A Case of Cold Feet: Serial Narration and the Character Arc

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One of the challenges when writing about the aesthetics of 'good television' is to capture both what is extraordinary about the text and what is ordinary practice. Most good television doesn't flaunt its utter difference from television conventions in the way that, say, gallery exhibitions of video art can do. Such television shows instead participate within the norms of normal TV, tweaking those just enough to trumpet a particular programme as 'quality television'.

While we have a growing body of work on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of television, we are only in the early stages of talking about television aesthetics, and so any work that talks about narration and 'good television' must proceed on two fronts. In order to give a sense of what's 'good' about the text, we must simultaneously begin to invent a language to articulate the standard conventions that good television manipulates. In this way we do not radically distance 'good television' from more 'ordinary television', always a temptation when dealing with a denigrated medium. We do not need to shove ordinary television downward in order to elevate and appreciate the elegant construction of certain programmes. We need to maintain the continuities between the two, because good television comes out of and extends the practice of more conventional television.

We have inherited from film studies a language for discussing the aesthetics of shots and for analysing the narrative structure of a feature-length film, but there are still many mysteries about distinctive aspects of television's particular forms. We recognise and refer to 'character arcs' in serial television, but what does that mean? How does serial television juggle multiple arcs in an episode? By what principles does it parcel out its story information across multiple episodes? There is no single answer for these questions. I suggest that the best way to investigate them is through close analysis of how particular texts handle these concerns. Over time we can build a solid understanding of television aesthetics from the bottom up, creating a foundation that does justice to the remarkable range of aesthetic and narrative options available to contemporary television practice. In spite of the medium's bad reputation, there's a lot of good television out there; we need to pay specific attention as academics to how such television programmes work. This article looks at a season of ITV's serial comedy-drama Cold Feet, paying particular attention to its adept handling of two emotionally moving arcs. How does Cold Feet distinguish itself as 'good television' while still operating well within the paradigm of typical television practice?

Cold Feet follows the romantic fortunes of three couples in the North of England. We see devil-may-care Adam Williams (James Nesbitt) and sweet Rachel Bradley (Helen Baxendale) fall in love, move in together, get married, and begin a family. Cuddly Pete Gifford (John Thompson) is married to spitfire Jenny (Fay Ripley), and their working-class marriage goes through bumps that eventually result in their divorce, whereafter Pete falls in love with the younger Jo Ellison (Kimberley Joseph). Uptight David Marsden (Robert Bathurst) and his frustrated wife Karen (Hermione Norris) are the upper-middle-class couple dealing with the problems of raising a family in a cold, professionally-orientated marriage. Each episode of the serial updates us on the progression of each of the six main characters' lives.

The fourth season (out of five) stands out for two reasons in my memory. One is that Cold Feet by this point had developed a stylistic assuredness in handling narrative devices such as flashbacks and fantasy sequences, as we shall see. The other memorable aspect of the fourth season is a couple of astonishingly vivid character arcs: Karen's descent into alcoholism, followed by the dissolution of her marriage to David when she has an affair with her publisher Mark. Part of these arcs' power is Hermione Norris's performance, one of the best ever by an actress on television, but we still woefully lack the concepts needed to do close performance analysis in television. As a scholar of narrative, I wanted to examine how Cold Feet coordinated its narrational activities to help give these arcs their impact.

In serial television the needs of the arc and of the episode are often at odds with each other. Primetime series are traditionally geared towards providing a satisfying payoff within the episode itself, and thus there is a tendency towards providing some form of closure, such as the answer to a continuing narrative question (who is the father of the baby?) or the resolution of a guest star's particular conundrum (the verdict of this episode's court case). If a television show neglects the needs of the episode, then audiences are unlikely to gain much
pleasure from watching that evening's television. Something significant needs to happen in each episode to make it interesting.

And yet every significant narrative event can push the overall storyline along. Unlike pure series television, serials have a memory; one episode has lasting repercussions on the subsequent ones. Serial television creators must manage various characters' overall progress in their individual arcs towards significant turning points. If television creators don't pay enough attention to the overall shape of the character arcs, audiences will not feel invited back for subsequent televised pleasures. Progress too quickly and the arc loses the serial quality that makes such television more like the protracted rhythms of real life. Move too slowly and the audience grows bored with the plotline. Having many character arcs reach a climax during a single episode can provide one large payoff, but one cannot do this on a regular basis without exhausting the plot. The pacing of a serial depends on the close coordination of arc and episode, providing some narrative events whose impact is primarily local, while others move the character forward towards turning points.

No serial narrative can present only events that propel the character arcs forward. Coming up with such a lean narrative would be incredibly difficult, and then coordinating that plot to ensure payoffs for each individual episode would be a remarkable feat of narrative calculus. Therefore, on a primetime serial, some events are more 'serial' than others. When Pete's mother moves in with him in episode four, this inevitably cramps her newly single son's style, and when she begins to display signs of dementia, this increases Pete's troubles. All is well by the episode's end, in which Pete's mum moves into retirement accommodation that she likes. In episode two Jenny leaves her children with Karen as their babysitter and is horrified when she returns to find that Karen has left them in the care of Jo, a woman that Jenny doesn't know. Karen and Jenny argue about Karen's irresponsible abandonment of the children, but before Jenny leaves England (and the show) at the end of the episode, she and Karen make up. These situations provide a significant amount of plot for their respective episodes, but they don't move the characters significantly vis-à-vis their major life concerns: Jenny's and Pete's marital breakup, Karen's alcoholism.

Of course it is difficult to say that any narrative event has no ramifications on major plot concerns, particularly given the interconnected nature of serial narrative. One could say that Karen's argument with Jenny is one of a series of incidents that reveals the extent of Karen's alcohol problem, and that Pete's difficulties with his mother are part of his post-breakup adjustments, and of course this is true. But in Roland Barthes' terms the hermeneutic codes (questions of what will happen next?) that these situations raise (will Karen and Jenny resolve their argument? What will Pete do with his mother?) are answered by the end of the episode. The answer to these questions within the episode has little or no effect on the larger narrative hermeneutic codes of the overall character arcs (will Karen's alcoholism get out of control? Will Pete and Jenny divorce?). These particular plot events in these two episodes add to what Barthes calls 'semic' codes. They contribute to our understanding of the main characters, allowing us to see them react and interact in ways that build our knowledge of their thoughts and attitudes (Barthes 1974: 18-22). They do not have lastling direct ramifications on the primary relationships among the characters, however.

So these narrative events and questions that structure the payoffs of a particular episode can become less important when viewed from the perspective of the overall arc. What serves a hermeneutic (forward-driving) function in the episode serves a semic (character-oriented) function in the character arc. Or to put it in other terms, these plot events give us resolution without progress in the serial narrative. Only by thinking about serial narrative can we even consider such a contradictory-sounding concept. Resolution by definition is narrative progress when you examine a single text (a feature film or a novella such as Balzac's Sarrasine). The resolution at the end of the individual text brings to a close all significant narrative questions. But when that text is placed within the larger narrative structure of serial episodes, the narrative functions of its elements transform, thus making resolution without progress possible.

Progress towards what, then, if not progress towards closure at the end of the episode? Character arcs in serial narratives arrange events, both crucial and less crucial ones, that eventually result in an irrevocable turning point, a plot event that fundamentally shifts the basis for all subsequent action by the character. Jenny decides to take a job in New York, leaving husband Pete; Rachel becomes pregnant; David tries to win Karen back after jeopardising their relationship by having an affair; Karen admits that she is an alcoholic and seeks help. Nothing is ever the same for a character after an irrevocable turning point. A character arc, then, is a line of character action from irrevocable turning point to irrevocable turning point, extending through the serial narrative.

Of course, to narrative scholars there is nothing new about the idea of a turning point, irrevocable or not. Aristotle discussed 'reversals' in the Poetics, and Syd Field talks about 'plot points' in Screenplay. But again serial narrative transforms concepts we have developed by dealing with single narratives. Tragedies may turn on a single reversal, main-
stream screenplays may be organised around two major plot points, and a melodrama may contain a quick succession of reversals. But in serial narrative these protracted, cross-episode arcs are the primary organising structures for plot occurrences over time. Individual episodes may provide cliffhangers or resolutions, but the overall weave of the serial is in juxtaposing and arranging the arcs that connect irrevocable turning points.

And so narrative scholars can examine and discuss patterns and variations in how different serials weave together their character arcs across episodes. American daytime soaps with their longer production schedules tend to present irrevocable turning points and then extend their impact across time as we watch information about that event travel through a network of conversational dyads. British serials produced in the *Cold Feet* mode (creating a season of a limited number of episodes screened in subsequent weeks, followed by a lengthy gap while the next season is prepared) provide more frequent payoffs, making them more plot intensive.

The fourth season of *Cold Feet*, for instance, tends to end its episodes with an irrevocable turning point. Jenny’s pregnancy terminates (the end of episode one); Jenny leaves Pete and goes to New York (episode two); Adamblurts the truth to Rachel about his infatuation with his old girlfriend (episode three). Ending on an irrevocable turning point gives each episode a solid sendoff, where one of the major audience concerns gets settled decisively, one way or another. The strategy also provides the opening impetus for the next episode. Episode two begins with Jenny and Pete mourning the loss of the baby; episode three begins with Pete trying to raise his child without Jenny; and episode four begins with Adam trying to apologise for his mistake. This structure guarantees both a certain amount of narrative satisfaction to viewers for each episode while also laying the groundwork for getting viewers involved at the beginning of the next episode.

Just as an episode can present resolution without progress along the character arc, a similar principle is true at the level of character actions in a serial. Not all actions in a serial move the characters forwards or backwards in their arc; in fact, we are shown some character behaviours precisely because they are actions without progress. David, trying to show Karen that he can be a more considerate, caring husband, brings home Chinese food, her favourite. Unfortunately Karen is not home, so he shares the food with their nanny Ramona. Knowing her love of poetry, he pretends to memorise some Keats, ‘reciting’ for Karen using the help of a post-it note. Karen says she is ‘almost impressed’. Although he hates foreign films, he rents one to impress her. When Karen discovers that he fell asleep while watching, she mischievously tells him that he should watch the rest of the video later that night.

None of these actions actually gets David any closer to his goal of restoring his connection to Karen. In fact, the entire point of showing the audience his efforts is to let us know that he is getting nowhere in his relationship with his wife. Things aren’t getting any worse (there’s no negative progress), but the situation is not improving either, particularly in those actions that Karen never finds out about, such as David bringing Chinese food when she’s not there. Even when Karen is aware of David’s actions, they seem to have almost no impact on her, other than perhaps bemusement at his blatant overtures. Again, given the nature of serial narrative, it is difficult to argue that any action has absolutely no ramifications on the plot outcomes, and of course these actions without progress do have bearing on our moral evaluations of the characters. We are supposed to notice that wooden David is at least trying to be flexible so that he can woo the wounded Karen. The state of affairs between them is unchanged, but the relationship between audience and character changes during these actions without progress.

As Murray Smith emphasises (1995: 207-12), our evaluations of characters have a moral basis, and while we recognise the reason for Karen’s standoffishness, we also are asked to re-evaluate David’s priggishness in light of his blundering but well-meaning efforts. We allocate our sympathies in a nuanced, sometimes contradictory manner as our understanding of characters’ motivations becomes more complicated.

Such actions without progress are not exclusive characteristics of serial television. They are an adaptation from the melodrama, which is frequently organised around narrative standoffs. Characters in melodrama get stuck in what Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs (1997) call ‘situations’, impasses where action grinds to a halt because circumstances make it impossible for anyone to do or say anything without unthinkably negative consequences. Serial narratives prolong the situation because they take place over a more extended period of time, and one way to fill that time is with actions that do not lead to progress. The feeling of being hemmed in by circumstances becomes protracted as serial characters flail against their situations, thus gaining our sympathies. At the same time, we tend to evaluate characters more positively when they are actively trying to alter their circumstances than when they are passive. And so the ‘actions without progress’ strategy has a dual moral force, helping us evaluate the character as both driving and being driven.

Now we are ready to discuss the construction of the two arcs involving David and Karen in season four: Karen’s increasing alcohol problem,
finally resulting in her seeking help for her addiction (an irrevocable turning point); and Karen's affair with her boss Mark, eventually causing her to leave David. A remarkable aspect of these arcs is that they attempt to gain sympathy for the two least appealing characters on the show. Adam and Rachel's romance gave the first season a playful charm, and Pete and Jenny lend the show a working class bite, but Karen and David are colder, more distant, more caught up in trying to live the picture-perfect life of the modern family. Karen Marsden spends the first several seasons whining about having abandoned a professional career to raise their children (a humourless precursor to Felicity Huffman's Lynette Scavo on Desperate Housewives).

If kvetching Karen does little to gain our sympathy in the first seasons, her husband David is perhaps even less appealing, a stereotypical portrait of the upper middle class. Intensely concerned with advancing his own professional career, he appears to have no interests or enthusiasms that exist outside of maintaining or extending his class position, leading him to neglect his family. The most interesting development in David's boring life during the first three seasons is when he is coerced into working with a community organisation where he actually seems to discover a spark of life. It is this new David who has an affair with a fellow volunteer, and the collapse of that affair brings the near-demise of his marriage. It is this David, seeking to apologise for his lapses and restore his marriage to its previous boring stasis, whom we encounter at the beginning of season four.

On the surface, these two arcs I examine here seem focused on Karen's actions: her alcoholism, her affair. But the narrative tools we've just elucidated show how important David is to these arcs. Over and over we see David performing actions without progress as he tries and fails to gain Karen's favour. His intent is blatantly obvious, but his actions reveal a thoughtfulness and an understanding of Karen that he had not previously shown. Rather than using generic tokens of apology such as flowers and chocolate, David tools his activities towards things he knows Karen enjoys. We see David even resort to therapy as a way of getting Karen back. Cold Feet keeps up this protracted pursuit through several episodes, never entirely abandoning its notion of David as upper-class buffoon but using actions without progress to make him a well-meaning, loving one in season four. To counteract the previous several seasons of David's unsympathetic selfishness, Cold Feet sentences him to episodes of hard, seemingly fruitless labour. Although his actions do not lead to significant progress in his relationship with Karen, they are important in reclaiming him in the audience's favour.

Cold Feet gives protracted attention to David's newfound ardour by using elegant, showy instances of familiar narrative devices. Everyday film/television practice over the years has developed a recognisable 'language' of devices for manipulating time, space, and subjectivity, and such standard techniques such as flashbacks make complex storytelling legible. Any particular flashback activates the paradigmatic category for such devices, allowing us to judge any specific instance as fitting well within standard norms or demonstrating a stylistic bravado that would denote 'good television'. In so doing, Cold Feet reminds us that good television distinguishes itself not by rejecting the practices of ordinary television but by using elegantly efficient instances of standard narrative techniques such as the flashback.13

Since the serial narrative often requires that the viewer have familiarity with events that happened in previous episodes (which may have aired years ago), the programme needs mechanisms for either reminding audience members of what they've seen previously or filling them in on events they didn't see. Cold Feet uses a particularly flashy flashback to give us information about David's formative years. The sequence begins when David is at dinner with a colleague, discussing his recent therapy session. We flash back to the therapist asking David why it is important for him to please his father. He answers: 'Because I've always looked up to him'. His face distorts as the anamorphic lens twists, and the image dissolves to a gritty film stock showing David in childhood in a second level of flashback. As the adult David narrates, the child David and his mother discover his father and aunt emerging suspiciously from an obviously compromising position. Dissolving back to the therapy session, the camera superimposes the child's face over David the man's, and then we return fully from the double flashback to the business dinner in the present.14 This flashback provides endearing insight into the reasons for David's rigid social correctness, while it also demonstrates Cold Feet's command of style.

Cold Feet also uses fantasy sequences to reveal David's unrealistic version of his own marriage. On a visit to Australia, David begins to believe that he and Karen could start a new life Down Under. To please her, he starts secretly arranging to transfer his job to a Sydney office, and he finds a new house for his family. We see his beatific vision of what it would be like to live there: David and Karen survey the seaside view of their dock, the children tucked safely in bed, and David suggests that they get into the hot tub later. All is well, it seems; David and Karen's marriage is restored, and they are happy in their new surroundings.15 Of course we the audience know what David does not, that Karen thinks David has been neglecting her for work once more, driving her towards her lover Mark. This fantasy sequence emphasises the enormous
discrepancy between David’s hopes and what we believe will most likely happen. The fantasy sequence is itself a less common narrative choice for serials, and a foregrounded use of fantasies serves as another distinguishing marker for Cold Feet.16

Such devices as flashbacks and fantasy sequences show us that David spends most of the fourth season going nowhere, stuck in a situation that is structurally beyond his control; and yet he continues to act. In such an arrangement, it would be easy for Karen to become the villain as she heartlessly refuses to give in to his advances, but the narrative set-up gives her a clear justification for distrusting and disliking her husband (his infidelity in season three). Thus the basic situation is cemented, and it is the job of the audience to determine the relative moral weight of the two characters’ actions. Murray Smith argues that this call for relative moral evaluation is typical of modern melodrama: that we are expected to place characters into what he calls a ‘graduated moral structure’, not a Manichaean binary of good and evil (1995: 207-14). Karen seems justified in her refusal, but at what point should she give in? David appears sincere in his love, but is his newfound interest in family merely his latest project? The audience is asked to weigh the evidence presented (now favouring Karen, now attending more to David’s case) and shift its moral judgment. In a serial, this judgment becomes even more complex, factoring in several seasons’ worth of characters’ actions into our evaluation.

At any given moment in the serial, the arrangement of plot occurrences across arcs and episodes becomes important in this moral judgment, as in episode three which shows us Karen at her alcoholic nadir. Karen invites newly single Pete out to a club, leaving David to take care of their children. At the club she gets wilder and wilder, finally rebuffing Pete’s attempts to get her to settle down and ending up with the sleazy owner of the club. We see the terror in her eyes when she’s alone with the club owner, who boasts that he could rape her if he wanted but that she is too wasted to be attractive. He leaves her stumbling alone in the dark.17

Hermione Norris’ fearless acting certainly makes Karen’s feelings of desperation palpable, but Cold Feet’s narration also works to force our moral judgement. The serial uses parallel editing to cut back and forth between Karen’s wild evening at the club and David taking care of the children at home. We see David tucking his son in bed, followed by Karen doing a shot of alcohol at the bar. We cut from Karen ordering more drinks to David hearing wine bottles clink when he takes out the trash. Of course parallel editing is an old device for eliciting our moral evaluation,18 and it is one that Cold Feet uses repeatedly.

But Karen’s bar frenzy is the only time in the entire fourth season where Cold Feet devotes an uninterrupted ten minutes to a single plotline. In all other instances, the serial interweaves Adam-Rachel, Pete-Jenny, and David-Karen arcs throughout, but here everything comes to a halt while we watch this one spectacular descent. The segment begins by alternating between David at home and Karen at the bar, but eventually it abandons the parallel structure when David falls asleep waiting for Karen to return. Then we are left watching Karen’s continuing revelry with no cuts to other plotlines, the serial demanding our attention on this arc alone. It slowly eases us from the moral comparison of David’s and Karen’s actions to watching Karen dissolve before our eyes. By arranging narrative events in such a way that only this segment is treated with such unblinking scrutiny, by making an exception here to the normal serial practice of never staying with one plotline too long, Cold Feet elegantly and powerfully focuses our attention on the brutal spectacle of a character hitting bottom.

Karen’s and David’s relationship wobbles back and forth throughout the fourth season, at times seeming closer to reconciliation, at others reopening a chasm between them, and all along we are expected to make comparisons, to hope for the best, to become morally uncertain about what is best for each character, to predict suspiciously that the best is unlikely to occur. Part of the nature of serials is that they seem to be able to keep characters in this state of limbo for long periods of time, and the same is true here for Karen and David. Finally in the last episode of the fourth season, we get one last juxtaposition.

Circumstances force Pete to ask David to be his best man as he marries Jo, and so the characters stand at the altar, Pete and Jenny promising their eternal love, Karen and David (who has just lost a fistfight to Karen’s lover Mark) obviously aware of how badly those promises can be broken. The camera cuts among the four, giving preference to Karen’s and David’s agonised faces as they try to manage their eternal love, Karen and David (who has just lost a fistfight to Karen’s lover Mark) obviously aware of how badly those promises can be broken. The camera cuts among the four, giving preference to Karen’s and David’s agonised faces as they try to manage a proper British stiff upper lip.19 Because of the last minute switch in groomsman, David does not have Jo’s and Pete’s wedding rings, which threatens to halt the ceremony. David suddenly gets an idea: he volunteers his own wedding ring for the new couple, and Karen does the same. Old, exhausted love is traded for new, vibrant love in this single gesture. Karen pursues David as he storms off after the ceremony, shouting his name, undoubtedly ready to alternate once more between pain and partial forgiveness, as they have done throughout their marriage. David turns and says: ‘No, Karen. No more’.

And so the serial arc finally resolves: when one character has grown tired of a particular pattern of behavior, when the writers and directors
judge that the narrative energy of a particular plotline is exhausted, then altogether they say, 'No more'. Obviously the serial can prolong the narrative situation almost indefinitely. The tricky part is in the timing. How long does the arc extend over the episodes? How are the plot events arranged either to push the characters towards an irrevocable turning point or to keep them acting without progress for our moral scrutiny? Each serial arc provides a slightly different answer to such questions. In the end, Cold Feet is good television because it marshals stylistic and narrative devices with deftness. It is good television because it is wise enough to understand that relationships frequently end when people simply exhaust the energy they have to expend on rebuilding. It is good television for not rejecting its soapy conventions but renewing them with heartfelt flair.

Notes


A Case of Cold Feet


7. The fourth season of Cold Feet contains roughly two arcs per couple. Adam and Rachel decide to adopt a child, but that plan changes when Rachel becomes pregnant, and the season ends with the delivery of their baby. For Pete and Jenny, the fourth season continues the line of action from season three, showing the dissolution of their marriage. Then Pete finds love with Jo and marries her in episode eight. The two David-Karen arcs are the focus of the rest of this article. The arcs in Cold Feet are configured as a series of conflicts/actions concerning the three romantic couples. The friends may have conflicts outside these pairings, but these never extend for more than one episode of Cold Feet.


9. This more plot intensive structure characteristic of the limited season serial has now gained influence in America, where HBO and Showtime have adopted the same mechanism for producing The Sopranos, Queen As Folk, and Six Feet Under. For a discussion of limited serials on television, see Creebmer, Glen (2004), Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen, London: BFI Publishing. For an interesting extended discourse analysis of a single British television serial, see Tulloch, John and Avarado, Manuel (1989), Doctor Who: The Extended Text, New York: St Martin's Press.


11. For more on seriality, primetime soaps, and melodramatic form, see Feuer, Jane (1984), 'Melodrama, serial form and television today', Screen 25:1, pp. 4-16.

12. Brewster's and Jacobs's concept of situation implies a moment of stasis, literally based on the theatrical tableau. The idea of 'action without progress' is meant to emphasise moments where narrative action does not still but continues in spite of its patent ineffectualness.


16. Space considerations do not permit a fuller discussion of the brevity of fantasy sequences in Cold Feet, so one example will have to suffice. Adam (who is considering renewing his romance with his childhood sweetheart Jane) considers whether to purchase a CD that was an old favourite of his and Jane's. Suddenly his wife Rachel appears, telling him that they'll have to cut back on something if he is going to buy the shelf, arguing with the much larger fantasy Jane. Then Rachel and Jane appear life-size in the store, continuing the argument until Adam tells them both to shut up. When they disappear, ending the fantasy sequence, he realises that he has been shouting at a pair of startled teenagers (Cold Feet [ITV1], 25 November 2001).

17. Jane Feuer (1995) in Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism, London: BFI Publishing, has noted that art cinema techniques such as fantasy sequences are one of the hallmarks of quality television, as in thirtysomething: 'The lack of influence of thirtysomething', in Hammond and Mazdon, pp. 27-36.

18. Tom Gunning (1991) follows Gerard Genette in asserting that a moral evaluation is crucial to the 'voice' of narration. Narration does not simply present a character's actions; it lets us know how we should feel about those actions. Gunning points out...
that D.W. Griffith’s use of parallel editing is important not because it is the earliest use of the technique (it isn’t) but because Griffith used parallel editing to comment on his characters’ morally, thus giving the new medium of film the narrational capacity of ‘voice’. See D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: the Early Years at Biograph, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

19. This moment calls to mind a similar wedding in The Best Years of Our Lives, when the bride and groom (Wilma and Homer, played by Cathy O’Donnell and Harold Russell) are visually upstaged by the glances between two onlookers, Fred (Dana Andrews) and Peggy (Theresa Wright).

References

Sarah Cardwell has written that: ‘While the close textual analysis of film is undergoing something of a renaissance, the same enterprise remains almost non-existent in television studies’ (Gibbs and Pye 2005: 179). In part, this assertion references the uneven status in recent times of close textual analysis as a practice within contemporary film studies, the term ‘renaissance’ succinctly implying a proceeding period of relative sparseness. Yet, despite the wariness (and, at times, open hostility) expressed by some scholars towards close textual analysis, film studies has always attended to matters of style and meaning within films themselves. The same prevalence cannot be observed in television studies, however, where close textual analysis has, by and large, remained absent from critical discourse. Cardwell’s outlining of this resonates with observations provided by other television scholars. Charlotte Brunsdon, for example, has traced the relative absence of sustained textual analysis of television back twenty years, stating that: ‘There was, between the 1984 and 1986 [International Television Studies] conferences, a clear move in interest from what is happening on the screen to what is happening in front of it – from text to audience’ (1997: 117). The wider complexities of Brunsdon’s debate cannot be satisfactorily detailed here, but her concise description defines a trend that has since dominated television studies whereby critical inquiry has existed, for the most part, away from a consideration of style and meaning relationships within programmes.

As established scholars outline this neglect of aesthetics-led debate in television studies, so a firmer platform emerges for textual analysis within the discipline. Jason Jacobs, for instance, challenges the perception of television as a device only for relay and, furthermore, identifies a strand of contemporary television drama (primarily recent excellent US programming) that merits scrutiny as work of artistic accomplishment. He explains that: