

## **‘Televisual Desire’**

**Dr Kristyn Gorton**

School of Cultural Studies

Leeds Metropolitan University

k.gorton@leedsmet.ac.uk

The title of this paper refers to a larger research project within which I consider the concept of desire in relationship to television studies. From within this general perspective my research has evolved in two parallel directions: first, to critically examine the use of a psychoanalytic interpretation of desire in film and television criticism - hence the references in my abstract to the work of Mulvey and Ang; and second, to consider emotional engagements within media texts.

In the interest of time, I’m going to focus specifically on emotion. So, this paper considers Kay Mellor’s work in *Fat Friends* (2000-) as a means of exploring how emotionalism can be valued as an aesthetic criterion within television studies. Drawing on recent work on ‘middlebrow’ or ‘middle-of-the-road’ texts by S. Elizabeth Bird (2003) and Christine Geraghty (2003), I argue that we, as television academics, need to re-value middlebrow texts in part because of the emotional engagement they offer viewers. Mellor’s *Fat Friends*, which, alongside the rest of her work, has been academically disregarded, offers an example of a ‘middlebrow’ text in that it combines social realism with a sentimentalism that appeals to audiences. However, this emotional or sentimental engagement is often what has caused ‘middlebrow’ texts to be dismissed; as Bird argues: ‘for the most part [...] scholars do not care to define what is ‘wrong’ with

the middlebrow in terms of taste or aesthetic judgment; they just ignore it (2003, 121-122).

Three points of interest follow from this argument: **first**, an underlying aesthetics of television that has yet to be made clear, as Geraghty argues: ‘television lacks a critical culture in which evaluation is openly discussed’ (2003, 25); **second**, there appears to exist a continued devaluing of feminine or emotional texts. As Bird argues: ‘knee-jerk criticisms of shows like *Dr Quinn* and soap operas often betrays a common association of the feminine with vulgarity and excessive emotion...’ (2003, 141). Warhol also argues that ‘feminist film theory—with its psychoanalytically inspired tendency to read women’s crying over films as a masochistic pleasure ...—has not done much to ameliorate the negative associations of crying over stories’ (2003, 30). And **finally**, a confusion has developed over the role these ‘middlebrow’ programmes play within television studies, and perhaps further, a confusion has arisen over the use of this category altogether.

Why do we watch some programmes and not others? Without always being aware of it, we, as television viewers, continually make aesthetic judgements about the shows we watch, without necessarily having criteria through which we can judge why we like some things and not others. As Bird contends: ‘We know that all popular TV is not equal in quality, yet we cannot define what quality is, so we fall back on questions of popularity and ideology’ (2003, 142). At the end of her 1990 article ‘Problems with Quality’, Charlotte Brunson states: ‘Judgements are being made—let’s talk about them’ (1997, 147). More than a decade later, Geraghty attempts to develop some aesthetic criteria through which we can be more explicit about the judgements we invariably make.

Geraghty's purpose is not only to establish a more transparent method through which we might judge what makes a television programme 'good' and another 'bad', but also to indicate how having a more defined criteria will help students and teachers improve their understanding of television. The second point is a fundamental one given that some of our students are the future television writers and producers. As Geraghty does well to point out, the lack of aesthetic criteria and emphasis instead on representation and ideology within television studies has led to a crucial difference between film studies and television studies: students have a 'passionate desire' to *make* films but have a 'passionate desire' to *be on* television, not to make television programmes (2003, 30- 31). In my own experience, students give very straightforward answers to 'what is your favourite television programme' but lack a clear sense of why they like some shows and dislike others.

Geraghty proposes that we consider TV writing, sound, acting, characterisation,<sup>1</sup> and innovation as ways of evaluating television texts and adds that 'individual writers could be recognized and their work analyzed even when it is obscured by the serial/series format. [The British examples she cites include] Caroline Aherne, Paul Abbott, Tony Jordan, Debbie Horsfield and Kay Mellor.' (2003, 34).

It is worth highlighting that Kay Mellor is identified as a writer worthy of consideration and further attention.

In order to consider ways of re-evaluating 'middlebrow' texts, and to offer a way in which to judge a text aesthetically, I want to pick up on Geraghty's reference to 'emotional explosions' (2003, 34) and connect this with other recent work on

emotionalism. This seems to me a way to re-consider Mellor's work and, more broadly, to recuperate 'middlebrow' texts from the critical dustbin of television studies.

Through his close examination of the drama genre, Robin Nelson poses similar questions regarding the judgements we make about television. Like Geraghty, Nelson agrees that we 'make distinctions of worth all the time' (1997, 218) whether we are aware of this or not. He argues that 'estimations of quality always come from somewhere: they are grounded in people's lived experience and people inhabit different places. Thus, there is always a significant proportion of ascription in people's aesthetic judgements, informed by their ethical and socio-political positions' (1997, 225). Nelson further argues 'that communicability of thoughts and feelings is possible though not foolproof, and that the roles of symbolic formations in bridging the gap between subjectivities is likely to be a significant one, on the contested ground of what it means to be human' (1997, 229). In other words, Nelson argues for an 'engagement of emotion', by which he means to stress the fact that viewers think more reflectively and more intensely about human life (1997, 230).

There are, of course, problems with this model of aesthetics, for instance, Nelson's model would be difficult to assess in terms of audience research (see Geraghty 2003, 42, endnote 1). Judging how viewers reflect and ponder human life is hard to measure, although more and more research is attempting to define these terms, such as Bird's work on *Dr Quinn* and Robyn Warhol's work in *Having a Good Cry*. For instance, Bird argues that 'perhaps the most dominant form of aesthetic appraisal is that known as emotionalism—a theory that emphasizes **the expressive qualities of the object**. How well does it communicate moods, feelings, and ideas?' (2003, 136). Similarly Robyn

Warhol in *Having a Good Cry* examines how it *feels* from a viewer's perspective to watch a soap—to become emotionally involved with a series and finds that the audience experience emotion in different wave patterns than the narrative would suggest—an experience which Warhol refers to as an 'undertow' of emotion (2003, 116-7). Recent work such as Bird's and Warhol's emphasises the importance of cognitive-based models of emotional expression in its valuation of 'the expressive qualities of the object'. As Carl Plantinga argues in his work on spectator emotion: 'In mainstream films, allegiances with and antipathy toward characters orient us. What we are oriented *toward*, and respond to, are characters in narrative situations. Emotional response both inside and outside the theatre depends in part on our evaluation of a situation or scenario' (1997, 381).

In other words, we, as viewers, are orientated or drawn to the expressive qualities of the text, the emotional situation that the characters are involved in. In his study of engaging characters, Murray Smith refers to 'emotional simulation' as a way to describe the relationship between spectator and character, he states that: 'Observing the behaviour of a person in a certain situation about which we have limited knowledge—as is often the case with a character in fiction- we imaginatively project ourselves into their situation, and hypothesize as to the emotion(s) they are experiencing' (1995, 97). This model of emotional engagement shares commonalities with sentimentalism and lends itself to a sense of aesthetics that can help us to re-consider the role emotion and desire play within television studies and middlebrow texts.

In contrast, psychoanalytic models of engagement such as Ang's and Mulvey's, pivot around lack, which is inherent to a psychoanalytic understanding of desire. For instance, Ang defines her 'tragic structure of feeling' (1985, 61) as 'identification and distancing

constantly alternating with one another' (1985, 61). The lack maintained in these models is interpreted as necessary in that it allows the viewer a critical distance through which they can make a rational interpretation. However, it often negates an appreciation of the engagement—the close connection—viewers have with the text. This is primarily because there is still an assumption in psychoanalytic film criticism, borne out of Brechtian and neo-Freudian film criticism, that this kind of emotional engagement does not enable viewers to be critical of the texts they watch. As Plantinga argues: 'An emotional or pleasurable experience is often thought to be harmful or naïve of itself, while an alienated, distanced response becomes the mark of a knowing spectator' (1997, 373). This assumption needs to be critiqued, particularly in light of more recent theories on emotion and rationality. For instance, in his recent work on emotional behaviour, Finn Spicer (2004) points out that theorists now understand emotion as essential to the proper working of reason (Nussbaun, 2001, Damasio, 1994 and Mameli, 2004). He claims that theorists are moving to view emotions as the 'oil in the system of reason' (2004, 52). The assumption that the emotionalism in texts encourages passivity and uncritical distance also shares clear links with negative interpretations of sentimentalism. In her work on sentimentalism, Knight outlines the history of sentimentalism and its criticism and argues that:

'The sentimentalist is a problem for the philosopher. The philosopher feels at a loss to explain why the sentimentalist is watching *Roman Holiday* (or *Sleepless in Seattle*) in the first place—especially since they are hardly instances of 'high art.' But if this were not bad enough, the philosopher also cannot explain why the sentimentalist is watching the film for the umpteenth

time, let alone why she is weeping over it again, and why she is, in an odd sort of way, happy while she weeps' (1999, 413).

Knight's analysis can be transferred to the problems television researchers, like Bird, encounter when they try to make sense of why audiences enjoy a programme such as *Dr Quinn*. Similar to *Sleepless in Seattle* or *Roman Holiday*, *Dr Quinn* is not 'high art' nor has it been awarded much distinction, but like the films Knight identifies, audiences have a strong emotional attachment to it, and this is partly because of the emotional response: they are happy to weep.

This is crucial for audience studies where there has been a long history of debate over whether the audience is passive or active, and the underlying implication in criticism of emotional or sentimental texts is that they have a passive and/or uncritical audience.

Instead, recent research suggests that they are very active, Bird writes:

'Certainly both [*Dr Quinn*] and soap operas have been decried for their 'easy' sentimentality. Yet both sets of fans show that in this area too they are discriminating and active in the way they respond, usually connecting the emotional and expressive with the moral dimensions' (2003, 137).

Because these texts are associated with the sentimental there is an assumption that they are passive. As Knight argues: 'In short, according to the standard view, sentimentality leads us away from active, cognitive engagement with the ambiguities and complexities of the real [...] toward the over-simplified, the distorted, the falsified, the fantasized, the fictional' (1999, 417). As Knight suggests, the assumption is that the sentimental leads to the simplified, the uncomplicated and therefore to the passive viewer. However, as

Knight's essay demonstrates so well, we need to question the assumptions that have been and continue to be made about emotional or sentimental texts and their audience' responses and recognise, as Bird's research has done, that these emotional texts are far from over-simplified and are therefore too important to be overlooked. As she argues: 'Dismissal of middlebrow shows as clichéd, sentimental schlock, often without watching them, is indeed elitist, depending heavily on easy social and gender-based stereotyping' (2003, 1443). However, it is not just the distinction between high and low art that is operating here, but also a modernist assumption that there is a distinction between the sincere/authentic and false/sentimental. What this model sets up is a value judgement on when it is 'ok' to cry (or 'culturally acceptable') and when it is not.

In order to think through these ideas, I have chosen to use Mellor's work as an example of emotionalism and sentimentalism. Although few academics have engaged with her work, Mellor is undoubtedly a major television phenomenon: she has successfully written and directed a play, *A Passionate Woman*<sup>2</sup> (1992) that she is soon to make into a movie; she has written and directed several award winning comedy dramas including *Fat Friends* (YTV, Rollem & Tiger Aspect, 2000-), *Band of Gold* (Granada, 1996), *Between the Sheets* (ITV, 2003), *Playing the Field* (Tiger Aspect for BBC, 1995) ; she has written and directed a movie, *Fanny and Elvis* (The Film Consortium, 1999), for which was awarded the Audience Award at Dinard Film Festival; and she has her own production company, Rollem Productions, through which she has been able to retain creative control. As mentioned earlier, Mellor's *Fat Friends* offers an example of a 'middlebrow' text in that it combines social realism with a sentimentalism that appeals to audiences. Centring

on the lives of a group of overweight members of a Leeds 'slimming club', the series explores, amongst other issues, how 'you are what you eat'.

In the first episode of the first series of *Fat Friends* Betty, a fifty-something wife of a Leeds fish fryer gets ready for her slimming club's annual event, at which she hopes to be crowned 'Slimmer of the Year'. Her fantasy is of her family's and community's acceptance and recognition of the hard work she has put into losing weight. When she does not win the award she is more upset with her husband's absence than her loss. When she arrives home, she finds her husband asleep on the couch, tie loosened, bottle of Whiskey open on the coffee table and the television droning in the background. He wakes up when she opens the door and immediately begins to apologise for his absence. She silences him and has what can easily be called an 'emotional explosion':

### **CLIP from Episode One, First Series**

Betty's 'emotional explosion' is characteristic of the strength of writing and intensity of emotion that can be found in Mellor's work. It is also, as Geraghty argues, a defining feature worthy of recognition. Betty's monologue reveals her desire to be thought of as wild and sexy not as comfortable and safe: a desire that many women (and men), particularly those who have been in long term commitments, can recognise.

But it is the writing, the characterisation and the acting in the scene that expresses and communicates the feelings and emotions that Mellor puts forth. Emotional struggle underpins every episode of *Fat Friends*: regardless of whether other things are happening in their lives, all the characters are struggling with weight gain and loss; they are trying to

cope in a society that does not recognise fat people in the same way they do thin people. And yet, often the viewer is encouraged to forget that this is the fundamental **struggle** these women (and to a lesser extent, men) face. And I think struggle is key here: Mellor constructs characters who transcend the issue of 'fat' and are instead trying to cope with desirability, love, and life—with humanity.

Warhol writes: 'To those who ask, "What's 'good' about 'the good cry'?" I respond (without sarcasm, now) that the ideals of sentimental culture- the affirmation of community, the persistence of hopefulness and of willingness, the belief that everyone matters, the sense that life has a purpose that can be traced to the links of affection between and among persons—are good ideals' (2003, 55-56). What comes through in Mellor's work is 'the affirmation of community, the persistence of hope' and the 'belief that everyone matters'. These 'good ideals' structure her narratives and are made clear to the viewer through her characterisation and use of emotion. I would go further to argue that they are what make her programmes popular. The notion that 'everyone matters' is clearly an enjoyable message for viewers, but is also reflective of an alienated society. Furthermore, it suggests that emotionalism in television is not just there to provide escapism or light relief but is also needed as an art form that 'speaks' to 'the links of affection between and among persons'.

What Mellor's work demonstrates is a sentimental or emotional engagement between spectator and screen that is not fantastical but is nonetheless effective and which provides an emotional simulation between character and viewer that may perhaps resonate more profoundly than previous understandings of emotional engagements have allowed.

Conceptualising this engagement within cognitive-based film theory allows us to consider the way the spectator is orientated towards the text—both emotionally and physically, instead of needing to establish distance and alienation. It also encourages us to re-think the aesthetic value of emotion in middlebrow texts.

### **Works Cited**

Ang, Ien (1985), *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling, London: Routledge.

Bird, S. Elizabeth (2003), *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*, New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1979), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Trans. Richard Nice, London: Routledge.

Brecht, Bertolt (1957), *Brecht on Theatre*, Willett, John (trans. and ed.), London: Methuen.

Brunsdon, Charlotte (1997), *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, London: Routledge.

Carroll, Noël (1988), *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Carroll, Noël (1999), 'Film, Emotion, and Genre', in Plantinga, Carl and Greg M Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, pp. 21-47.

Geraghty, Christine (2003), 'Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6: 1, pp. 25-45.

Knight, D (1999), 'Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality: A Meta-Aesthetic Perspective', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57: 4, pp. 411-420.

Nelson, Robin (1997), *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change*, Houndmills: Macmillan.

Mellor, Kay (2000), *Fat Friends*, Rollem Productions in association with Tiger Aspect, Mosiac Movies.

Plantinga, Carl (1997), 'Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism', in Allen, Richard and Murray Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 372-393.

Spicer, Finn (2004), 'Emotional Behaviour and the scope of belief-desire explanation' in Evans, Dylan and Pierre Cruse (eds.), *Emotion, Evolution and Rationality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 51-68.

Warhol, Robyn (2003), *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bird's research demonstrates 'that a concern for coherent character development is central to appreciate of genres from TV to literature' (2003, 135).

<sup>2</sup> *A Passionate Woman* opened to excellent reviews in 1992 at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. It was then transferred to the West End Comedy Theatre where it ran for a year. It was subsequently followed by five national tours. Productions have also been held in Spain, Sweden, France, Australia, America, South Africa, Iceland, Finland, Austria and Poland.