

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

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Keeping up with the Drs. Jones: Quality Texts, Quality Viewers and Quality Scholars

Asking professors or graduate students in the English Department if they studied “quality literature” or academics in Art History if they studied “quality art” would be like asking if birds can fly: their objects of study are so firmly established as high culture that the word “quality” is redundant. And then there is television, mired in the popular until HBO hauled it up by its proverbial bootstraps and made it an almost respectable object of study. But just in case our colleagues over in English or Art History didn’t have a subscription, or missed the reviews of *The Sopranos* or *Six Feet Under* in the *New York Times*, we stuck the label “Quality” in front.

This introduction to my position paper sets out, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to draw attention to the link between the study of a popular cultural form and investments in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “bourgeois aesthetics” by the people who study it in particular and the academy in general. Although the questions framing this roundtable open the door to a critique of the recent upsurge in Quality TV studies, they also associate such studies with formalism (and, by extension, aesthetics). They also place “quality shows” (the examples given include *True Blood*, *Lost* and *The Wire*) in opposition to “non-quality” shows (*The Vampire Diaries* and *Gilmore Girls*). My response to these questions, laid out below for further discussion at the conference, is based on an attempt to both situate and destabilize the label and notion of Quality TV.

As we know, early television studies scholars didn’t focus on Quality TV but this cannot simply be attributed to the dearth of American programming that could be considered as such. Long before HBO executives came up with the slogan, “It’s not TV, it’s HBO,” critics were praising network dramas like *All in the Family* and *Hill Street Blues*. But scholars focussed on *Star Trek*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *Miami Vice* instead. John Fiske and John Hartley were interested in television precisely because it was more akin to the avante garde texts, characterized as open, excessive and incoherent. Feminist media scholars such as Tanya Modleski focussed on soap operas and argued that they were a devalued genre because of their association with the feminine. Indeed, the study of “lowbrow” television texts continues unabated today; I rarely attend a conference without multiple panels on reality TV. Studying the popular, even today, however, is still risky business where bourgeois aesthetics is the norm; such study is easily interpreted as naïve celebration of the trivial. Just ask John Fiske, who was the subject of sustained vitriolic attacks from supposed colleagues in Cultural Studies. I was once asked by a colleague at a university at which I held a limited term faculty position if I wrote fan fiction. When I replied that I did not, his response was “thank goodness!” (I was still not hired for a tenure-track position at that university either.)

In light of the above, studying Quality TV is of obvious appeal. It is as close as you can get to full-blown legitimacy in the academy as a television scholar, especially if you study audience reception or fans. Based on my research with whom I call “elite fans,” I have argued that quality texts produce quality readers. That is, by demonstrating that they know how to mobilize discourses of criticism and that they know how to distinguish “good” writing from “poor”

writing, “good” acting from “bad” acting, etc, they mark themselves out as legitimate members of the educated, middle class. The position I am taking here is an extension of this logic and process of identification: quality texts produce quality scholars. In making this claim, I am not suggesting that this is necessarily a conscious or deliberate career move. Those of us who study Quality TV get pleasure from these texts and these pleasures are imbricated with the same bourgeois aesthetics. These are the same pleasures that members of the upper and middle classes have been getting from a “good book” or from a “masterful” work of art since Victorian times. Even reality shows and soaps come with their own ambivalent and/or guilty pleasures. The texts that we ignore, therefore, are not the lowbrow, as is suggested in the panel description, but the middlebrow and the mundane. A body of work is not going to emerge around *The Vampire Diaries* because it fails to satisfy on the level of both aesthetics and spectacle.

I will conclude by noting that there is nothing wrong with an interest in Quality TV. Rather than drawing on discourses of aesthetics and formalism to come up with a definition of a quality show, or established a canon of quality texts to be taught, scholars need to be self reflexive and examine the investments in such aesthetics in terms of production, reception, scholarship and pedagogy.