

## Which is the best *Doctor Who* story? A case study in value judgements outside the academy

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Nigel's mate, James, not a [*Doctor Who*] fan, is often confused as to why we are. 'When was *Doctor Who* good?', he asked ... [we explained that] 'We have popular seasons, we have unpopular popular seasons, we've popular unpopular seasons, we've popular unpopular popular. There's massive, there's rubbish, there's madness. ... Ratings-wise, the unpopular seasons were more popular than the three popular seasons ... One of the unconscious Laws of Fandom is that you can only have three unpopular seasons at a time – with the exception of the Pertwee era, where four are allowed. .... Through this reversal, the popularly unpopular popular had been sandwiched by an unconnected season popularly considered excellent ... So to answer your question, "When was *Doctor Who* good, save a few weeks around Christmas 1963, quite possibly never"'. 'But that's nonsense'. 'No, James', said Chas, 'It's appreciation' (Jenkins, 1998b: 12)

### Cultural Studies and Cultural Value

One of Cultural Studies' most important contributions to academic thinking about culture is the acceptance as axiomatic that we must not simply accept traditional value hierarchies in relation to cultural objects (see, for example, McGuigan, 1992: 157; Brunsdon, 1997: 5; Wark, 2001).

Since Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams took popular culture as a worthy object of study, Cultural Studies practitioners have accepted that the terms in which cultural debate had previously been conducted involved a category error. Opera is not 'better' than pop music, we believe in Cultural Studies - 'better for what?', we would ask. Similarly, Shakespeare is not 'better' than Mills and Boon, unless you can specify the purpose for which you want to use the texts. Shakespeare is indeed better than Mills and Boon for understanding seventeenth century ideas about social organisation; but Mills and Boon is unquestionably better than Shakespeare if you want slightly scandalous, but ultimately reassuring representations of sexual intercourse.

The reason that we do not accept traditional hierarchies of cultural value is that we know that the culture that is commonly understood to be 'best' also happens to be that which is preferred by the most educated and most materially well-off people in any given culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 1- 2; Ross, 1989: 211). We can interpret this information in at least two ways. On the one hand, it can be read as proving that the poorer and less well-educated members of a society do indeed have tastes which are innately less worthwhile than those of the material and educational elite. On the other hand, this information can be interpreted as demonstrating that the cultural and material elite publicly represent their own tastes as being the only correct ones. In Cultural Studies, we tend to favour the latter interpretation. We reject the idea that cultural objects have innate value, in terms of beauty, truth, excellence, simply 'there' in the object. That is, we reject 'aesthetic' approaches to culture (Bourdieu, 1984: 6; 485; Hartley, 1994: 6) [1]. In this, Cultural Studies is similar to other postmodern institutions, where high and popular culture can be mixed in ways unfamiliar to modernist culture (Sim, 1992: 1; Jameson, 1998: 100).

So far, so familiar.

## **Any program is as good as another**

This is all familiar enough. It is not, however, uncontroversial. Many academics (including, oddly, some who name themselves as 'Cultural Studies' practitioners) are deeply unhappy with giving up the idea that some cultural objects *are* simply 'better' than others (in the universal, transcendent, unchanging sense in which aesthetics judges culture). Accepting the first interpretation of Bourdieu's work - that the tastes of the uneducated, less materially well-off members of culture are innately worse than their own - these writers rail against the Cultural Studies/postmodern turn in relation to value judgements.

The arguments of those who want to retain their own value judgements as the only, universal, true ones tend to follow a series of familiar steps:

First, one claims that the Cultural Studies/postmodern turn denies absolute, universal value judgements (true).

Then one claims that this means that everything is relative, anything goes, and all texts become of equal importance (false, I think - see below).

One then states that this is not acceptable - that one cannot refuse to make distinctions (true, but not in the way these writers often suggest)

Then one looks around for a method of making value judgements which can be rationally justified, and which accords with one's own personal feelings about what is the 'best' in culture.

Brunsdon comments on: 'the dissolution of *all* distinctions in postmodernity' (Brunsdon, 1997: 128, emphasis added); Nelson worries that 'the displacement of established hierarchies has dislocated bearings completely, creating a tendency towards an utter relativism such that any value is taken to be equivalent to any other ...' (Nelson, 1997: 218). Caughie worries that the abandonment of aesthetic judgements of television texts: 'gives criticism and critical theory no way of ... arguing for one kind of production against another; or of valuing some forms over others. Critique is replaced by commentary' (Caughie, 2000: 232). Simons worries that: 'Since the "reader" [of television] has the ability and the freedom to produce even non-television meanings ... any program is as good as another ...' (Simons, 1994: 83). Hunter and Kaye worry that: 'the collapse of universally applicable standards of aesthetic judgement [means] postmodern audiences are supposedly free to make of texts pretty much what they like ... few positive reasons are left to prefer one text to another ...' (Hunter and Kaye, 1997: 1, 5).

It seems to me that this is a false move. Postmodern thinking, and the sociological turn in Cultural Studies informed by the work of Bourdieu, do not refuse all distinctions. Neither do they refuse all evaluation. These ways of thinking about culture do indeed refuse the ascription of absolute, generalised and transcendent value to texts; but do not deny that, in culture, evaluations and distinctions are continually being made.

It is still possible, under these approaches, given particular criteria, to decide which texts better fulfil them (which is the longest text? Which uses most traditionally feminine approaches to culture? Which is the most melodramatic? And so on, and so forth). And we know - and I shall demonstrate throughout this paper - that even in the absence of absolute value judgements sanctioned by elite cultural institutions, all texts do *not* become equal. Audience members continue to exercise judgement and discrimination in making sense of cultural

objects, in a variety of ways (including, as we shall see, the traditionally aesthetic).

Accepting, then, that this move from no absolute to no distinctions is logically unconvincing, we then find ourselves at the last stage of the argument. Obviously, it is not acceptable to employ an approach to culture which has no way of distinguishing between different kinds of text (agreed, in the abstract). Therefore, we must accept: 'the reinsertion of aesthetic ... judgement into the debate', as 'a vital rejoinder to the uncritical drift of cultural populism and its failure to dispute laissez-faire conceptions of consumer sovereignty and quality' (McGuigan, 1992: 159). We must: 'intervene in the debate to change things for the better, rather than to submit helplessly to indeterminacy and undecidability' (Nelson, 1997: 248). For, after all, there is such a thing as: 'intrinsic aesthetic value' (Nelson, 1997: 212), and 'some TV dramas [are] better than others' (Nelson, 1997: 218). As Brunsdon asks: 'What are we going to do about bad television? Nothing, if we're not prepared to admit that it exists' (Brunsdon, 1990: 70). Caughie agrees, finding that, as we have no other way of making critical distinctions under the Cultural Studies/postmodern model, we should return to the theories of Adorno, which at least: 'still offers a sticking-point against the accommodation and commodification of values in an advanced capitalist culture' (Caughie, 2000: 226). And with this, we find ourselves back in absolutist debates about what is 'good' television and what is 'bad', canvassing various notions of 'quality', public service and aesthetic criteria, the avant-garde, experimentalism, high art, professionalism and craft, national service, formal qualities of the medium, customer satisfaction, expense of production, seriousness, genius, and creativity (Hachmeister, 1994: 21, 27; Nowell-Smith, 1994: 37- 38; Simons, 1994: 79; De Leeuw, 1994: 46-48; Cook and Elsaesser, 1994: 66-67; Raboy, 1996: 50, 68; Thompson, 1996: 13, 14-15; Rosengren et al, 1996: 15; Alexander, Hoerrner and Duke, 1998; Kronig, 2000. See also the overviews of these debates presented in Corner et al, 1993: 82; Brunsdon, 1997: 134-136; Frith, 2000: 39). Each of these writers claims that their approach provides the final, absolute yardstick against which a generalised, aesthetic, innate, true, incontrovertible 'good' or 'bad' judgement can be made of any particular television program or channel. It's as though the work of Hoggart, Williams and Bourdieu had never happened.

### **There is a consensus, albeit not universal**

I have described this form of argument in some detail, for it strikes me as rather odd. It is commonplace in writing about culture, but the move it involves - Cultural Studies states there are no absolute hierarchies of value, therefore Cultural Studies denies that there are any distinctions to be made between texts - is unconvincing to me. The 'anything goes' world imagined by those academic critics who are opposed to postmodern thinking is a strange one, and one which I do not recognise. For, without absolute value judgements, the world goes on. Audiences continue to make distinctions. Some texts are valued more than others, for a variety of reasons: and this happens without academics to police the canon and control what should be seen as good (it is little wonder that some academics get so upset about this particular postmodern turn - not because it leads us to a world of chaos and uncertainty, but because it begins a major demarcation dispute. Without us to tell people the truth, what will become of the world?, wonder the academics,. The answer is undoubtedly disturbing for those who don't trust non-academics to think - the world will continue perfectly well, and many of the jobs you have retained for yourself will be carried out by the general public).

It is odd that there has been almost no interest demonstrated in this fact: the fact that value judgements are being made constantly in the consumption of culture. Writers endlessly worry about the chaos that follows when absolute value judgements are abandoned: but almost none ever ask, How do audiences make value judgements?

It is occasionally mentioned that audiences do this. Collins notes that television audiences are: 'continuously making distinctions, but outside of the rigid hierarchy of values that places all interpretive and evaluative power in the hands of the professional intellectual ...' (Collins, 1993: 38), while Brunsdon comments that 'critical judgement' (Brunsdon, 1997: 125) is an everyday practice. Thompson states that: 'Some media academics still honestly believe that the vast majority of their fellow citizens are incapable of making any kind of discriminating judgement in relation to television ...' (Thompson, 1996: 13), implying the opposite; while Nelson notes that: '[v]alues are made in the everyday practices of making and watching television drama ... there is a consensus, albeit not universal, that some things are better than others' (Nelson, 1997: 6, 218). As Leggatt describes his findings about audience practices of value-judgement:

there is ample evidence that television viewers can readily make judgements of quality and identify what they mean by them; they can certainly distinguish their judgements of quality from their expressions of interest or enjoyment ... (Leggatt, 1996: 85).

We even have calls by some writers to study precisely this topic: Brunsdon noting that: 'we need to articulate both a sociology of taste ... and the existence of more and less arcane hierarchies of taste in every cultural field' (Brunsdon, 1997: 132; see also Collins, 1993: 43; Gans, 1999: 146), and Frith that:

we remain really quite ignorant about popular television aesthetics, about viewers' judgements of what makes for good viewing ... most viewers are sophisticated genre readers and have their own versions of "quality" judgements ... in terms of the technical (good acting, sets, camerawork) the believable, the interesting, the spectacular, the satisfying – terms that echo but do not exactly match the professional concern for originality, authenticity and innovation ...' (Frith, 2000: 46)

Despite these calls, I am aware of little Cultural Studies work on how value judgements are made outside the academy, in the everyday world where debates about the worth of programs are contingent, situated and outside of the traditions of aesthetics (Collins, 1993, is one exception).

The major insights we have into this process is that emerging from sociological audience work (TAA, 1986; Eratmasa, 1990; Savage, 1992; Greenberg, 1992; Gunter et al, 1992; Rosengren et al, 1996) This work offers some useful insights into the variety of ways in which audiences make value judgements. On the one hand, public service discourses, favouring masculine genres such as news and current affairs are apparently important in evaluating television programs. Many researchers have found that audience members often rate programs as being of high quality even though they don't personally enjoy watching them, and rate the programs that they themselves like as being of lower quality (Morrison, 1986: 15, 17; Greenberg and Buselle, 1996: 170-1; Leggatt, 1996: 75).

At the same time, a contradictory impulse rates as 'good' those programs which the viewer personally enjoys (Morrison, 1986: 16, 21). The fact that two contradictory schema appear to be employed in making value judgements about television programs means that sociological inquiry must ultimately give up,

frustrated, with attempts to map value judgements in an empirical way, noting huffily that: 'the remainder [of the decision making process] is the result of viewer inconsistency or viewer fickleness' (Greenberg and Buselle, 1996: 195), and that 'value judgements cannot be justified empirically' (Gans, 1999: 163).

Because quality is bounded by different meanings for different people for different programmes ... we would caution that, as a research question, there is a limit to the value to be gained from pursuing the general idea of quality of programmes ... Further more, quality is not very meaningful when set with in the reality of how people watch television ... Poor quality does not hinder enjoyment: one group discussant, after criticising the poor quality of *Dynasty*, said 'I know it's ridiculous, but I enjoy it' (Morrison, 1986: 17)

Sociological research into the question of value judgements tells us little about the discourses employed by audience members to work out value; or the ways in which audience members understand these for themselves; or how value-judgements might differ in particular situations. This work also relies on the sociological distinction between reality and representation, denying the effectivity of discourses in helping us to construct our interpretations of reality: thus, one report notes that viewers might find 'experienced quality in programming may be quite high' (Rosengren et al, 1996: 27), while 'derived quality' (*ie.* how good the text really is, according to the criteria of the researchers) 'may be quite low'. (27).

### **What, then constitutes a 'good' episode?**

This article responds to Brunsdon's call to study: 'the existence of more and less arcane hierarchies of taste in every cultural field'. Presenting a detailed case study of the ways in which *Doctor Who* fans conduct debate about the value of episodes of that program, it then uses this information to reconsider debates about cultural value in the academy.

In doing this, the article contributes to the development of one cultural sites has been the object of Cultural Studies-style research into value judgements - television science fiction. The work of John Tulloch on *Doctor Who* and Henry Jenkins on *Star Trek* has addresses precisely the kinds of questions which would seem to be an ameliorative to the sterile debate on value detailed above. As well as examining in detail how the social identities of viewers contribute to both their interpretations of, and their pleasures in *Doctor Who* (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 67-172), Tulloch specifically asks 'What, then constitutes a "good" episode' of *Doctor Who*, discussing this question with fans of the program. Suggesting: 'Fans quite generally agree' on the value of given *Doctor Who* stories (Tulloch, 1995: 147), Tulloch describes a 'precise aesthetic' whereby stories are judged according to whether or not they 'leave things unexplained' and 'adhere to the history and continuity of the show' (145). He notes that some fans also draw on traditional authorial discourses, and educational or well-researched elements (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983: 177). Jenkin's work on *Star Trek* fans at MIT finds that evaluative judgements are made by that group in terms of the perceived scientific plausibility of texts (219; see also Jenkins, 1992: 95 for a discussion of wider fan communities and evaluative judgements).

The current paper, then, develops from the work of Tulloch and Jenkins. These authors have demonstrated that detailed evaluative work takes place in science-fiction fan communities. The current paper seeks to investigate this process in more detail, and to use this case study to return explicitly to debates about cultural value. In the process, some of Tulloch's positions are challenged: for example, this work suggests that, rather than accepting that there is a static set

of criteria in fandom for judging *Doctor Who* stories ('Fans quite generally agree'), the article describes the changing nature of evaluations - stable but not static - and the ways in which they are challenged in public discussions about value. Similarly, whereas the work of Tulloch and Jenkins does not make explicit the differences between judgements as to 'favourite' stories, and those of the 'best' ones, such a distinction becomes central to the current project.

Ultimately the paper has a very simple project: to make explicit the fact this research, and the foregoing work of Tulloch and Jenkins, can be mobilised precisely to engage in wider theoretical arguments about cultural value. The level of detail which can be presented in this case study, as questions of value are of central concern to the work (rather than in that of Tulloch and Jenkins, where it is one of many aspects of fans' reactions to programs in which they are interested) should also make clear that, contra the residual authoritarianism implicit in accounts which worry that without the clear guidance of 'we' academics, people outside the academy will be unable to engage in informed debate about value, in fact the degree of detail, knowledge and self-awareness in these discussions is impressive.

How, then, do *Doctor Who* fans decide which are the 'best' *Doctor Who* stories?

### **The *Doctor Who* Magazine Awards**

*Doctor Who* is a British, family-oriented science-fiction television program which first began broadcasting on the BBC in November 1963. Twenty six annual series were broadcast before the program was retired in 1989 - including one hundred and fifty nine televised stories (of varying numbers of episodes), and seven actors playing the lead role of the alien Time Lord, the Doctor. This character travelled through time and space in a ship called the TARDIS, which was shaped as an old-fashioned British Police Box (see Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983 for a detailed account of the structure and history of the series). The character returned for a one-off telemovie, co-produced with an American TV network, in 1996; and in the periods when it has not been broadcast, has survived as a series of original novels published (first by Virgin Publishing and then the BBC) at the rate of two a month; and as a series of original audio dramas, produced by company Big Finish.

*Doctor Who Magazine* - the only magazine about the program officially licensed by the BBC - has been published, continuously since October 1979. It has gone through a number of incarnations, from children's weekly comic, to rather dull and fact-filled monthly publication, to the self-reflexive and ironic journal of its current regeneration (Cartwright, 1997). As of 2000, *DWM* had a circulation of over 10,000 readers.

In issue 260, the magazine announced 'The *DWM* Awards', inviting its readers to partake in aesthetic contemplation of the one hundred and fifty-nine televised *Doctor Who* stories:

What is the greatest *Doctor Who* story ever? ... we hope to compile a definitive list of the best (and worst) of *Doctor Who*, and for that we need your help ... rate each and every *Doctor Who* story between 1 and 10, where 1 means 'truly awful' and 10 'absolutely superb' ... (Anon, 1998: 45) [2].

The results of this poll were published in issue 265 of the magazine, with the headline: 'We count down the greatest *Doctor Who* stories of all time'. Over 2600

readers of *DWM* magazine voted, giving a score between one and ten to each broadcast story.

I start with this poll because it provides evidence for the arguments made above, and introduces the question of value judgements in *Doctor Who* in an obvious way. For, if it were true that the lack of universal aesthetic criteria for judging popular culture meant that, in this topsy-turvy postmodern world, 'anything goes', one would then expect to see every one of the one hundred and fifty-nine *Doctor Who* stories listed in this poll averaging out at about a five, as some viewers gave a rating of '1' to each story, some a '5' and some a '10'.

But this is not what happens. The published results of the poll show that the lowest rated of the *Doctor Who* stories in the poll - *The Twin Dilemma* - was rated by viewers at 43.7% - a fail in most University Courses. Conversely, the 'best' story, according to the 2600 readers who voted - *The Genesis of the Daleks* - rated at 90.12% (Anon, 1998b).

There is no academic tradition outlining the aesthetic criteria by which *Doctor Who* stories should be judged. A canon of acknowledged 'great *Doctor Who* stories' has never been published by any academic press, taught in any University course, nor displayed in any art gallery. And yet a community has managed to reach a consensus on just this fact.

As the parodic taxonomy which opened this article displays - "We have popular seasons, we have unpopular popular seasons, we've popular unpopular seasons, we've popular unpopular popular" - not only are television viewers outside of the academy are indeed capable of making discriminating judgements in relation to television - but that, in this case, they do so with a degree of complexity and jargon that would not dishonour the academy itself.

The *Magazine* forms around it a constituency of readers - an 'interpretive community' (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 108). It is not the only hub of *Doctor Who* fandom in Britain, never mind internationally - there are also fanzines, local clubs, pub meetings, conventions, internet groups and so on, which attract *Doctor Who* fans, and which think about and discuss the program in quite different ways (see, for example, Miles 1999). A 'virtual community' is 'gathered' by this magazine (Hartley, 2000: 158), sharing an identity as a particular kind of *Doctor Who* fan. John Hartley has described the formation of such mediated audience communities as 'cultural citizenship' (163); a form of citizenship - belonging to a community - which is quite different from previous forms of belonging in that it is voluntary, non-exclusive (the members of this community obviously belong to other communities - whether national, gendered, centred on sexuality - or even to other kinds of *Doctor Who* communities). The lack of traditional state-based centres for such communities does not render them unreal: rather, it is a postmodern form of social organisation.

The *Magazine*, therefore, does not tell us what all *Doctor Who* fans 'really' think about *Doctor Who*. But it does give us a useful case study of one institution, with a variety of interesting associated discourses, serving one fan community, and offering a variety of ways to conduct debates around value judgements in popular culture. For the writers in *Doctor Who Magazine* are involved in making value judgements on stories at many sites - in the Editorials, reviews, letters, annual award votes, feature articles, the 'Time Team' discussions of earlier stories, previews, and so on [3]. The Magazine works as a public site for ongoing discussions about value judgements - and thus represents a valuable archive of empirical textual evidence about the process of making value judgements in popular culture.

The methodology of this analysis of those discourses is textual analysis, taken here to mean the attempt to: 'make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of [a] text' (McKee, 2001). I take it as axiomatic that public utterances are just as 'real' as private utterances in attempting to understand the discourses by which audiences are making sense of texts (McKee, 1999).

It is perhaps worth asking, as a final methodological question, why *Doctor Who* fans? As Greg Noble has pointed out, we seem to have an emerging (anti)canon in Cultural Studies; a lot of work being done on *The Simpsons*, *X-Files*, *South Park* and *Buffy*, very little on *The Bill*, Whitney Houston and Mr Bumpy (Noble, 2000: 7). Although not as studied as *Star Trek* and *Xena*, *Doctor Who* has received more attention than most (non-cult) television programs (see Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983; Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). It seems obvious that many Cultural Studies academics are now following the lead of their English Literature counterparts and writing about what they love; and what they love is cult television shows (see Lewis and Stempel, 1993; Reeves et al, 1996). The advantages of writing about what one loves are obvious: for example, an already existing detailed knowledge of intertexts and discourses that inform interpretation within a community. The advantages of studying cult programs more generally extend to the fact that so much of the interpretive work around such a series is done in public (even if not always properly archived) ways. Of course, there is no claim in this work that *Doctor Who* fans are 'representative' - as John Hartley has suggested, such a concept does not even suit Cultural Studies, being developed for social sciences rather than the humanities (Hartley, 2000). Rather, this article presents a case study, looking in detail at the ways in which competing and complementary discourses are employed to make value judgements about popular culture. If nothing else, the approaches taken to *Doctor Who* by the *DWM* community demonstrate the sophistication of the value-judgements which occur in popular culture; and provide ample evidence (to use a sociological turn of phrase) that the abandonment of universal standards for value judgement, ruled over by an educated elite, does not necessarily lead to 'anything goes'.

### **We all clap our hands, smile and say "how fantastic"**

Before we start on this analysis, though, it should be noted up front that there are indeed some letter writers in *DWM* who do indeed favour the tendency that is so feared by critics of Cultural Studies and postmodern thinking. The writers of these letters do not want any distinction to be made between *Doctor Who* stories at all; rather, they would like every one to be celebrated as equally good:

any new *Doctor Who*, whatever shape or form it takes, must be better than no *Doctor Who* at all ... A united front has made the *Star Trek* franchise what it is today – be it good or bad it's still going strong after 30-odd years. If only *Doctor Who* fandom could say the same ... (Bowler, 2000: 7)

The idea that *Doctor Who* must be celebrated, whether 'good or bad' occurs occasionally in the magazine, usually as a response to a negative review of a recently released *Doctor Who* video. These writers claim that the magazine should: 'be a little more positive and enthusiastic' (Weston, 2000: 6); avoid 'self-mockery' (Williams, 2000: 7; Read, 2000: 7) and 'negativity', and 'defend the honour of *Doctor Who*' (DiPaolo, 1998: 14). From this perspective:

If you don't like *Doctor Who*, don't talk about it. If you do like *Doctor Who*, you should praise it ... or ... keep your opinions to yourself (Kenny, 2000: 6)

Such arguments, however, are always rebutted in the magazine: dissent and criticism are defended. This is achieved by contrasting *Doctor Who* with the bad object of American sf..

As we will see throughout this article - and as Tulloch and Jenkins have previously noted (1995: 122) this is an important tendency in making value judgements about science fiction. The ways in which evaluative debates about *Doctor Who* stories are conducted by fans of *Doctor Who* tend to be strongly informed by the philosophies presented in *Doctor Who* itself. This is entirely unsurprising - these fans like *Doctor Who*, thus it is to be expected that they will enjoy the world view shown in the program. This point is worth emphasising, though, because it underlines the lack of universality in value judgements; and the fact that different communities will employ different criteria and different strategies in making these judgements:

*DWM* is now the only genre magazine I get simply because of its non-reverential but affectionate attitude ...If you want just fawning admiration, go read a *Star Trek* book or magazine, in which their TV show can do no wrong. We love *Doctor Who* even more when its preposterousness is shown ... Only by prodding, poking, questioning and laughing with it can we truly appreciate the magic that is *Doctor Who* (Green, 1998: 32)

*Doctor Who* is different in its amateurish and fun from the humorless mass culture which is represented in these arguments by American sf. The arguments against blanket celebration draw on lessons learned from the program itself:

Have I suddenly been swept into a parallel universe in which all dissent must be eliminated [suggesting *Doctor Who* stories where exactly this happens - for example, *Inferno*] ... If we all clap our hands, smile and say "how fantastic" to every single *Doctor Who* release, regardless of quality, we are just going to look stupid ... (Green, 2000: 7; see Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 165 for similar discussions).

There is a commitment in the community of *Doctor Who Magazine*, occasionally debated explicitly, to the process of 'appreciation' or 'criticism', which discriminates between various stories on their 'quality', their value as 'good' or 'bad'.

### **The holy writ of fandom: the consensus of value in *Doctor Who Magazine***

The *DWM* Awards prove that there is consensus in (this part of) *Doctor Who* fandom about which are the best stories, and which are the worst. A voting sample of more than 2600 members of this community agreed that Tom Baker story *Genesis of the Daleks* was worth over nine out of ten; while *The Twin Dilemma* was worth just over four out of ten. The rest of the Top Ten (*The Talons of Weng-Chiang*, *The Caves of Androzani*, *The Pyramids of Mars*, *The Robots of Death*, *The Remembrance of the Daleks*, *The City of Death*, *The Tomb of the Cybermen*, *The Evil of the Daleks* and *The Web of Fear*), along with the next ten stories on the list, all score over eight out of ten. No other stories do. As one writer noted, the survey contained: 'no real shocks' (Arnold, 1998: 44), representing familiar value judgements about the various stories. These values, another writer suggests, 'we agreed years ago' (MacDonald, 1998: 26).

This consensus is reached by the ongoing process of debating these stories in public for a such as the *Magazine*. The editor of the magazine discusses his own votes:

I filled in the 10s and 1s first to set myself a benchmark. Having been raised in the *Doctor Who* fan culture of the eighties, the 1s were easier. Just one stroke of the pen was needed to assign the painful *Silver Nemesis*, *Battlefield*, *The Dominators* and *The Curse of Peladon* to oblivion. For the 10s, well ... *Horror of Fang Rock*, naturally, then *Survival*, *Enlightenment*, *Trial 9-12* (yes, really) ... (Gillatt, 1998: 3)

It is 'the *Doctor Who* fan culture of the eighties' which makes most value judgements easy. A consensus - what Gillatt calls a 'collective mood' in fandom (Gillatt, 1997c: 3) - on the value of these stories has been reached. In another article, Gillatt notes that:

I grew up with the *Doctor Who Monthly*'s of Jeremy Bentham and Richard Landen, and the books of Peter Haining ... those were the days when we learned by rote what was "good" and "bad" *Doctor Who*... (Gillatt, 1997d: 3)

The importance of the early issues of *Doctor Who Monthly* (before it changed its title to *Doctor Who Magazine*) has been noted by other writers. Stephen Cartwright notes that:

In today's age of video, satellite, programme guides and across-the-board novelisations, it's easy to forget that in 1979, only the most privileged of fandom's inner circles had read the plot of *The Aztecs* ... let alone seen any photographs ...the average *Doctor Who* fan was desperately hungry for photographs and information (Cartwright, 1997: 8, 9).

As I discuss it the next section, it seems to me that there is some element of creating a straw-man here, in order to allow teleological narratives of manumission: once we 'learned by rote' (Gillatt); now we think for ourselves.

Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that there are indeed major changes in the media culture between the launch of the magazine in 1979 and the Awards vote in 1998. A lack of accessible computers meant that both fan publishing and internet fandom were much more limited than is now the case, meaning that fewer voices were published discussing the value of texts. More than this, the dearth of domestic video players or commercially released copies of early *Doctor Who* stories did indeed mean that many viewers had never seen stories, and - even if they did not simply believe the opinions of published writers - had no direct experience of the material against which they could judge those comments [4].

Given this combination of differences in medium, and a preferred narrative of evolution, it is not surprising that the small number of published writers in previous decades are given a privileged place in thinking within the *Doctor Who* community about the process of value judgement. For example, Cartwright claims that the work of Jeremy Bentham - who wrote all of the text material for the magazine for seventy-two of its early issues - became vitally important for fans who wanted to know more about the early days of their favourite program:

it was ... arguably Bentham's monopoly on the magazine which engendered much of the holy writ of fandom which often still goes unchallenged. *The Gunfighters*, which comes across as a rather witty

knockabout with some great one-liners and surprisingly expensive-looking scenery, was universally enshrined as the worst ever *Doctor Who* story for many years before most *DWM* readers ... had ever seen it (Cartwright, 1997: 10)

As noted above, John Tulloch's work on value judgements of *Doctor Who* suggests that 'Fans quite generally agree' on value judgements. Histories of a move from rote learning to individual choice suggest that agreement is not that straightforward. This finding could be explained by reference to our differing samples - Tulloch talks to members of the British *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society. It might also be explained by the fact that the research took place in a different decade: certainly *Doctor Who* magazine has lost its humorless instruction on 'good' and 'bad' episodes since the 1980s, and it may be that the arguments presented above have some validity in describing community debates about value in *Doctor Who* fandom. Whatever the reason, the debates described above suggest that the process of agreeing on value judgements in the present *Doctor Who Magazine's* community is more complex than that described by Tulloch. A consensus is present: but it is an unstable and a changing thing. It is not (and it is unlikely it ever was, entirely) 'learned by rote' [5]. Readers can now see most early stories for themselves, allowing for a more convincing speaking position from which to engage with published value judgements. The value of stories must be continually defended, revised - and is always informed by the personal pleasure of 'favourites', which alters the list of what is 'good'.

### **I've discovered my views to be in the minority**

The consensus learned by 'critical rote' is particularly criticised in this community in terms of a key tenet which is also - unsurprisingly - a key tenet of *Doctor Who* itself. This tenet is the assertion that individualism and the right to dissent must be defended. '[A]s fan crit keeps saying, the critical consensus is wrong' (Cornell, 1997: 92). Gary Gillatt, projecting unthinking consensus about the value of *Doctor Who* stories onto past generations, claims: 'We're a bit wiser these days ...' (Gillatt, 1999b: 3).

In this vein, several writers commenting on the results of the *DWM* Awards argue both that the values assigned to stories were predictable; and they were wrong. One writer:

found the results of the survey depressing and hugely predictable reading. In 22 years of being a diehard fan. I've discovered my views to be in the minority. I seem to like all the stories fandom loathes ... No way is *Genesis of the Daleks* the greatest story of them all ... I have long found *Remembrance of the Daleks* far from being one of the best, one of the worst ... (Goodman, 1998: 43-4)

Another writer describes the results not as 'predictable', but as 'shocking' (Musselwhite, 1998: 13); while columnist Jackie Jenkins rejects the explanation of consensus as she states that:

I [have] once more been immersed in contemplation of the results of the *DWM* Awards hoping that this time the ranking of the stories would have struck me as making some semblance of sense. Unfortunately, no. The notion that if one were to introduce a typewriter to a roomful of chimps, said primates would eventually churn out the complete works of Shakespeare is one of the oft-quoted laws of inevitability. By the time I was interrupted I'd begun to view the survey in a similar light, wondering how long it would take the same chimps to produce the results printed,

taking into account that the first several hundred attempts would have to be rejected due to the evidence of far too much thought and consideration being applied (Jenkins, 1998: 41)

This refusal of consensus, of: 'received wisdom' (Gillatt, 1995a: 3, Barnes, 1998: 3) is presented in terms of refusing 'prejudice' against stories, and allowing for their reevaluation. This regularly occurs in the magazine in relation to individual stories which are, in the consensus displayed in the *DWM* Awards, regarded as being 'bad' *Doctor Who* stories. *Horror of Fang Rock*, for example, is: '[o]verlooked by just about everybody ... But it's FAB!' (Ainsworth, 1995: 35). *The War Games* is: 'far from the turgid monochrome plodder that a few inattentive viewings and received wisdom had led me to believe. Au contraire, it's the business' (Barnes, 1998: 3). *The Twin Dilemma*: 'has just been voted the worst *Doctor Who* story of all ... what's your problem? *The Twin Dilemma* is pretty good! ...' (Skipham, 1998: 44; see also Shaw, 1998: 13). *The Nightmare of Eden* has a reputation as being: 'tacky, stupid, [with] bad acting and the like [but t]he story I have just watched was perfectly respectable' (Tapner, 1999: 13). Conversely, *The Celestial Toymaker*, 'long-championed by older fans ... [is] terminally dull in execution...' (Gillatt, 2000: 42, 43). This rhetorical position - setting oneself up as an individual in the face of an authoritarian prescription to do otherwise - is an important part of the ongoing debate about value in the *DWM* community. On television, the Doctor regularly overthrows tyrannical regimes which stop their citizens from expressing themselves by inciting the citizens to a revolutionary awareness of their own individuality. In the fan community, the writers for *DWM* take on just such a subject position for themselves as they engage in debate about the stories which they like best.

### **Heated debate, coercion, argument, counter-argument and the occasional punch**

There is a consensus about the relative value of *Doctor Who* stories in the community of *DWM* readers. This consensus has a history in the early days of the magazine, but is not absolute. It is not universally accepted, and is continually being questioned as public debate continues - as it should, in *Doctor Who's* own philosophies - to challenge received wisdom in the name of individualism. Through the process of this ongoing public debate, consensus is continually reworked. It is never rendered static; but it is relatively stable.

*DWM* provides a number of interesting cases studies of how consensus can be reached on elements of the program. These display the persuasion and argument which take place in all consensually-oriented debates, and the perhaps grudging acceptance of the consensus that is reached.

Presenting their list of 'Twenty Moments when you know you're watching the greatest TV series ever made, Barnes and Ware describe the process by which they finally decided on the twenty 'greatest' moments:

The final list has only been arrived at after many hours' viewing, and many more of heated debate, coercion, argument, counter-argument and the occasional punch. Rankings were determined via an arcane and necessarily subjective process of evaluation. All twenty scenes were awarded points based on factors including initial impact, re-viewing potential and overall importance to the series' mythos ... (Barnes and Ware, 1995: 18)

Criteria are established: but it is only through debate that any kind of consensus is reached on which stories fit these criteria. Similar examples appear in the 'Time

Team' feature of the magazine. In this regular feature, four fans have to watch (or in the case of early episodes of *Doctor Who* which were junked from the BBC Archives, listen to) every single episode of the one hundred and fifty-nine broadcast *Doctor Who* stories: 'Their mission. To watch the whole of *Doctor Who*. From the beginning. In order'. The comments of this four person team on the episodes they watch are then transcribed: and provide a fascinating microcosm of the process of consensus formation on the value of *Doctor Who* episodes.

For example, the team discuss the William Hartnell story *Planet of Giants*, and decide, despite initial disagreements, that the technobabble in the story is a problem:

'Don't tell me that sodding Fast Return Switch is stuck again!' 'Give them a chance ... you know what's coming ...and that adds to the joy. The technobabble is surely just an excusable way of getting to the fun?' 'Space Pressure?' quote Jac and Clay simultaneously. 'OK, OK. Maybe that's a bit lame', mumbles Peter (Gillatt, 1999d: 24)

Similarly, discussing the Hartnell story *The Crusade*, the Team come to agree that the villain is the first really 'evil' character in the program's history:

Peter likes the chief villain. 'We've seen the mad, the bad and the dangerous to know – but El Akir is the first truly evil baddie in the series ...' He's instantly shouted down. 'Tegana!', 'The fat Sensorite!', 'That woman on Marinus!'. 'But they had plots and motives' replies Peter calmly, 'El Akir is just evil and cruel for the joy of it'. There's a begrudging rumble of concurrence (Gillatt, 2000: 16)

Through the public debate in the magazine, a 'mumble[d]', 'begrudging' - but still present - consensus is reached.

### **It's interesting how the fashion goes, isn't it?**

Despite the construction in these discourses of 'received wisdom' as being monolithic and unchanging, one of the most interesting and useful aspects of the fan community consensus about the value of *Doctor Who* stories is that it does in fact change over time, in systematic ways. This is interesting for thinking about aesthetic debates: it makes clear that consensus about value does not in fact strive progressively towards a single, objective truth about the worth of a given cultural object. Rather, the history of *Doctor Who* fan criticism is full of examples of what Murray has called the: 'cyclical phases of opinion' (Murray, 1997: 22).

For example, the Tom Baker story, *The Deadly Assassin*, which *DWM* fan consensus in 1998 placed as number eleven in the ranking of all-time greatest stories (with a vote of over eight out of ten) was at the time of its broadcast in 1976, 'just not worth considering ... WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE MAGIC OF DOCTOR WHO?' (Rudzki, 1997[1976]: 6), and came last in the *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society's Season Poll for the year (Cornell, 1997: 7). Similarly, *Horror of Fang Rock*, '[i]n one of those peculiar twists in fan opinion ... was given a lukewarm reception on first transmission, but is now very highly regarded indeed ...' (Griffiths, 1998: 9, quoting Terrance Dicks).

This trend is most pronounced in relation to 'eras' of the program, rather than individual stories.

The era of the third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, has been re-evaluated a number of times over the years. The magazine *Doctor Who Bulletin* in the 1980s intervened

in a consensus in which: 'the Pertwee era was the height of Classic *Doctor Who*' (Cornell, 1997: 12). Writer Nick Pegg: '[i]nvented the Anti-Pertwee-Era movement' and: 'turned fandom around within two years [and t]hese days, even the most dedicated Pertweephile admits that certain elements of the show then were a bit rubbish ...' (Cornell, 1997: 12). This led to a period where: 'fandom actually condemned [Pertwee's] whole era to be despised' (Murray, 1997: 22). However, the 'cyclical phases of opinion' mean that an emerging new consensus believes that: 'It's now all right to actually LIKE the Pertwee era' (Murray, 1997: 28).

The mid-Tom Baker years of *Doctor Who* (1977-1979), under the producership of Graham Williams have undergone a similar cycle of evaluation. These stories (including a period with *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* author Douglas Adams as script editor) tend to be more comic than other periods, and have been both decried and celebrated for this fact, with fans: '[v]ilifying the Graham Williams era and then placing it on a pedestal' (Murray, 1997: 22). At the time of broadcast and for a period after that: 'the Graham Williams' era would be generally regarded as one of the blackest periods in *Doctor Who*'s long history' (Newman, 1997: 7):

The traditionalist stance (shoddy production, send up, childish...) has been redressed slightly over the past few years by an opposing argument. ... the *Doctor Who* stories of the late seventies are hugely, magnificently and squarely entertaining (Roberts, 1997: 14; see also Cornell, 1997: 11; Gibbons, 1998: 33).

In contrast, Tom Baker's last season (eighteen), and the years following, under the producership of John Nathan-Turner went the other way, and continue to vacillate in evaluation, as: '[f]andom has been retreating from its once near-hysterical adulation of the early Nathan-Turner period' (Gray, 1997: 108).

Again, in the value judgements of this fan community we can see that consensus is present, but never static. It changes over time, and although there is a (contested) agreement at any given time about which are the best stories, the fans know that this will change in five or ten years, as the debate moves on.

### **Ignorance of the "professional" or "superior" fans' views of the series**

It is also worth noting that the assignation of value to *Doctor Who* stories in these Awards - if not in the entire community - is a straightforwardly democratic process. It is emphasised in the magazine's discussion of the Awards that it is the number of people who voted that gives this listing of 'the greatest *Doctor Who* stories' its status:

A staggering 2600 of you ... have helped compile this definitive, once and for all, statement of the Doctor's greatest ever adventures (Anon, 1998b: 5)

Because so many people voted, the list is therefore 'definitive, once and for all'. Contrasting the results of this survey with other similar surveys in different magazines - which produced similar, though not identical results - the writer claims that: 'it should be noted that these canvassed a significantly smaller number of participants than the *DWM* awards' (MacDonald, 1998: 29). Because more people vote, the results are more accurate: this is democracy at work.

Of course, it is worth pointing out that this term is not unproblematically positive, at least in the terms in which democracy is often thought. To start with, it goes

against the previously noted discourse in both *Doctor Who* and in these discussions - the insistence that the rights and views of 'the minority' must be recognised. Similarly, this process does not mean that every voter has equal power within the community - democracy never does, historically, although utopian visions may wish it to be so. In the *Magazine*, for example, we must be aware of generic differences: do comments presented in the letters pages carry the same weight in deciding value as those of the reviewers, for example? The present project has not investigated this question in detail, although the textual evidence in the magazine is suggestive. The role of reviewers, for example, is often discussed within the *Magazine* itself, and never with the sense that they have a responsibility to give the correct response, or a privileged insight because of their status. Indeed, accordance with the majority of fan opinions - that is, 'ordinary fans' - is often proposed as a prerequisite for the role of *DWM* reviewer, along with the injunction to be 'entertaining'. There is little sense of the traditional 'critic', offering profound insights emerging from greater training and sensitivity in the subject. And in the DWAS survey, there is a commitment to a form of simple democratic decision making - the votes of the editor and the reviewer of the magazine count for the same as the votes of each reader who votes in the survey. The term 'democracy' here, then, is descriptive rather than idealistic.

I like this democratic approach to value, not least because it is likely to be an anathema to many traditional writers on aesthetics, for whom precisely the opposite is true (whatever the largest number of people enjoy is automatically the worst - lowest common denominator, mass culture, and other such terms of abuse). This reversal of such discourses is a pleasant one. In political discourses since the time of Plato, democracy has been reviled precisely because of such aesthetic criteria:

The central idea involved in Plato's criticism [of democracy] is that there is a truth in matters of value ... some opinions are right and some of them are wrong ... he tended to assume that the majority did not have such knowledge (Harrison, 1993: 27)

The *DWM Awards* provide a forum where we can see democratic aesthetics at work. And although the results may not accord with those produced by a cultural elite, the process is perfectly workable: as we noted above, the lack of traditional processes of aesthetic value judgement, led by an educated elite has not led to an anything-goes cultural anarchy: but to a civilised community-debate, which forms a stable but not static consensus about value - in a democratic fashion. Again, in discussions of this element of consensus-formation, we find the anti-authoritarian stance of *Doctor Who* contributing to discourses which reject wisdom handed down from positions of authority. In order to appreciate a *Doctor Who* story, we are told, all you need is: '[s]uspension of disbelief ...[and] an ignorance of the "professional" or "superior" fans' views of the series' (Haines, 1999: 7).

It is also interesting to consider the quantitative nature of the survey: a mark between 1 and 10 is not the best way to deal with subtle questions of differing kinds of value, criteria and purpose (this is what the ongoing debates in the magazine are for). On the one hand, this is a perfect example of the barbarism which so worries Plato, and which I thus find so charming. On the other, it is obviously a practical imperative: 2600 people cannot take part in a debate without reducing participation to a schematic - a representative - level. Democracy is the same thing as bureaucracy. Such a numerical approach to value is very much outside of the tradition of academic thinking about value. Although one might expect to find Shakespeare's plays listed as a Top Ten (assigned

numerical values allowing for such an easy organisation) in places such as web sites, or ironically in a cheeky magazine, it is almost unimaginable that such a list would be published in an academic journal. The language used to create hierarchies in academic culture is more qualitative, more vague: this play is Shakespeare's 'best'; this one is 'not his best'. The move towards numerical measurement of quality, and the creation of Top Ten lists from it, comes from areas outside of the academy - most notably perhaps the Top Ten list of singles published in America, UK and Australia each week, and the Top Ten rated television programs. This kind of social science does not fit well with the Humanities intuitive - and traditionally anti-democratic (see Carey, 1992) to questions of value.

### **I watch *Doctor Who* because I LIKE *Doctor Who*: the vacillation between 'favourite' and 'best'**

*DWM*'s consensus about the value of particular stories is stable but not static, agreed but not to the extent of excluding dissent. In an ongoing process writers engage in discussion about which are the 'best' *Doctor Who* stories. But on what terms are these debates conducted? What arguments are presented by and to this community for deciding on the value of particular *Doctor Who* stories?

The most important element of these debates about value - for the purposes of this article - is that they consistently slip between the discourse of personal judgements (my 'favourite') and that of objective, aesthetic judgements (the 'best'). As I will argue below, this continual slippage is particularly important, and tells us a lot about the purpose that value judgements serve for this (and perhaps for other) communities.

Every year, *DWM* holds an annual survey, in which readers vote on the *Doctor Who* products released that year. Until 1989, this was television stories; after that (when the television program was cancelled) it was novels and the magazine itself. It is interesting to note that in the voting form for these surveys, readers are consistently asked to nominate the 'best' television story or novel; but their 'favourite' issue of the magazine (Gillatt, 1997a: 22). This vacillation between the objectivity of 'best' (an innate quality of worth in the text) and 'favourite' (a personal reaction) is common in the *Magazine*.

Many writers move between personal reactions and objective judgements in the course of a single paragraph. Peter Frankum, for example, defending the work of scriptwriter Malcolm Hulke on the program states that Hulke's story *Doctor Who and the Silurians*: 'is a good story, well told. Personally I have found it thoroughly entertaining ...' (Frankum, 2000: 6). 'I ... found it thoroughly entertaining', runs the logic of this letter, therefore it is 'good' (see Ainsworth, 1995: 35; Jones, 1995: 33 for more examples of a similar shift).

Other writers make it much more explicit that they are discussing 'favourite' stories rather than 'best' stories (Berriman, 1997: 92; Roberts, 1997: 20; Cornell, 1997: 7) - personal reactions rather than objective qualities of texts:

... when a member of the general public asks us why we bother watching that lot of old toot [that is *Doctor Who*], we mutter things like 'subtext' and 'surprisingly deep' ... when what we ought to be saying is, 'I watch *Doctor Who* because I LIKE *Doctor Who*. All of it. Even the ones with glittery tinsel effects. Even the ones with no intellectual weight whatsoever. Even the one with Ken Dodd in'... (Barnes, 2000: 6)

Surprisingly, the introduction of 'favourite' as a term in the debate does not, however, signal again a return to the 'anything goes' world feared by critics of Cultural Studies and postmodern thinking, or the fragmented world of 'viewer fickleness' which concerns sociologists in this area. For the choices of 'favourite' stories are not entirely determined by individual whim (as the results of the Awards cited above make clear). They are structured in various ways: and the magazine has explicitly addressed some of the factors involved in nominating 'favourite' stories. The oscillation between 'best' and 'favourite' allows both traditional aesthetic discourses, and a number of personal factors, to be brought to bear in these debates about the value of *Doctor Who* stories.

### **An utterly unworkable script**

Particularly in the Reviews section of *Doctor Who Magazine*, we find that traditional aesthetic discourses are indeed employed in order to make sense of this British science fiction television program. Dave Owen's review of the Sylvester McCoy story *Battlefield* demonstrates this tendency:

A disaster like this needs an utterly unworkable script as a foundation. Some of the dialogue simply makes no sense whatsoever ... Next you need a director who appears to think he's working on [children's program] *Crackerjack* ... [D]ialogue, performance and direction synergise in the miasma of mediocrity that is the "Boom" scene towards the end of the first part [...where] alternate head shots are edited together ... turgidly ... Sylvester McCoy tak[es] part in bellowing matches he can't win ... Employing a semi-paralysed VT editor was probably a bad idea, or perhaps he was merely so convulsed with hysterics at Mordred Christopher Bowen's truly diabolical laughter that couldn't cut to the next scene ... this *Battlefield* does indeed have the smell of death about it (Owen, 1998b: 14; for other examples of aesthetic discourse see Bishop, 1999: 21; Owen, 1995a: 34; Owen, 1996a: 41, 42 for similar examples)

Particular formal elements of the text (performances, writing of dialogue, construction of plot, framing of shots, editing pace) are evaluated, and assigned a value between 'brilliant' and 'awful'. These assessments of particular elements are then generalised into a statement of ontological worth - that a given text is 'good' or 'bad', with no qualification as to 'good for what' being required.

This use of aesthetic discourses is interesting - it shows us that popular culture continues to use the discourses established for high art. The challenge in a postmodern culture to the rigid distinction between these cultural arenas leads to, as one effect, the bleeding of taxonomies developed for one kind of culture into the assessment of another (see Newcomb, 1974 for an early example of this process, and an ambivalent discussion of the suitability of aesthetic discourses for television; and Jones, 1995 for an assertion that such aesthetic discourses should not be applied to a popular culture product like *Doctor Who*).

That the use of traditional aesthetic discourses is part of the fan process of judging *Doctor Who* stories is notable for two reasons.

Firstly, it is only one part of the complex process of assigning value judgements to stories - as the rest of this article will demonstrate.

Secondly, this case study demonstrates that in assessments of popular culture, as in assessments of all texts, aesthetic discourses claim objectivity but rely on subjective interpretation. Although there is implicit in the language of aesthetics a suggestion that what is being described is an innate quality of the text - in

relation to particular elements, or to worth overall, a text simply *is* good or bad - the fact that different viewers judge these supposedly objective qualities very differently demonstrates clearly that the language of aesthetics follows personal judgement - in order to rationalise responses to the text - rather than simply describing elements that are present in it.

For example, Craig Hinton's review of the Tom Baker story *The Ribos Operation* is scathing about the story:

this isn't scriptwriter Robert Holmes' finest hour. In fact, it positively stinks... It is four episodes of tediously dull plot, completely lacking in entertainment value and peppered with embarrassingly outrageous performances (Hinton, 1995a: 34)

The script and the performances are judged by aesthetic criteria, and found to be wanting. Yet in the very same issue of *DWM*, editor Gary Gillatt states of the same story that it is:

thrilling and ingenious ... [with] interesting and credible alien worlds ... a triumph of atmosphere, dialogue and plotting ... skilful direction and colourful production design ... interesting ... [and] amusing supporting characters ... [such as] Garron [who are] ... intelligently played ... (Gillatt, 1995a: 3; see also Stewart, 1995: 41)

The scripting is 'thrilling and ingenious' and it 'stinks'. Ian Cuthbertson's performance is 'embarrassingly outrageous' and 'intelligen[t]' (see Bassett, 1998: 43; Gregory, 1998: 43; Hickman, 1998: 43 for responses to the *Battlefield* review quoted above, which involve similar disagreement over specific elements of aesthetic judgement). Of course, if we were to accept the axioms of aesthetic writing, we could argue that one of these writers - both very knowledgeable about *Doctor Who* - is 'right' and one is 'wrong' . I suppose it is simply axiomatic of a Cultural Studies approach to culture - accepting that there is no ideal 'truth' about the status of any given text - that leads me to favour other interpretations. For if the 'truth' can be hidden from such experts (at least one of whom must be wrong), then whose claim to know the 'truth' about the aesthetic quality of a text can we finally believe? It seems obvious to me that the use of traditional aesthetic discourses in *DWM* makes clear the discursive nature of such claims, and the futility of trying to claim that there is a single, achievable truth about the worth of a given text in traditional aesthetic terms.

### **A triumph of style over substance**

It is also interesting to see how the debate in *DWM* magazine decides which are the 'best' *kinds* of texts.

Every so often *DWM* will attack another science-fiction television program, asserting that it is not as good as *Doctor Who*. In doing so, the qualities which are most important for the value of a text are made explicit. Unsurprisingly, the qualities which are isolated are those which *Doctor Who* is perceived to have most abundantly. The debate in the magazine about the relative merits of *Doctor Who* and *The X-Files*, initiated by the editor, illustrates this point well:

[the] dull and unengaging ... leads [of *The X-Files* were] uninvolved ... [and had a] lack of charisma ... [The episode] eschewed such traditional dramatic requirements as plot, conflict, structure and meaningful resolution ... [instead relying on] unrelated set-pieces - all for effect only ... I have criticised *The X-Files* in front of fans of the series ... and their

usual response is ... 'Well, it's better than *Doctor Who*' ... it's not. *Doctor Who* writers knew how to tell stories ... Don't let series compromise plotting in favour of attractive leads and CGI effects ... Don't watch this rubbish ... (Gillatt, 1997b: 3)

The criteria which are important - which make a program worthwhile rather than 'rubbish' - are good 'plotting', and 'charisma[ti]c' performances. Worthless qualities - even if they are done well in a text - are visual ones (attractive leads, special effects). It is unsurprising that *Doctor Who* is known for its dodgy special effects, and never had - until the appearance of the eighth Doctor in 1996 (Paul McGann) - a lead who could be described as conventionally 'attractive'.

These criteria are: '[p]art of the critical vocabulary of *Doctor Who* fandom' (Roberts, 1997: 18). Characterisation, plotting, performance are important. 'Superficial' qualities (Bell, 1997: 35) such as production values are unimportant: 'CGI and big explosions do not a good TV series make ...' (Clarke, 1998: 14); where 'humour, fantasy and imagination' (Littlehales, 2000: 7) - in the criteria applied to making aesthetic value judgements of *Doctor Who* stories - apparently do.

We can see in these statements a typical modernist distrust of the visual; and the employment of familiar aesthetic criteria of 'depth' as desirable, 'superficiality' as problematic. As we noted above, this binary is also played onto another familiar theme: the distrust of a mass culture represented by America (see Bell and Bell, 1993). The 'superficial' characteristics which are aesthetically bankrupt in this discourse are strongly associated with American texts: *The X-Files* (Bell, 1997: 35), *Star Wars* (Littlehales, 2000: 7; Roberts, 1997: 18; Gillatt, 1999c: 6) *Buck Rogers* (Bell, 1997: 35) and *Star Trek* (Harvey, 1997: 41; Hall, 1997: 16):

The fact that *Doctor Who* was cruder visually than flashy American series or big-budget cinema films is fantastically irrelevant. The programme's success has not been built on special effects, but on solid storytelling (Gray, 1997: 114)

This dismissal of the values of a 'mass culture' defined with reference to America also, interestingly, appear in the television series *Doctor Who* itself. As noted above, this is only one example of a form of circular argument whereby fans like *Doctor Who* for particular textual features; these features then being extracted and used as criteria for judging the value of texts. In the television series, mass culture is equated with brainwashing (*The Macra Terror*) or even death (*Terror of the Autons*). The Doctor associates himself with high culture (frequently quoting Shakespeare) and only very rarely with any form of popular culture (it is only with the Andrew Cartmel era, the final three seasons of the program in 1987-1989, that the Doctor began to acknowledge popular culture - evincing a liking for jazz and milkshakes). Indeed, there is a more general attitude in *Doctor Who* that dislikes all forms of professionalism and bureaucratising of culture - that is, modernity itself. Professionals become besuited bureaucrats (*The Claws of Axos*, *The Happiness Patrol*) or monsters (*The Sunmakers*). As John Tulloch notes, the Doctor himself is a particularly English type - the gentleman amateur, who wins by making mistakes and thus confusing the enemy (see *The Destiny of the Daleks*, where this is explicitly acknowledged). The aesthetic judgements of the program by *DWM*'s readership value these same qualities. It is precisely the fact that production values are low, that the programs are produced by amateurs rather than professionals, that make them 'good'.

The establishment of such criteria to defend an interest in *Doctor Who* has particular implications for value judgements of individual stories. Those stories

which do look 'better' - more detailed sets, more complex camera work and lighting - are often denigrated and assigned less value precisely because of this fact. For example, the Tom Baker story *The Leisure Hive*, 'a triumph of style over substance' suffers because: '[t]he emphasis on production values degrades the credibility of the script' (Gray, 1997: 114). Indeed, improved production values on *Doctor Who* in the early 1980s: 'were fatal to the series' central tenet: that the primary function of *Doctor Who* is to tell a story successfully' (Gray, 1997: 108). Concomitantly, those stories which have: 'poor production values' (such as the seventeenth season closer *Horns of Nimon*, and the Colin Baker story *Timelash*) can be celebrated for their 'straightforward storytelling' (Gray, 1997: 108), and their status as: 'enjoyable hokum' (Owen, 1998: 14).

In the discourses used within the *DWM* community, then, there is a place for aesthetic judgements, based on criteria which are explicitly set up to favour the program which the readers love. These debates, like all aesthetic debates, are presented as being in some way absolutist - although, as I discuss below, this is a form of provisional absolutism. Presenting personal reaction as objective judgement, they leave little space for constructive dialogue beyond that described by the editor of the magazine:

I would imagine that every single reader of this magazine has, at some time or another, found themselves ridiculed for their affection for *Doctor Who*. For my generation, this began in childhood with playground battle-cry of "*Star Wars* is better than *Doctor Who*" which invariably led to the traditional "No it isn't"/ "Yes it is!"/ "No it isn't" schoolboy debate, the intellectual rigour of which would soon be lost to a scuffling scrap ... (Gillatt, 1999c: 6)

But beyond the aesthetic debates - No it isn't!/Yes it is! - *DWM* shows a fascinating, and very complex, self-awareness about the ways in which subjective elements of value judgements function for this community.

### **A farewell to make grown men weep**

One of the criteria by which best/favourite stories are judged in this community is in terms of affective reactions to episodes. In their account of 'Twenty moments when you know you're watching the greatest television series ever made', the authors explicitly lay out the criteria for distinguishing the 'greatest' moments in the history of *Doctor Who*:

We were looking for the magic, elusive X-factor which gets the blood flowing, the heart pumping, expands the mind and broadens the vision – That Certain Something, if you will, which refreshes the parts other series just don't reach ... (Barnes and Ware, 1995: 18; see also Ware and Barnes, 1997: 8 for a similar description of criteria for the best cliffhangers in the show's history)

In much reviewing and commentary of stories in *DWM*, authors explain their own affective reactions to episodes. But this is not simply used to describe something about themselves (unresolved issues from childhood, unhappy marriages, inexplicable fear of spiders). Rather, as part of the process of attempting to transcend a fragmented culture of individual responses, comments in the *Magazine* repeatedly use their own physical responses to *Doctor Who* stories to generalise about qualities of the texts: not only did I react this way, they say, but everyone else must as well. Therefore the story is (objectively) good.

For example, of the 1989 story *Survival*, David Owen writes: 'if the closing soliloquy, as the Doctor and Ace walk off to further adventures, doesn't bring a lump to your throat, then there is no poetry in your soul' (Owen, 1995b: 46). Affective response is validated as an important part of judging programs; but it is not allowed to remain at the individual level. It is introduced into public, rational and conscious debate as community members are tutored in how this affect is properly to be employed in order to fit in with community consensus on the value of particular stories. *The Pirate Planet* is 'only marred by [companion actress] Mary Tamm who was by this point beginning to mildly annoy' (Pereira, 1996: 21) - not just the reviewer, in this discourse, but all viewers of the story. Companion Sarah Jane Smith's departure in *The Hand of Fear* is: '[a] farewell to make grown men weep' (Barnes and Ware, 1995: 18); while, in Colin Baker story *Revelation of the Daleks*: 'the gland throbbing on Stengos' temple [as he is converted into a Dalek] is, without doubt, the single most up-chuckingly disgusting thing seen in the show ever. FACT ... (Barnes and Ware, 1995: 18). The story is good because it makes the viewer gag. This is not personal reaction. This is FACT.

Of course, this is also in part a traditional aesthetic argument. The fact that a lack of correct response is described in terms of having 'no poetry in your soul' is suggestive. Traditionally, disciplines like English Literature have drawn on the affective - the concept of sensibility - in order to validate the objective worth of texts. Not everyone may appreciate the greatness of a text, but this is because they are not sensitive or open enough to receive its effects (rather than being because different responses to a text are valid).

The fact that affective response is used to gauge the value of texts is interesting as we think about the criteria that are picked in order to move from 'favourite' to 'best' in discussing *Doctor Who* stories. It is clear that attempts are being made here to establish consensus on the worth of individual stories, as the correct affective responses to various moments are canvassed. But there are other aspects of choosing 'favourite' stories that are more directly connected to aspects of culture outside of *Doctor Who*. One of these is the place of nostalgia in deciding the 'best'/'favourite' *Doctor Who* stories.

### **The classic era of the show is the one you watched when you were twelve**

Every so often in *DWM* - usually following a controversy in the letters page over the objective aesthetic value of a given story - a writer will insist that the debate is wrongheaded. The writer will suggest that it is *favourite* stories rather than *best* stories which are being discussed. They will then note that the primary criterion in choosing your favourite *Doctor Who* stories is not the quality of the stories: it is the age of the viewer. As Scott Gray formulates this: 'I think it's fair to say that the "classic era" of the show is generally the one you watched when you were twelve' (Gray, 1995: 34):

having grown tired of the seemingly endless debates about how 'my Doctor is better than your Doctor', it was refreshing to see somebody realise the importance of time ... William Hartnell will always be the 'original' to me because he was very much the grandfather figure to an impressionable young boy ... Does that mean I think any less of the others? Not at all. But part of me will always remember his portrayal of the Doctor with great fondness and this is how I feel we should appreciate our favourite incarnation - not that he was better than the others, but that he was best for me ... vive la difference (Roche, 1997: 31)

With this focus on the importance of the personal circumstances of the viewer in deciding their favourite Doctor or story comes a celebration of plurality - 'la difference' - that needs no absolute truths about the best stories. *Doctor Who's* history is often broken down into the 'eras' of each of the seven actors who portrayed the character in television seasons. Each of these has champions in *Doctor Who Magazine*, champions whose age determines that they find the era of *Doctor Who* from their childhood their 'favourite' and (sometimes thus) the 'best' (William Hartnell - the first Doctor - Roche, above; Patrick Troughton, the second - Trump, 1996: 22; Jon Pertwee, the third - Ainsworth, 1995: 35; Tom Baker, the Fourth - Roberts, 1997; Peter Davison, the fifth - Martin, 1995: 34; Colin Baker, the sixth - Lawston, 2000: 7; and Sylvester McCoy, the seventh - Searle, 2000: 7).

This criterion is also employed by reviewers, who explain their affection for a story in terms of childhood memories of its first broadcast. The regular feature 'The Hit Parade' - in which writers from the magazine list their: 'favourite *Doctor Who* stories' - frequently does this. Dominic May lists *Evil of the Daleks* as one of his top ten *Doctor Who* stories with the explanation that: 'being nine in 1967 was fun'; and writes with a clear awareness that it is less the text than his memories that are special to him: 'If the missing episodes ever turn up [the story, like many others, was wiped by the BBC in the 1970s], I hope they won't jade my memories' (May, 1995: 35).

This does not mean that we are reduced, again, to the fragmented society of anything goes; a situation where it is only age that works to define the value of a text (although it is obvious that this is at least one important factor in making value judgements about this program). The tendency towards making 'objective' judgements of 'best' stories continues alongside the personal championing of 'favourites'. Co-existing with the acknowledgement of personal factors in making value judgements is an insistent desire to decide standards which, even if not absolute, are accepted across this community. Once again, and despite the introduction of age precisely as a way to defuse debates about the 'best' stories, the stories which are chosen as 'favourites' for the personal reason of age are often then introduced into public debate by claims that they are, as well as being 'favourite', also 'best'. A typical writer might start with one kind of argument (personal favourite because of age), and finish with another (objective statement of value), claiming that: 'simply because of when I was born, MY Doctor was Peter Davison and most of what I've seen of the previous Doctors was, sorry, rubbish' (Martin, 1995: 34). Such a move is common in writing in *DWM*. Putting *The Ambassadors of Death* on his 'Hit List', Matthew Pereira starts by saying that: 'I felt it was my moral duty to opt for this one, solely because I remember it the most clearly from my childhood'; before going on to overturn that 'solely' by championing its aesthetic (objective) greatness: 'such depth of characterisation ...' (Pereira, 1996: 21; see similar comments in Lyons, 1996: 31; Roberts, 1997: 18).

As well as the individual affective and the age-related viewer responses to texts, there is also in *DWM* a continual desire to engage in communication and consensus formation. This can take two forms. One, as we have seen above, is to find ways of agreeing over what is valuable in a *Doctor Who* story. A second tendency, however, is to push towards a meta-debate about value judgements: and try to reach a community consensus that objective standards of evaluation are not important.

### **The 'let's be pals' principle**

The latter approach is best illustrated by another discourse of value that is drawn from *Doctor Who* itself, and then applied to value judgements in *DWM*: the importance of 'tolerance'. This discourse mostly emerges in debates about the relative value of *Doctor Who* compared with other science fiction television programs (see the debates above about *Doctor Who* and *The X-Files* above). In relation to common assertions that *Doctor Who* is better than American TV sf, for reasons of plot, character and lack of visual pleasure, other writers will usually advance the case that we should not be involved in rubbishing other people's pleasures. Rather we should accept that everyone's tastes are different: after all, that is what the Doctor himself would do:

The only problem with [a] laid-back attitude [to relative value] is that lots of other people out there seem like they actually DO want to have a fight about it ... Now *Doctor Who* fans, raised on the mellow "Let's all be best pals" principles preached by their hero will naturally enough refuse to rise to this obvious bait. Instead, they will not sagely, state that they are pleased that their challenger loves X, Y or Z series, and then seek to find some common ground (Anon, 1999: 8)

Liz Halliday defends *The X-Files*: 'There I was thinking that one of *Doctor Who*'s central tenets is tolerance' (Halliday, 1997: 45; see also Lavelle, 1997: 45; Welsford, 1997: 45). Duncan Harvey defends *Star Trek* against another attack by asking, much as the Doctor might, for 'peaceful coexistence' (Harvey, 1997: 41). *Doctor Who* includes the celebration of tolerance, peaceful coexistence and the celebration of difference. Matthew Jones demonstrates exactly how this element of a *Doctor Who* text can be extracted and then applied to value judgements of the text itself:

[Seventh Doctor story] *The Happiness Patrol* is a celebration of difference. A critique of the idea that one way of living is inherently or naturally better than any other ... you may disagree with what I've written and that's good. In fact, it's brilliant. Because if *The Happiness Patrol* teaches us anything, it is the danger of there only being one view, one voice that shuts down all others (Jones, 1997: 51, 56)

Of course, this discourse is only one part of the public discussions about value in *DWM*. It should be obvious by now that, although these discussions do indeed produce consensus and are thus quite productive, they are also wildly and wonderfully contradictory. Many of the approaches taken in making evaluations of these programs do not make logical sense when placed together; but still they function as part of the public debate. The idea that *Doctor Who* champions tolerance, therefore we should all be tolerant of each other's tastes in stories, is expressed in the *Magazine*: but if it were followed strictly, then debate would vanish (to be replaced by exchanges of favourites, and polite comments of 'Oh really? How lovely'). But even writers who express this view can then contradict themselves with aesthetic judgements about best stories; and many other writers, of course, do not subscribe to this view explicitly at all. This is one discourse: but to note that does not suggest that *Doctor Who* fans are indeed all 'pals': for the very existence of the ongoing debate that is described in this article demonstrates that this is not the case.

### **Thoughts from outside of recognised "fandom"**

A final point about the functioning of non-absolute value-judgements in this community examines the way that non-*Doctor Who* fans are represented in the magazine. There is a constant awareness in *DWM* that 'the general public' (as they are known) employ criteria for evaluating *Doctor Who* stories which are very

different from those used by the fan community. And yet there is never any sense (in any issue of the *Magazine* that I have examined) that 'we' (the fans) need to prove that 'we' are right in our judgements, and 'they' are wrong in theirs. Rather, there is an acknowledgement that different communities judge on different criteria.

The fact that the wider audience do not evaluate *Doctor Who* stories in the same way as the *DWM* community can be seen clearly in the 'audience appreciation figures' for *Doctor Who* stories which were collected from 'the general public' by the BBC at the time of each story's original broadcast. These are reproduced in *DWM*. The disjunction between general audience 'appreciation' of each story, and its place in the consensual evaluative ranking of stories within *DWM* fandom is massive. For example, *Genesis of the Daleks* - the number one 'best' story for this fan community, received a general audience appreciation rating of only 57% on its broadcast (Pixley, 1997b: 41). The focus group members interviewed in 1974 about this particular story: 'thought the episode slow, and the conclusion tame and unimaginative ... [and it was] dismissed by some as "absolute rubbish" and "just for kids" ...' (Walker, 1998: 48).

By contrast, *The Horns of Nimon* - listed almost at the very bottom of the list in the *DWM* Awards (number 149 out of 159 ) rated a general audience appreciation score of 67% when it was broadcast, well above the average for a *Doctor Who* story (Pixley, 1997: 30). Similarly, *Mindwarp*, listed well down the Awards list at number 127 out of 159, scored audience appreciation scores of 72% - among the highest ever garnered for an episode of the program (Pixley, 1997c: 30). It seems that the wider audience evaluate the program very differently from fans.

An example of the differing criteria is apparent in focus group comments about *The Leisure Hive*. As was shown above, this is often cited in the *DWM* community as a *Doctor Who* story which fails because it is 'superficial', privileging look and style over the 'traditional' *Doctor Who* characteristics of plotting, dialogue and performance. Yet the focus groups prove fond of this story:

Particular praise was also accorded to the overall standard of production ... 'the special effects were very highly rated and several people considered these the most important part of the programme ... most people appreciated the series for its visual interest' (Walker, 1998: 50)

*DWM* shows a consistent awareness of these different criteria; and rarely takes an absolutist position that 'we' (the fan community) are correct, and 'they' (the general public) are wrong [6]. Sometimes the opinions of non-fans are described as 'a far "truer" value judgement on these episodes than any number of long-after-the-fact fan criticism could ever offer' (Gillatt, 1998b: 3, scare quotes in original). Sometimes the general public are represented as the wider audience that *Doctor Who* must satisfy in order to be returned to television, no matter what fans think. For example, in a discussion of the: 'brilliant experimental television' of the story *Warriors' Gate*, which is: 'full of admittedly wonderful poetic SF moments and complicated ideas', reviewer Dave Owen claims that it is also: 'unforgivable in its contempt for the family audience' (Owen, 1997b: 21).

Sometimes the general public are a group whose opinions 'we' (the fans) are scared of:

[Rewatching an old story] I step out of my skin, strip myself of love for the programme, and suddenly I realise just how stupid it can seem ... It suddenly occurs to me that if this really is the general consensus about the value of the show, then most people I know must think I'm a complete

loony when I talk about being a fan of *Doctor Who* and say that it's fine television drama ... being a fan of *Doctor Who* involves looking at the programme and the world from a different angle to everyone else (Jones, 1998: 45).

Consensus over evaluation in this fan community is present but provisional; it is stable but never static; and it doesn't lay claim to be the 'truth' with which all viewers must agree. It is explicitly understood to be a consensus formed only by one community; in ways that are simply not meaningful to other communities who may also watch exactly the same program.

And yet - despite all of these tendencies - this community still wants to reach a consensus on the value of individual *Doctor Who* stories. How does this disavowal (I know very well that value judgements are personal and subjective, but all the same ...) function for the *DWM* community?

### **An in-built race memory requirement to list and categorise endlessly**

It may seem, to those used to 'rote learning' and absolute value judgements, that this community's consensus about value - based as it is around refusal of authority, insistent individualism and tolerance of multiple viewpoints - might be an unstable and confusing one. How can the members of this community argue so passionately for a particular story being good, while simultaneously recognising that all such judgements are provisional and personal?

It is in answering the question, I think, that the *DWM* community's judgements about the value of *Doctor Who* stories might turn out to be most useful for wider thinking about the concept of cultural 'value' when universal hierarchies are dispersed. The oscillation between the vocabulary of 'favourite' and 'best' shows an awareness of the personal aspect of value judgements - but also the strong and important desire to communicate with others, to reach consensus and thus to form communities. The retention of the language of aesthetic judgements ('good', 'bad'), when the logic of all arguments in the magazine go against it illustrates - I think - a desire not to fall into fragmented individualism. It demonstrates that this community holds a strong belief in communication, the possibility of persuading others, of creating (for this community) an objective 'reality' on which we all agree - even when we don't.

The way in which this ferocious commitment to communication, even as subjective elements of judgement are acknowledged, can be seen most clearly in the priority given in *DWM* to the figure of debate as the central organising principle of its fandom. The conclusion of the article on 'Twenty moments when you know you're watching the greatest television series ever' demonstrates how this commitment both to the personal and to the objective is balanced through the figure of necessary debate:

So, there you are ... *DWM's* selection of *Doctor Who's* twenty defining scenes. But that, however, is just our opinion and you may disagree vehemently with some of the choices. We understand this and we'd love to hear from you if you think we've missed something vital. Please send a brief outline of your own favourite sequence to 'YOU FOOLS! YOU'VE FORGOTTEN THIS!' at the editorial address ...' (Barnes and Ware, 1995: 18)

The cry of 'You fools!' is not to be evaded, but to be welcomed. For the *Doctor Who* 'subculture', in one definition in the magazine, is precisely: 'about ... happy yelling matches in pubs nationwide as the Hinchcliffe and Williams eras are

compared ...' (Gray, 1996: 3). For, after all, '*Doctor Who* fans are never happier than when they are in disagreement with each other' (Murray, 1997: 21). The attempt to move from the subjective to the objective, impossible though it may be, is precisely the dream of community which motivates value judgements in the magazine:

I can recall a few of my own arguments with other fans (drunkenly trying to convince anyone who would listen that *The Robots of Death* is the superior Boucher story is only one of many examples that spring to mind) (Murray, 1997: 22)

In order to understand the retention of the objective, the claim for 'the best', it is necessary to understand that these arguments do not, finally, aim for a conclusion. There is no definitive answer - and, more importantly, no real desire for one. It is the (drunken) pleasure of the debate itself which fuels the discussions.

This article opened with *DWM* opinion columnist Jackie Jenkins describing one delightedly drunken debate about the purpose of value judgements in *Doctor Who* fandom. Another article - in another pub, describing another debate - shows the evaluation of stories continuing:

[A]s fans, we all share the same inner demon. This monster, with an in-built race memory requirement to list and categorise endlessly, is an unholy cross between Rumpelstiltskin and Peter Snow during a by-election crisis ... [at the pub, a friend says] 'I once drew up a 'Top Ten TARDIS landings list' ... I could see Chas, like myself, trying to avoid the bait ... 30 seconds later, Chas: 'Mine's *The Tenth Planet*' 'Mine's *Castrovalva*' (Dammit, I've started). Table became a Top Ten Fest of landings, space ships and unbelievably, Tom's boots ... The landlord's saying 'Drinkupperleese'. Full to bursting, the Chart Monster's caught by his fur-lined hood, sedated and thrown back in his box. He's a finely-tuned beast, after years of video labelling, voting for seasons, for stories, cliffhangers, villains, directors ... (Jenkins, 1997: 25).

I propose a reading that may be romanticised, and is only a tentative proposition. The desire to find the objective value of loved objects is an end in itself, ensuring ongoing communication with a community of the like-minded. For John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, the exchange of videotapes within fan communities is: 'a central ritual of fandom and one of the practices which helps to bind it together' (quoted in Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 141). The exchange of ideas, I suggest, works in a similar way.

## Conclusion

This paper answers calls to 'to articulate both a sociology of taste ... and the existence of more and less arcane hierarchies of taste in every cultural field' (Brunsdon, 1997: 132). Contributing to the field of what might be called 'value studies', a field which already boasts a large amount of sociological work, and some Cultural Studies analyses. Presenting a detailed case study, it is possible to trace the ways in which consensus about the relative value of *Doctor Who* stories is created in a given community.

I have noted that the choice of 'favourite' stories is a starting point for debates about value, but not its end point. In this paper, I have not tried to explain how individual preferences of 'favourite' stories are made. These personal reactions can perhaps be mapped to some degree (for example, a nostalgic preference for

programmes broadcast when you were twelve). Ultimately, however, I would say that such questions are not only beyond the scope of this paper but also, I would say, beyond the scope of my discipline (Cultural Studies). It is, and I am, rather interested in how public, communal debates about value are conducted in the community.

Indeed, personal choices about 'favourites' are not the same thing as decisions about which stories are 'best', have the most 'value'. In some sense, the concept of 'value', only really comes into play when interpersonal attempts to reach a consensus about stories are begun. The personal response of favourite has no necessary connection to judgements of value at all - whereas aesthetic claims about the 'good' or 'bad' qualities of stories obviously do. I would say, then, that to understand how decisions on cultural value are reached, it is ultimately public debates that must be analysed.

Examining the case of *Doctor Who Magazine*, we can see that, outside the academy, this community is committed to discussing the relative value of *Doctor Who* stories, refusing to accept calls to 'clap our hands, smile and say "how fantastic"'. A vast amount of meta-discussion takes place about the ways in which evaluations of 'good' and 'bad' stories might be made. The difference between personal 'favourites' and communal 'bests' is acknowledged. The fact that consensus about value changes over time, and does not reflect everybody's opinion is explicitly acknowledged. It is also an axiom of the debate that other groups will produce different value judgements - and this is not seen to undermine the process.

Despite these caveats, the process of consensus-formation about value continues. Despite the fact that each fan has her or his 'favourite' Doctor and era, the results of the *DWM* Awards demonstrates that a consensus across these favourites is formed. Traditional aesthetic criteria are employed, inflected by the particular moral stance of *Doctor Who* itself: the visually-oriented, expensive texts associated with mass culture, modernity and America are less worthy; the characteristics of 'plot' and 'performance' are to be valued: there is little disagreement over these parts of the evaluation process.

Yes, even having set up these criteria, it seems that the final decision about which stories meet them - which stories are 'good' - finally bears little relation to the texts of the stories themselves. Consensus is reached, at any given time, about which stories have 'good' 'plotting', 'characterization', 'performances' - but that consensus changes radically over time (as in the example of *The Deadly Assassin*, above). As the examples quoted above show, consensus can be reached when one viewer makes a sufficiently persuasive case for their point of view.

This is the reason why I have not presented any detailed textual analysis of the texts themselves in this article - asking, for example, what is it about *Genesis of the Daleks* that has led it to being consensually defined as the best *Doctor Who* story ever? This is not an oversight, but (it seems to me) a logical outcome of the data surveyed in this article. If *The Deadly Assassin* can move from the bottom of a poll in 1976 to number eleven out of 159 stories some twenty years later, then I think it likely that there is nothing in the texts themselves that guarantees perceptions of value. Certainly, it would be possible to trace a detailed history of the changing criteria - the way in which the era of Third Doctor Jon Pertwee, for example, was celebrated as the epitome of *Doctor Who*; then hated as the worst time in the show's history; and then rehabilitated as good fun - in order to explain historically why the ten stories picked by *DWM* readers as the best in the 1996 poll were chosen (the presence of Daleks, 'dark' stories, various forms of

'realism'). Such a project is outside the scope of this article (but would be a book I would be happy to write).

This article, then, gives us some sense of the public nature of value judgements; their status as discourses within particular institutions; the degree of meta-debate that can take place in thinking about the criteria; and, importantly, the possibility of disavowal, by which the refusal of universal assumptions about value does not stop the use of aesthetic vocabulary within a given community.

In a way, though, this material does not really help to solve the problem that originally motivated this work. As I suggested at the start, cultural theory continues to worry that: 'As I noted at the start of this paper, ongoing debates in Cultural Studies worry that: 'the displacement of established hierarchies has dislocated bearings completely, creating a tendency towards an utter relativism such that any value is taken to be equivalent to any other ...' (Nelson, 1997: 218). This paper has demonstrated that this is not the case. But this may well prove to be irrelevant. For the sociologists investigating audience understandings of 'quality' have already demonstrated this; as have John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins. Indeed, several of the writers who worry that 'anything goes' themselves acknowledge in their arguments that audiences make distinctions: and yet this does not seem to throw their arguments that without cultural guidance, all values become relative.

I suspect that the lack of interest in this evidence by some cultural theorists might prove to be a disciplinary issue: and one with implications about demarcation. I noted above that it is sociologists who have done most of the research into audience's evaluative practices. Tulloch, although firmly within Media and Cultural Studies, has shown that he is also comfortable working in more sociological paradigms (Tulloch and Lupton, 1997). Henry Jenkins work has always been strongly oriented towards ethnographic audience work (Jenkins, 1992). It is interesting that the writers who continue to worry about cultural value are those coming from traditions developing from the traditional humanities and English Literature: disciplines like film studies, art history and philosophy: it is the film studies journal *Screen* which publishes much of this work. The very existence of these disciplines relies on value judgements: they are set up, as English Literature was before them, to study 'great works'.

It seems to me that postmodern approaches to the evaluation of culture are a problem for cultural theorists, and not for the culture they claim to study. Outside of the academy, evaluative debates continue, with a wonderfully open-minded knowledge that all value judgements are ultimately provisional, but with a firm commitment to acting as though this were not the case. But academic writers from Jameson onwards have condemned the postmodern turns in culture, mainly, it seems, because their own authority is being undermined. The crisis is not one of cultural value more generally, but of the value of academic work. Cultural Studies academics, proclaiming a belief that the masses are neither stupid nor incompetent consumers of culture, have been stuck for a while now on the relationship between intellectuals and other citizens. We cannot, in Cultural Studies, claim that we know better than others - this is precisely the kind of authoritarian institutional claim to 'truth' that we are busy deconstructing, after all. But in that case, why do we do what we do? If audiences are competent and active readers after all, then why do they need us to tell them what they're doing, watching, becoming? As a drama, it has the hallmarks of empty nest syndrome (they don't need me any more!), or perhaps a demarcation dispute. If we cannot tell people what is good television, the best of culture, then what is our job?

I think that the best response to this - given that we can see that, outside of the academy evaluative discourses have not vanished, everything is not equal, and there is a perfectly workable (even if internally inconsistent) approach to making sense of, and judging the value of, culture - is to abandon the English Literature tradition of 'the best and the greatest', and accept our role in Cultural Studies as Cultural historians. Which is not to say that we do not have our own opinion, our own preferences as to what are more desirable forms of textual production and social organisation. But we must understand our own value judgements - as *Doctor Who* fans clearly do - as being provisional, non-universal, emerging for particular reasons in particular situations (some of which reasons are purely personal, and have little to tell us about wider culture, except in a very tangential way). This is not a cause for panic. There is still a job for archivists of culture, who can trace the ways in which texts circulate, are made sense of, represent the world in which we live. We do not need to turn to aesthetic value judgements, or to denigrate the judgements of those outside of the academy, in order to do such work.

A final question might be about the generalisability of this study. Yes, we have seen that *Doctor Who* fans have detailed and sophisticated debates about cultural value. Is this true in other cultural sites?

This case study came about for a specific reason - to make an intervention into the debates which began this paper, and to demonstrate in detail that evaluative processes do take place, in sophisticated and interesting ways, outside the academy. To this extent, the work is not generalisable. Indeed, as I suggested above, the very idea of generalisability suggests homogenous groups and representative samples which are extremely difficult for Cultural Studies (and suit much better the more statistical forms of social analysis, such as Sociology, Politics and Economics). David Morley is not the only writer who has found easy generalisation to be a bane of qualitative audience work (see Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 101).

What follows, therefore, are thoughts out loud. It seems to me that this case study offers some suggestive ways of thinking about cultural consumption more generally: but it must be borne in mind that nothing that has gone before provides convincing proof of these musings. These are merely the opinions of one writer who has spent some time thinking about these issues.

Joke Hermes has noted that some cultural consumption takes place in what she calls the 'everyday' mode - where texts are consumed with little interest in themselves or their contents, in a form of browsing (Hermes, 1995). This could be placed at one end of a continuum of media consumption, with the other being occupied by the approaches described above - an intense, detailed, loving engagement with, reviewing of and discussion of texts that could fairly be named a 'cult' approach to media. I find it interesting to note, thinking about the ways in which such an approach is taken in culture, that it is not just the obvious and familiar 'cult' television programs which inspire such an approach. In a myriad of sites, consumers display their commitment to, expertise in, and ability to work with, texts: As well as multiplying the number of cult media sites (to Nancy Drew books and Swiss Chalet School novels, for example, mentioned by audiences for this paper), I think immediately of dog shows (the detailed discussion and comparison of dog's anatomies) and cake-baking contests (the subtle distinction between sponges which is quite beyond the untrained observer); of train and bird spotting. More importantly, first in terms of reach and second in terms of theoretical arguments, I think of sport and of high culture. The practice of revisiting cultural moments in order to discuss, evaluate and compare interpretations of them is at the centre of the culture of sports viewing. We can

see this in a public format in such television programs as Australia's *The Footy Show*, including clips of the 'Top Ten' of various elements of gameplay, along with invitations to viewers to participate in voting for - taking part in the discussion about - these 'texts'.

In relation to the second suggest, it seems to me that the approach to *Doctor Who* taken by the fan community described in this article is almost identical to that taken by traditional forms of English literature - a love for a small number of texts (Shakespeare's plays, Austen's novels), whose worth is always being discussed, whose texts are continually revisited in order to maintain ongoing discussion about value. From this perspective, it is wrong to compare the practice of *Doctor Who* fans with the academy in order to judge how academically the former engage in debates about value judgement: it seems to me more convincing to see the study of high culture as being merely one subset of the 'cult' approach to culture (which, for *Intensities*, has the wonderful advantage that studies of Shakespeare's plays could happily be included in this 'Journal of Cult Media'. Or maybe not).

The general point, then, is that the continuum stretching from the 'everyday' to the 'cult' ways of consuming culture might be a useful model for thinking about questions of consumption more generally - offering a variety of more or less engaged positions for audiences working with the culture around them. Of course, it can be argued that I am extending a metaphor too far, that the ways in which sports are consumed are too different from those in which dog shows are organised, or Yeats discussed, to make this a useful comparison. As I say, I present no evidence for such a theory in this paper: it is merely a personal reaction to the work presented here, and watching the culture in which I write.

What I can state with certainty is that complex processes of value judgement do take place outside the academy; that consensus as to cultural worth of texts is formed according to rules specific to the community in which the debate takes place; and that while Cultural Studies and postmodern thinking more generally may lead to fears that everything goes, a study of cultures outside the academy provides ample evidence for the fact that this is not, in fact, the case.

But also, finally, that for many cultural theorists such evidence will, sadly, be of little interest.

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## Notes

[1] A brief word on the relationship between value judgements and aesthetics; this is not necessary to the ongoing argument, so please feel free to skip it. The term 'aesthetics' is a messily multivalent one, whose multiple meanings seem to be used interchangeably in much writing about cultural value.

I am interested here in describing how value judgements are made about cultural objects - what is a 'good' *Doctor Who* story; what is a 'bad' one - and to use this information to feed back into debates about value in cultural theory. In some senses, the value judgements that I am describing here are 'aesthetic' ones. But in other senses, they are nothing to do with aesthetics.

Aesthetics can mean: 'the philosophy of art or the philosophy of beauty [or] the philosophy of criticism ... Others have used the term "aesthetics" of any kind of general inquiry into the arts, whether philosophical or scientific ...' (Sparshott, 1963: 3; see also Bosenquet, 1957: ix; Kivy, 1992: x). Aesthetics in one sense is concerned with 'beauty ... expressiveness or ... creative imagination ...' (Sparshott, 1963: 123; see also Bosenquet, 1957: ix). Yet 'aesthetics' can also be understood as a philosophical work practised by critics. In another sense, the term can be understood as something conceptually quite distinct, yet often collapsed into critical work: an innate quality of a cultural object itself: 'simple aesthetic properties ... [include] beauty, loveliness, grandeur and prettiness' (Ogden et al, 1925: 23; Kristeller, 1992: 4). For other writers, aesthetics is ultimately about value judgements: 'traditionally the site of legislation regarding the art and practice of critical value judgement' (Sim, 1992: 1).

So for some writers, aesthetics is about detecting particular qualities in texts (beauty etc); for other writers, there is a more general process of value judgement in place (aesthetics involves not simply distinguishing which object is best at being beautiful, but in generalising for this a general worth - which objects are best).

To confuse things even more, in other senses, the term 'aesthetics' simply means the study of formal properties of a medium, with no explicit value judgements (see, for example, (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: ix); although even here, things are not as straightforward as they seem, as there is often a value judgement in place suggesting that the texts that are most 'pure' in their use of a medium - ie, do things within that medium which could not be done in any other - are the 'best' texts.

So aesthetics may imply value judgements; explicitly be based on value judgements; or have only an indirect relation to value judgements.

Having acknowledged all of this, in this essay, I will use the term 'aesthetic judgements' to mean value judgements in generalised terms: claims that something is 'best' or 'good' with no conditions based on this claim (ie, best at what, exactly). This includes similar terms of generalised and unfocussed approbation, including 'great', 'masterly', 'excellent', 'brilliant', and so on. ➤

[2] See Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: 190 for a brief discussion of a similar survey of *Star Trek* fans; the results in this case are interpreted in terms of the political preferences of the readers. ➤

[3] It is worth noting quickly that there are obviously generic differences between, say, the review column of the magazine and the letters page, in terms of perceived authority. But I do not wish to labour this point: as I discuss below, this point is also discussed in the magazine, with claims to authenticity being made by letter writers precisely on the basis of their lack of authorised status. ➤

[4] It is interesting that in the discourses of *Doctor Who* fandom, it is necessary to be familiar with a text before one can pronounce judgement on it. Such an insistence on personal experience underlying the process of making value judgements is actually quite alien to much academic thinking about value where, for example, writers are confident in their ability to dismiss television programs - or even most of television's output - without ever having seen the texts they are dismissing, based on general theories of the medium. The *DWM* Awards asked viewers to vote only on the stories which they felt qualified to judge - whether that meant seeing it, reading the novel and listening to the audio track, or other

unspecified ways of consuming it. Although the decision was finally left up to the voters, the implication remained that it was the personal judgement of value, not simply the repetition of learned responses, that was here being measured. ➤

[5] It is interesting to compare such comments with those recounted in *Science Fiction Audiences*, which detect a move in *Doctor Who* fandom to a 'third wave', which is 'much less didactic than earlier fans, less elitist, more pluralist and tolerant' (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: xi) ➤

[6] Again, this way of thinking about differing audiences is displayed in Tulloch and Jenkins (1995: 141) ➤

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