

Roberta Pearson, Position Paper for “The Good, the Bad, and the Cult: Television Studies Sensibilities” Roundtable

Television studies divides into two different and distinct traditions, one situated within the social sciences and the other within the arts and humanities. Social scientists have tended to study institutions, regulation and reception, often investigating hot button topics like violence and sexuality. Arts and humanities scholars, particularly those with roots in film studies and cultural studies, have also been interested in reception, but from the very different perspective of active audiences and fans. They have also produced institutional histories of television. But, despite the fact that this second branch of television studies originated within a text-obsessed film studies, until quite recently neither camp has shown sustained interest in individual television programs other than discussing them from institutional or audience perspectives. If one thinks about the “classics” within an admittedly young discipline, only a handful such as D’acci’s study of Cagney and Lacey, concern themselves with specific television texts. Today much of the interesting and influential work in the field tends to take an institutional or media industries perspective even if including discussions of individual shows; e.g. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionised*; Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television* and Mittell’s forthcoming book on television narrative.

However three publishers have book series devoted to studies of individual television programs. The IB Tauris *Reading Contemporary Television* series “aims to offer a varied, intellectually groundbreaking and often polemical response to what is happening in television today.” Wayne State’s *TV Milestones* solicits books that offer “a comprehensive account of a particular television show, placing that show in the context of the history of television and broader cultural history and discussing representative episodes of the show in detail.” BFI TV Classics is a “series of books celebrating key individual television programmes and series. Television scholars, critics and novelists provide critical readings underpinned with careful research, alongside a personal response to the programme and an argument for its 'classic' status.” I don’t have space here for a full analysis of the titles in all three series, but many familiar programs appear: e.g. *Madmen*, *Dr. Who*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Star Trek*, *Lost*, *Buffy*. Despite the various justifications for the series, the clear aim of all three is to sell books. Not of course that there’s anything wrong with selling books given the ever increasing financial pressures upon academic publishers; indeed such a strategy might permit them to subsidize books that might not sell so well. I myself edited *Reading Lost* for the Tauris series and am currently revising a book on *Star Trek* as television for the University of California Press, which is anticipating good sales.

But there’s also a process of canonization going on here, as indicated by the words “classics” and “milestones.” And that worries me a bit since including programs in a canon necessarily entails excluding other programs; if such a process of canonization is inevitable I’d like it to be driven by something other than financial concerns. I’d also like it to be driven by something other than the tastes of television scholars, who are overwhelmingly the white, middle class upmarket audience at which many of the programs in these series are directed by their producers and distributors. There’s also something slightly disturbing about the fit between many of the programs and the sensibilities of the acafan. Tauris’ emphasis upon polemical response and the BFI’s

upon personal response seems to encourage a focus upon precisely that tranche of programs that most ‘naturally’ appeal to television scholars.

In his very useful essay “Exemplarity, Pedagogy and Television History,” Jonathan Bignell argues that “examples shape theorists’ and students’ understanding because citing an example relies on a notion of a canon whose constitution, inclusions and exclusions represent a larger context and history. Yet an example must therefore exceed the field it stands for, and also be more than typical. This duality between representativeness and exceptionalness is necessarily the case.” It was precisely this duality that caused me to write a book on *Star Trek* and edit a book on *Lost*. *Star Trek*’s forty-year plus history exemplifies the many changes in the television industry and television story telling between its debut in 1966 and the cancellation of *Enterprise* in 2005. But its forty plus year history is itself exceptional as is the continuous run of four series between 1987 and 2005. *Lost* exemplified the many changes in American television in the transition from TV2 to TV3, but was also exceptional in its cult blockbuster status, its extended transmedia storytelling and its highly complex narrative.

While a program’s representativeness/exceptionalness is one criterion for choosing to write about it there may be others which I hope the contributors to this round table will discuss. For example, can an argument be made that 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? Should we be studying programs that are simply ordinary, or perhaps even bad, rather than exceptional? And what are the perils of focusing on individual programs while ignoring everything else that constitutes television from the news to the interstitials?