

Rethinking Form Analysis

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I was inspired to pose a question based on Matt Zoller Seitz's polemic essay both by the response it prompted from media critics but also by the response it provoked from several of the media academics I follow on Twitter (some of whom serendipitously ended up on this roundtable). Being a new scholar who has worked primarily within the Cultural Studies of television and new media, I have often found myself ignoring form in favor of content, so, I was particularly interested in whether Seitz's critique could and should be considered by television scholars. All this to say: I posed this question not because I have any particular expertise in the area, but because I wanted to prompt further discussion amongst those who do.

Seitz's original essay and the various responses to it reveal a general disagreement as to the job of a "media critic." Tom Shone's reaction in *The Guardian*, for instance, takes the position that visual media criticism is meant to police filmmakers rather than to inform readers. In his column, he argues that a discussion of film form is not as important as Seitz contends, because today's film directors are skilled at cinematography and editing, while their "grasp on narrative and insight into character limps way out back." Therefore, critics, as filmmaker watchdogs, *should* concentrate on characterization and narrative. However, Shone's position ignores two of Seitz's main points: first, that the key relationship in a critique is between the critic and the reader rather than the critic and the filmmaker, and second, that form merits discussion even if it is not deemed particularly "good" or "bad." Seitz's contention that critics ought to act as instructors by making formal choices visible to readers makes his essay valuable not only to television critics, but also to television scholars. Neither critics nor academics can adequately perform a pedagogical function when writing about visual media without addressing form. Otherwise, as Seitz argues, we are "not contributing to visual literacy," rather we are merely applying the methodology of literary theory, political science, psychology, or some other discipline to television. In order to draw upon our expertise as television scholars, we need to approach television from our own unique methodological standpoint, which necessarily involves some discussion of the visual.

Additionally, a discussion of form should not be contingent upon a show's approximation of the cinematic or upon its form being either lionized as "art" or mocked as cheap or tacky. Such distinctions reinforce problematic hierarchies of taste and often lead to the ignoring of television form in all but "quality drama." What many responses to Seitz's article ignore is the importance of writing about the types of mundane or "invisible" form that frequently fly under radar of critique or discussion. We need to pay attention not only to particular triumphs or failures in television form, but also to elements of cinematography, editing, and sound design that have become so familiar to audiences as to go without notice. The codes and conventions of "ordinary" procedurals, sitcoms, reality television, soap operas, Hallmark movies, and morning news also merit discussion and analysis. As Seitz argues, visual media makes us "feel things" through editing, scoring, and cinematography, and the critic's and scholar's role is to extrapolate and explain to readers and students *how* it makes us feel these things, how to recognize these techniques, and how form plays a role in narrative and

representation. Such unremarkable form is especially important to examine and explain because audiences and students need to be reminded that visual media is first and foremost a construction rather than a reflection of reality.

Fortunately, the changing nature of both popular criticism and scholarship are giving critics and academics new opportunities to bring form to the forefront television analysis. Visual essays and the digital humanities are increasingly giving television scholars opportunities to focus on the visual, freed from the frustration of meticulously describing the visual aspects of a work. Additionally, as seemingly silly as the use of GIFs may be in television recaps, I would argue that they may be a jumping off point for TV critics and recappers to draw attention to the visual aspects of television narrative. In amusing, entertaining, and sometimes thoughtful ways, GIFs have the potential to draw attention to a particular shot or sequence by isolating it from the narrative and characterization and focusing the reader on visual form. Such tools have the potential to give even those of us who don't tend toward formal analysis a way to take up Seitz's challenge to more consciously "write about the filmmaking."