

Quality TV and Pedagogy: Formalism, Contextualism, and Productive Tensions

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Quality TV is not born, it is made – and I do not mean by television producers. Rather, scholars make it by structuring and organizing the discursive field of television studies, defining what texts are worthy – and not worthy – of inclusion in conferences, journals, and classrooms. Assessing the quality of a television text is not all that different from judging the quality of anything else, in the sense that it fundamentally involves the issues of value judgment and personal taste. Yet, when academics draw on these individual preferences to assess the quality of specific aesthetic, cultural, ideological, or political characteristics of television texts, it seemingly makes objective what is an inherently subjective practice. Made publicly, these personalized evaluations become codified and lead to certain common sense views of Quality TV and the establishment of a Quality TV canon. What's more, the process of definition need also be recognized as an act of exclusion; designating some texts as Quality TV implies that all others are not-Quality TV, and thus not worthy of analysis and study.

Troubling the waters is the fact that most television scholars distance themselves from the Quality TV label and rarely speak the phrase. Nevertheless, these very same taste and value judgments drive their teaching and research, in the sense that scholars tend to gravitate toward television texts that they find aesthetically, culturally, or ideologically intriguing. For instance, despite differences in social origins, politically and economically academics tend to be a fairly homogenous group. They are predominantly upper middle class and socially liberal, and the texts they study frequently reflect such values and tastes. Also favored are shows that are somehow exceptional: artistically ambitious, socially controversial, and defiant of network standards. For example, witness the inordinate amount of scholarly attention paid to Twin Peaks (1990-91), The Wire (2002-08), Lost (2004-10), Mad Men (2007-), all iconoclastic series that have mostly underperformed commercially. Indeed, numerous trends and biases emerge in the texts that scholars focus on: narrative fiction is almost exclusively preferred, while reality, sport, and news programming are all but ignored; hour-long dramas dominate over comedies, animation, and all other genres and forms; and texts that feature literary or cinematic characteristics tend to receive the most intensive examination (reinforcing preconceived notions of “high art”). As a result, the most taught and studied series tend to qualify as Quality TV, and yet these series hardly resemble TV at all. These texts are the exceptions, not the rule, and the overwhelming attention paid to them marginalizes and diminishes the value of the lion's share of television, to the extent that it even devalues the medium itself.

Television is not historically known for artistic innovation or for having distinctive “authors,” visual stylishness, or original narrative approaches. The institutional and structural form of television favors repetition and predictability. But it is precisely those series that deviate from these norms, featuring auteur producers and atypical visual or narrative styles, that have garnered the most attention in television studies. A binary is created by which Quality TV is defined in contrast to some indeterminate body of “regular” television texts, and in fact in contrast to the television medium itself. An example here would be the recent discussions of “narrative complexity.” Indeed, Quality TV discourse typically appears disguised under other names. A television text's aesthetic attributes have long been referenced as supporting evidence for Quality TV claims. Discussions of narrative complexity, like those about Quality TV, have centered on fictional, hour-long primetime dramas featuring serialized storytelling. The parallels between the labels Quality TV and narrative complexity are numerous: serial narratives, genre-

mixing, self-reflexivity, “complex” writing, auteur creators, and ensemble casts. The narrative complexity label also excludes many of the same texts and genres that Quality TV has historically shunned, notably sitcoms, soap operas, and nonfiction texts. The narrative complexity discourse also frequently references, and draws on scholarship from, the more culturally legitimate, “highbrow” art forms of literature and cinema. The impetus here seems to be to bring into television an aesthetic that rectifies an inherent lack in the entire medium, one that marks all of television as low quality. If all of television is lowbrow, the way to elevate its cultural value, to raise it up to the level of art, to make complex that which is simple and uncomplicated, is to infuse it with highbrow forms.

The actual phrase “quality television” is used colloquially more than methodically in academic circles, and frequently it appears disguised as roughly equivalent terms like “serious drama” or “art television.” At other times it is kept at arm’s reach, presented in scare quotes (“Quality TV”) so as to indicate that the author does not accept the usage of the phrase. More often than not, it is simply not mentioned at all. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Quality TV is itself a troubled term, television scholars are always making critical evaluations of television texts, even when they do not present them as such. Indeed, the simple selection of what texts to study involves value judgments. If popular taste dictated what television scholars studied, there would be more scholarship published on Dancing With the Stars (2005-) or Grey’s Anatomy (2005-) and far less on Buffy the Vampire Slayer or The Wire. Quite simply, scholars want to believe that their work is important, that it has value. By extension, that means that the object of their study needs to be valuable. Especially when the focus of analysis is on aesthetic properties, as has been the case with narrative complexity, there is a natural tendency to be drawn to texts that one finds aesthetically interesting in the first place. The scholars’ taste guides them to it. It is Quality TV because it is the television that they think is good, and moreover, it is the television that they study.