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Why Jeff Dunham is Important: The Value of "Bad Objects" in Television Studies

“What are the motivations for studying these objects aside from the fact that television scholars often fall within their target demographics?”

While more of a disclaimer than a central point of discussion, this passage about the field's taste preferences intrigues me. The prompt lists some legitimate reasons for studying texts that, in addition to flattering our taste preferences, exemplify and spark industry trends. Nevertheless, a ubiquitous focus on cult and quality television presents dangers worth considering as it limits the field's scope and reinforces classed taste hierarchies.

Researching my dissertation chapter on post-9/11 comedy, I certainly didn't enjoy watching all of *The Jeff Dunham Show* and the ventriloquist's many specials. But considering that his rise from relative obscurity to enormous popular and economic success coincided with the introduction of his “Achmed the Dead Terrorist” dummy in 2007, it would have been an oversight to ignore Dunham. From my vantage point, his comedy is aesthetically and ethically bankrupt. He is as unfunny as his puppets are offensive. I could have made a lot of the same points by skimping on or skipping Dunham altogether. Key episodes of *Louie* and *South Park* – both shows I enjoy and relative darlings of our field – do a lot of the same schadenfreudic work regarding Middle Eastern terrorists. But attempts to talk myself out of studying Dunham would have been alibis for incomplete, perhaps even unethical, scholarship. And although I read Dunham with a particular point in mind, the value of any work is never limited to its thesis. Without having to engage with ventriloquism, for example, I would have missed out on some useful insights, particularly regarding the relationship between verbal and physical humor.

Ultimately however, my point is not simply about the effect of narrow taste profiles on individual projects, but on the field as a whole. While it may be possible to do “state of the industry” projects using only cult and quality shows, to limit the scope of our knowledge to these programs is to ignore large and important chunks of our object. In the process, this also hinders scholarly cross-pollination. In other words, we can't recommend useful texts for each others' work if we all watch the same handful of shows. Obviously, we don't need to write every essay about the Chuck Lorre-verse, but we should all probably have seen some *Two and a Half Men* in order to claim literacy about the medium on which we write.

Plus, many of the reasons to highlight quality shows have vanished. By most reasonable standards, the battle to legitimate television has been won. This is thanks in part to academics, but credit belongs more to the combined effects of narrowcasting, popular criticism, and advertising as well as the aesthetics of shows that fill the cultural space opened by these factors. I believe our labor might be better spent examining these complex issues than recreating their ideologies and inadvertently turning our classrooms and journals into unpaid wings of HBO's and AMC's advertising departments.

As I hope my take on Dunham suggests however, I am not arguing that we pretend to not have taste preferences ourselves. To do so would be dishonest scholarship. But, and this is not a rhetorical question, how should we account for our individual tastes? There is no ideal here and the best of us will always be guilty of leaving aspects of our class and subject positions unexamined, but that is no excuse not to try better.

I realize it is easier to criticize than to find solutions and lest I sound too damning I admit that I am guilty of everything of which I accuse the field. To that end, I am going to set some goals for myself. Feel free to borrow as you find appropriate. I should ask myself every day how my taste preferences affect my work and how I can best account for and correct them. With every project, I should ask myself whether my texts are the best objects for answering the questions at hand. And

finally, I should constantly be filling in gaps with regards to my television knowledge. Whether it be overcoming my snobbish resistance to Dunham, my meta-snobbish resistance to “quality” shows, my liberal resistance to Fox News, or any other aspect of television I have resisted, I ought to constantly expand the base of my knowledge in order to be a more effective scholar.