

## Mass, Mainstream, and the Practices of Television History

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Television studies indeed has a problem with the “mainstream”, and it didn’t just begin with niche-oriented post-network tv.

Our intellectual roots, of course, lie in a deep-seated skepticism toward broad claims about “mass” audiences. In *Culture & Society*, Raymond Williams wrote that “The conception of persons as masses springs, not from an inability to know them, but from an interpretation of them according to a formula.... Our formula can be that of the rational being speaking our language. It can be that of the interested being sharing our common experience. Or—and it is here that ‘masses’ will operate—it can be that of the mob: gullible, fickle, herdlike, low in taste and habit.” Following Williams, we’ve steadily pushed against the massifying language of early communication studies, instead pushing toward a fine-grained, more deeply contextually mode of analysis that recognizes diversity among audiences, texts, media industries, and viewing contexts.

I’m not sure, though, how well we’ve really followed through on these basic premises of cultural materialism. Certainly, a great deal of terrific scholarship over the past two decades has exploded some deeply ideological preconceptions about “mass” tv and its often pathologized audiences. We’ve done a reasonably good job of building more nuanced portraits of subcultures and marginal audiences of various sorts.

What we haven’t done nearly as well, however, is develop a model of normative, “mainstream” television that is as nuanced as our understanding of localized, niche tv cultures. “Mainstream tv” still exists in our collective scholarly imaginary as that which niches push against, and as the resonant center of our dominant political culture. The problem is that we often do a better job of complicating our understanding of the marginal than of the mainstream.

The diffracted nature of contemporary television certainly does challenge our assumptions about what counts as the mainstream, if it even exists. It forces us to question the hierarchies by which certain programs become seen as normative, and to question the means by which audiences participate in that presumably normative culture.

But the greatest benefit of the development of post-network television and the scholarship that analyzes it may be its impact on historical scholarship. Nowhere is the tendency to see (network, primetime, fictional) television as “mainstream” and thus broadly and comprehensively normative stronger than in historical scholarship. (I’m not excusing myself here in the least, since I’m particularly interested in some of the most “mainstream” questions of all – those of the formation and struggle over nationhood).

The problem, I think, is that we're often not really very good historians, and take the discursive *claims* of particular texts as self-extracting *evidence*, complete with all the clues that will help us rebuild their cultural moment.

In our attempt to contextualize, we often generalize. It's easy, for example, to treat the reductive family and gender discourses of *Leave It To Beaver* or *The Donna Reed Show* as themselves the contextual surround into which these shows were inserted. The risk is that of a tautological historical practice in which we find self-reinforcing discourses; by doing so, we can miss a lot. As Lynn Spigel, Derek Kompare, and many others have pointed out, TV's own participation in constructing a simplistic national past certainly doesn't help – *Nick-at-Nite* isn't a documentary.

Recent scholarship in post-network, local, non-network, and/or international tv offers some important insights that can help us complicate our work. It forces us to grapple with key questions, such as those of when and how US television was influenced by international import and export, and of how local television production and distribution might complicate our understanding of network hegemony. The answers may well disrupt our understanding of classic network television as the stable center of a consensus culture.

Mainstream television likely no longer exists; but maybe it never did.