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Bleak House. Christine Geraghty. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. p/bk 140 pp. ISBN 978-1-84457-417-9. Price £13.99.

Screenplay writer Andrew Davies' 2005 television adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel, *Bleak House,* was produced by the BBC in collaboration with WGBH Boston. Shot in HD, *Bleak House* is a successful example of a BBC global export brand, as well as a controversial fulfilment of the channel's public service responsibility to provide quality television to a mass audience.

Unlike most of its heritage predecessors, this adaptation is not only a visually innovative costume drama, but narratively it introduces a combination of soap opera cliffhangers and detective noir. *Bleak House* includes performances from both established British theatrically trained actors such as Charles Dance, Sheila Hancock, Denis Lawson and Timothy West, and, presumably in an attempt to appeal to youthful audiences, nontraditional actors associated with less conventional backgrounds such as comedians Alistair McGowan and Johnny Vegas, and X *Files* star Gillian Anderson.

Lavishly illustrated, Christine Geraghty's book on this adaptation forms part of the BFI Film and Classic TV series, and is an incisive, well researched and succinct examination of this serialization within the context of the twenty-first century concerns of the BBC. Geraghty begins by drawing parallels between Dickens and his nineteenth-century reader, with the BBC and their audience. Situating the TV drama within the "quality" classic tradition, she argues that this serialization, which played over eight hours in fifteen episodes, fulfils the BBC's commitment to high standard programming and accessible viewing, with a view to successful export.

However, for Geraghty, more distinctive is its reworking of some of the traditions of heritage in order to reach a more youthful audience. She notes its similarity to British realism, in particular, what she perceives as a soap opera approach in line with programs such as *EastEnders* (1985-), and *Coronation Street* (1960 -). Indeed, scheduled to run immediately after *EastEnders* (1985-) and aligned with US programs such as *24* (2001-10), she argues that the publicity for *Bleak House* promoted it as a soap opera - a hypothesis she tests by drawing correlations between Dickens' writing

practices and television serials in general; her conclusion is that similarities do exist, albeit not as neatly as the BBC imply.

Through a close visual and aural analysis, Geraghty notes a specific aesthetic in response to the arrival and popularity of other postmodern dramas such as HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), which deployed a multilayered soundtrack and fluid camerawork throughout. Subsequently, Geraghty traces the publicity, promotion, viewing figures and critical reception of *Bleak House*, thereby providing a comprehensive and scholarly read for those interested in both aesthetics and the industry.

If the author focuses on the production for the first section of the book, then she subsequently produces an in-depth analysis of Davies' characterizations, particularly the role of Dickens' most complicated heroine, Esther Summerson (Anna Maxwell Martin). Here Geraghty becomes more critical of the screenplay writer's work, while also acknowledging the problems that he experienced in dealing with the historical and traditional views which proliferate concerning her unpopularity.

As she observes, Davies perceived Dickens' characterization of Esther as unmatched to a modern audience, and, in this respect she suggests that he is unable to deal with her character satisfactorily. Geraghty's analysis of the program's *mise-en-scène*, editing and style of filming is closely linked to her examination of the double narrative structure, which she discerns in this adaptation as part forward-looking and part a deductive mode of storytelling which sets up suspense.

Contrasting *Bleak House* with contemporary US television dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* (2004-6), she perceives that this particular adaptation speaks to a contemporary audience familiar with the conventions and rules of modern-day international programming. Indeed, Geraghty formulates a convincing argument to suggest that *Bleak House* is not heritage at all, but a soap opera delivered as such through snapshot editing and characterization, with visual cliff hangers strategically placed to create suspense.

The latter part of the book focuses on the choice of settings by *Bleak House's* directors, Justin Chadwick and Susanna White. These, according to Geraghty, depart from the style of filming traditionally used in heritage dramas, such as the deployment of precise and loving shots of stately

homes, collectable *objets d'art* and the pastoral landscape; instead she notes the binary contradictions of public (city) versus private (rural) space.

Finally, a particularly innovative aspect of the book emerges as Geraghty investigates the critical reception of the televised *Bleak House* contemporaneous with its release while simultaneously comparing it with the reaction to the novel. She concludes by defining an expressive "televisuality" in *Bleak House*, noting this as grounds for the tension that such a serialization creates between the usual, more elitist audience of a classic adaptation and the popular contemporary viewer.

This specific 2005 version of *Bleak House* was mostly critically acclaimed, albeit it received some censure in respect of its visual style; indeed, Paul Hoggart from *The Times* suggested that the experimental imagery of *Bleak House* made the plot difficult to follow (42), and Gerard O'Donovan, while looking forward to the next episode, mourned the loss of Victorian London; as he suggests, "Dickens' brooding portrait of the early-Victorian city, mired in filth, shrouded in fog [...] was dissipated in the rush to keep the plot moving forward at any cost." (O'Donovan) Geraghty fears that this is how it will be remembered over and above its bold attempt to return Dickens' adaptations to their rightful place: literary material with a wide ranging appeal to the general public. However, for her, Davies' adaptation retains its own individual and distinct status as a television classic.

In sum, Geraghty has produced an unusual yet accessible and erudite study of this Dickens adaptation, tracing a visual trajectory from classic serial through to postmodern text, while simultaneously suggesting that *Bleak House*'s imagery and narrative is wholly appropriate for a post-millennial audience.

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