Quality TV and Pedagogy: Formalism, Contextualism, and Productive Tensions
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If studying television is "bad enough," why study "bad television"?

Television studies scholars are confronted by longstanding perceptions of television as film's "ugly stepsister," the less sophisticated, less artistic, less ambitious medium. While scholars, producers, networks and audiences have all contributed to shifts in perspective, popular discourse is still rife with attitudes that television is a mindless timewaster. Even in circles where the possibility for stimulating, engaging television is granted, programming that does not strive to be "quality television" is not deemed worthy of critical examination.

At stake is the scholar's point of view: do we privilege the perspective of television as artistic expression or cultural product? A cultural studies approach interrogates television's important role as a site of socialization: audiences learn how to perform their gender, ethnic, and class identity through mediated models. As such, those series with large audiences have potentially significant influence, warranting critical analysis in their own right. *Lost* and *The Wire* merit our attention as quality television, yet programs like *Two and a Half Men* and *Gossip Girl* carry cultural messages that cannot be ignored.

Cougar Town, for example, challenges expectations about gender roles, ageism and relationships. While far from the formal standards of quality television, *Cougar Town* raises important issues appropriate for scholarly engagement. It is, perhaps, easier to use a series like *Married…With Children* or *Bewitched*, both popular series in their time, to discuss gender and marriage, especially as we can choose to disregard their formal qualities when positioning them as historical artifacts. Yet for contemporary students, watching television that predates them often abstracts cultural messages: rather than seeing Samantha's struggles to balance her roles as wife and independent woman on *Bewitched* as an applicable site of contestation, there may be a tendency to write off those issues as being irrelevant because the series was targeted to their grandmothers and mothers who had different experiences with gender roles.

Scholars who come to television through the humanities may be hesitant to engage popular programming, feeling more comfortable with the credibility and intellectual challenges of quality television. Danielle Steel and John Grisham novels are not typically assigned in literature classes, so can we comfortably incorporate *General Hospital* or *CSI* into the media studies curriculum? Doing so requires us to be explicit in our approaches to television, both as a medium and as a site of cultural communication.

From David Horowitz to helicopter parents, academia is under increasingly close, and critical, scrutiny. Scholars who devote careful attention to their pedagogy can justify the rationale behind classroom choices, yet may not always have the opportunity to offer such justifications before facing public condemnation. If "concerned parents" already think of television as a waste of time and perhaps a site of inappropriate and immoral cultural models, then it is virtually impossible to persuade such parents of the validity of one's curricular choices. However, bowing to such potential threats minimize the efficacy of the curriculum.

In addition to concerns from those focused on their own perceptions of students' needs, the tendency for television studies scholars to focus on quality television is also reinforced by perceived threats to academic scholarship. Authority and expertise are at stake as a growing number of organic intellectuals are blogging about television and posting in forums and online journals. Academics who think of themselves as public intellectuals may fall back on formal analysis, employing their theoretical expertise to separate themselves from those who lack academic credentials. How do we decide what texts matter? Are we willing, as scholars, to step outside of the canon and engage popular television on its own terms, in our living rooms, our classrooms, and our journals? Or does this put our credibility at risk?