

# INVESTIGATING *LIFE ON MARS*: THE CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF 'CLASSIC' TV

Ross P. Garner  
Cardiff University



CARDIFF  
UNIVERSITY  
PRIFYSGOL  
CAERDYDD

# INTRODUCTION

## ◎ Aims of the Presentation:

- To complicate how judgements and classifications regarding ‘classic’ TV are constructed by arguing for an approach that examines the contexts where such claims occur and how these work to position programmes.
- To explore this position through a case study of the discourses (industrial, scholarly, ‘popular’ etc.) circulating around *Life on Mars* (BBC/Kudos 2006-7).
- To exemplify this issue by discussing the negotiation of one key discourse that has been used to construct the series as a ‘classic’ - nostalgia.

# 'CLASSIC' TELEVISION?

- ◉ 'Classic' status residing 'within the text':
  - “*The Singing Detective* is not flawless, but its moments of sheer brilliance have come to symbolise the artistic potential of a sometimes downgraded medium ...a piece of small-screen drama that is so stylish, challenging and controversial that it equals anything the big screen can offer.” (Creeber 2007: 1; see also Newman 2005, Caughie 2007)
- ◉ Previous work discussing the contextual nature of textual classifications:
  - Example - TV 'Golden Ages':
    - ◉ “[t]he objective quality of any period of any creative medium is always a contentious discursive struggle” (Kompere 2005: 107).
    - ◉ “the discussion of the term ['Golden Age'] within all contexts should engage with the question of *who* constructs the period and content of any Golden Age, and for whom does this age remain golden?” (Holdsworth 2011: 120-1)

## LIFE ON MARS AS TV 'CLASSIC': NOSTALGIA

- One set of discourses surrounding *Life on Mars*' 'classic' status concern the programme's articulation(s) of nostalgia:
  - E.g. 'popular' audience appeal and Gene Hunt:
    - 'New Lads'
    - Right-wing viewers
    - Women (Cooper 2007; see also McElroy 2012).



## LIFE ON MARS AS TV 'CLASSIC': NOSTALGIA

- ◉ Engagements with the series' attitude towards nostalgia has also generated much academic discussion:
  - Jameson (1991) - stylised and 'glossy' past?
  - "Far from critiquing the past and championing the present, *Life on Mars* finds contemporary policing problematic and overly bureaucratic. This is reflected in Sam's contemporary existence being dominated by meetings, thereby suggesting it is ineffective in its primary goal of stopping criminals" (Willis 2012: 61)
  - "a vehicle ...which ... makes comparisons between the ethics of today and those of another age" (Nelson 2007: 177-178);
  - Indicative of scholarly attitudes concerning when, and in what forms, nostalgia can be engaged?

## LIFE ON MARS AS TV 'CLASSIC': NOSTALGIA

- ◉ Institutional/official publicity discourses positioned the programme differently with regard to nostalgia:
  - “we wanted it to be cinematic, and modern, at the same time as having that, kind of, Seventies throwback but we couldn't get in to nostalgia because I think nostalgia is a different kind of show” (Kudos executive producer Jane Featherstone).
  - “Life on Mars will remind viewers of life in the decade that taste forgot, but it is not a trip down memory lane to get nostalgic or reminisce about the good old days; it reflects life as it really was: an era of social and civil change.” (BBC Press Office 2005: online)
  - “In the hands of the wrong directors, you might have seen Tyler and Hunt dressed as Wombles and chasing criminals around on Space Hoppers” (Glenister in Wilde 2007: online)

## LIFE ON MARS AS TV 'CLASSIC': NOSTALGIA

- Why use these promotional discourses to position *Life on Mars* away from readings concerning 'nostalgia':
  - Nostalgia's industrial meanings:
    - Economic:
      - “nostalgia television [i]s cheap and populist programming and corresponds with the commercial safety of reproducing past successes and familiar forms” (Holdsworth 2011: 97)
    - Scheduling:
      - “The scheduling of classic-novel adaptations has altered little ...1990s adaptations such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), *Moll Flanders* (1996) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1996) ...were broadcast on Sunday evenings, although alternate episodes of *Moll Flanders* were transmitted on Monday evenings, allowing a rare escape from the traditional slot.” (Cardwell 2002: 82)

# CONCLUSION

- ◉ *Life on Mars*' status as a contemporary TV classic has been secured through negotiating specific discourses within different interpretive communities to secure this status.
  - Classifications concerning its engagement with nostalgia have valued the series within certain contexts (e.g. popular, academic) whilst downplaying this association in others (institutional).
- ◉ The 'classic' label attached to individual TV series needs further investigation to consider such status as arising from a programme's discursive positioning by situated agents rather than due to identifiable textual attributes.