

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

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Television was itself a "bad object" which had to be claimed as an object worthy of academic study in part due to its association with lower classes. This is why I specifically study what some may call "Non-Quality Television." At this moment, I am particularly interested in bodily makeover reality shows, such as plastic surgery shows. I do not study shows of which I am necessarily a fan, but ones that seem to be speaking to larger cultural issues. Television studies as a field has a history and interest in exploring items seen as low culture and understanding the complexity of form and context across the television medium. For example, Robert C. Allen's 1985 book, *Speaking of Soap Operas*, analyzed and redeemed one of the worst objects in culture and the academy: the women-oriented melodrama on television. His work helped to shift an understanding of lower cultural items, including what was often deemed the most banal programming of the most banal medium, to highlight the complexity contained in the narratives and in the viewers. All of television was now fair game in the academy. Books like *Freaks Talk Back* by Joshua Gamson (1998) and *The Money Shot* by Laura Grindstaff (2002) furthered this work by turning critical attention to another demeaned genre: the talk show.

This history and perspective is what drew me to focus on the study of television more than other media. Coming from a lower-class family as a first-generation college student, I was offended by the assumptions about taste and quality of not only media but also human beings that were made in classrooms and in scholarship of other forms of media. The desire to focus on "quality television" is in part a desire for recognition of the strengths of television, of its ability to do things well and to no longer be considered an inferior medium. As scholars, it is a desire to no longer have to defend television as an object of study or defend the intelligence of scholars who chose to study it. It also stems out of a desire to separate, categorize, and qualify programming, creating a sort of order out of the hum of television. However, the dictating of taste by academics is a dangerous arena. While it is justified in many different ways, ultimately scholars are trying to declare why their favorite shows are better than the masses of shows beloved by millions of other less-enlightened people. I prefer an approach which focuses on what is culturally occurring within a program and why, rather than a justification of the program's value.

Now, with television studies gaining some ground in the academy and definitely gaining ground in publications, this tendency to reify and canonize is perhaps creeping in, with ill effects on students. In the classroom, it is important to show students this breadth and complexity of television in order to avoid the canonization of particular "quality" programs. This tendency to canonize "quality" programs means that programs only of similar formal attributes are taught while class, racial, and gender lines are once again reified. Students often do not see their own viewing practices or interests represented in what is considered valuable. In addition, this canonization does not represent television well, since it focuses on the television text at the expense of other components of television. Texts are separated from television and not situated.

As an alternative, I often ask students to seek out and bring in examples and analyses of concepts from class, which allows them to relate to the class and educate the class from their own standpoint. Students find and bring in examples from around the world and create a much wider understanding of television than my own examples could have. I always find myself surprised by what my students are watching or interested in and would not have anticipated their examples. This creates diversity in the examples used in class and avoids canonization of particular texts. It allows for discussions of quality without reifying class, racial, and gender lines.

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