

The Good, the Bad, and the Cult: Television Studies Sensibilities  
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Why do we, as television scholars, study individual television shows? Setting aside issues of cult taste, the most basic answer is because they appeal to highbrow cultural sensibilities. Although the concept has a long history in the sub-field of television studies extending back to Raymond Williams' work on flow and John Fiske's exploration of the distinction between horizontal and vertical intertextualities, I believe the post-network era scholarly focus on intertextuality in shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men* is closely related to the utilitarian approaches to leisure and the culture of individual self-cultivation now dominant among the educated class. Sociological research addressing upper-middle class Americans convincingly demonstrates that leisure activities requiring intellectual engagement (like learning a musical instrument or playing chess) and intellectual curiosity (like being a voracious reader or frequenting art galleries) are highly valued as they are understood to indicate an individual's desire to maximize their own potential. Through this framework, scholars understand intertextuality as one of the ways in which "quality content" establishes a unique relationship with "quality audiences." Yet, this relationship remains largely taken-for-granted as a result of the exclusive consideration of legitimated texts as they are understood by elite audiences who presumably share upper-middle class understandings of leisure.

In contrast to the status-based distinction practices commonly associated with creative class professionals such as television critics and scholars, the most common American taste culture is defined by the prominence of individual subjectivity. In particular, this mode of engagement both requires and supports a worldview in which taste is a reflection of individual, idiosyncratic selves. As such, the importance of critical assessment associated with highbrow cultural forms is mirrored by the significance of individual, subjective assessment in middlebrow cultural worlds. Thus, the dominant theoretical understanding of intertextuality in post-network texts as a means by which legitimated content appeals to cultural elites by providing opportunities to demonstrate upper-middle-class cultural capital makes little sense when applied to non-elite audiences of quantitatively popular content.

In the context of television studies, however, the tendency to uncritically embrace such hierarchies is particularly problematic as the association between intertextuality and qualitative superiority in the post-network era ignores the broader context of the medium's increasing legitimacy. In this, there are significant parallels with one of the most popular concepts in television scholarship: "narrative complexity." In relation to never-ending narratives and the pleasures associated with

following the interpersonal relationships in soap operas, for example, post-network texts associated with narrative complexity masculinize a denigrated form by negating and denying the feminized other upon which their status depends. And, as I argue in an article working its way through *Critical Studies in Television* (an early draft is available here <http://mikewaynedotorg.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/cmpaper-for-asas-2012.doc>), considerations of televisual intertextuality employ a similarly problematic binary. By exclusively addressing highbrow references in culturally legitimated post-network drama, scholars negate the realities of middlebrow engagement. In privileging class over mass, to borrow a phrase from Newman and Levine, the viewing experiences of elite audiences are universalized while simultaneously denying the very real pleasures viewers associate with texts like *Criminal Minds* thereby marginalizing network audiences more generally. As such, it seems inappropriate to ask if “certain programs deserve study 'simply' by virtue of their interesting and perhaps 'good' storytelling and aesthetics even if they are not exemplary of broader trends?” To argue otherwise denies the social elements of taste while simultaneously implying that texts can be cleanly separated from those who engage with them. As Clint Eastwood's character William Munny states at the conclusion of *Unforgiven*, “deserve's got nothing to do with it.”

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