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Television studies and the idea of criticism

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There has recently been a growth in discussion and dispute about 'values' in the study of television. This has gone along with an increased use of the term 'aesthetic' to signal a refreshed emphasis on matters of form and creative quality, following perception of their relative neglect.

Articles in journals on both sides of the Atlantic have made contributions to this dialogue, but Jason Jacobs's recent overview of the issues is, I think, of particular interest, making useful references to earlier interventions concerning ideas of quality.[1] The example around which much of Jacobs's argument turns, partly in response to previous writing, is *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*[2] Put bluntly, the core question here is whether, and by what set of criteria, this successful series is any good or not. Do its production values and performance skills deserve positive recognition? Does the fact that it gives pleasure to a huge number of people deserve some critical respect? Or is its populist address best met with suspicion, its clear grounding in the idea of massive monetary reward the necessary object of ethical and political critique? *Big Brother*, together with the diverse forms of 'reality television' and the greatly expanded range of lifestyle series, could equally well serve to highlight the values in contention. Historically, British debate about soap opera and sitcom also shows clearly the tensions arising from a wish to affirm examples of 'good television' using different combinations of criteria, and at the same time to avoid the quality discourses of established arts criticism in favour of something privileging more strongly social and political factors and ideas of cultural democracy.

Defending popular programming against 'elite' disapproval appears to have become a routine task of academic television criticism, undertaken

1 Jason Jacobs, 'Television aesthetics: an infantile disorder', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2006), pp. 18–33. Jacobs cites Christine Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and quality in popular television drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2003), pp. 25–45. An important earlier call for more specific attention to the issue of 'quality' is found in Charlotte Brunsdon's 'Problems with quality', *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1990), pp. 77–90.

2 One key point of disagreement is with Matt Hills, 'Who wants to be a fan of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*', in Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock (eds), *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), pp. 177–95.

in different ways according to context. Certainly, as a 'move' in academic writing, it is now far more frequently made than its opposite, the hostile dissection of 'popular' programming in the light of its political and commercial (ideological) terms of articulation. However, this critical dynamic still remains active, as Jacobs's own comments show.[3]

Within the upsurge of debate around form and value, the idea of 'criticism' itself seems positioned for further appraisal. What kind of an activity *is* this, particularly when performed upon a television programme? Given its basis in kinds of 'expert subjectivity', what are its possibilities and limitations in producing knowledge and judgement that go beyond the personalized reading positions that initially inform it?

Dispute about the functions of criticism, including its basis and scope, form part of the history of scholarship in all the arts. But writing on television inflects the issues in particular ways and part of this particularity follows from the fact that so much of it, notwithstanding the strengthened tendency towards defence I noted above, has been done as *critique*, as a calling of attention to *deficits*. The various forms of criticism have a long tradition of wrangles over quality, but few bodies of writing can rival that on television in so regularly seeing not only individual works but, often, the medium itself as deserving of negative judgement. This judgement is sometimes offered in a spirit of transformative possibility, but more often it carries a strongly terminal ring. I want to pursue briefly some points about the present state and possible future of television 'criticism' as a mode of analytic practice.

Criticism and subjectivity

As a discourse of arts value, criticism varies in the extent to which it is prepared to admit the subjectivity and relational character of its judgements or, conversely, to affirm them as propositions about the intrinsic qualities of works and, perhaps, their social significance. Phrases such as 'in my reading', 'for me' and 'I find' pepper some accounts but are rigorously excluded from others. Grounded essentially in an *experiencing of artefacts*, criticism has a necessarily subjective dimension. It is a precondition that there has been an encounter and an interaction between work and self. This is one of the things that distinguish it from sociological and linguistic accounts, which prefer to conduct their analyses with minimal reference to subjectivized experience, privileging instead more objectifiable data. However, criticism not only varies in the way it admits subjectivity, it also varies in the extent and manner to which it wishes to transcend it.

Academic criticism of television has shown, until quite recently, a tendency towards the culturally, sociologically and politically categoric. Its accounts have been objectified away from 'personal response' and 'personal opinion', whatever their origins there, towards a more general propositional status. In part, this is because it has often been far less

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interested in aesthetic appreciation than in social implications. More than critical work on popular music, popular film and popular literature – although there are important variations between approaches here – it has tended to collapse or compress programme specificities, including aesthetic factors, in the interests of moving more quickly 'upwards' to offer what amounts to a *cultural sociology* of genre and medium. Here, the links (greatly aided by the shared word) between the established humanities notion of 'criticism' and the idea of 'critical theory' as a particular philosophy of cultural critique, dominated by the writings of the Frankfurt School from the 1930s through to the continuing commentaries of Habermas, have been important. This tendency has been aided by a strong sense of the relative low aesthetic density of television as a medium, a sense often linked to its perceived identity as more a continuous flow of industrial product, albeit one increasingly multi-sourced, than the site for specific and discrete creativity.[4] The idea of television as essentially marked by a pervasive banality still informs much newspaper criticism and provides the grounds for sustaining much television reviewing as a space in which comic derision is a staple mode. Such a role of humorous cultural denunciation can be contrasted with literary reviews, film reviews and the attention given to live and recorded popular music.[5]

There is an illuminating, if only partial, comparison to be made between the development of academic television criticism and certain strands of literary criticism. These strands would include the work of F.R. Leavis, in which judgement of quality in a work was in large part a function of its perceived ethical and social integrity and was then used as evidence in a broader engagement with cultural and social values. This was frequently 'critical' in the sense both of offering an evaluation of specific works and of quite often finding severe fault with what was there. One key difference, of course, would be that Leavis regularly used certain writers and works as a normative canon, indicating the positive and inspiring combination of values that 'great writing' could possess. Television criticism has generally been a bit short on positive exemplars, preferring in its more hopeful modes to emphasize potential rather than achievement.

Although fiercely dogmatic in practice, Leavis offered his 'readings' as a dialogue of interpretations with other members of the 'critical community' ('This is so, is it not?', 'Yes, but ...' being favourite formulations, bringing out the provisional, dialogic quality of judgement).[6] A 'critical community' is a rhetorical construct, partly defined by a measure of self-sufficiency in the critical expertise of its members as a group in dialogue. Although film studies has steadily developed (for better or worse) what I think can fairly be called a sense of 'critical community', with canonical works playing some part in this development, television studies has for a variety of reasons not gone down this route. For a start, its radical sociological ambitions, together with its concern for the broader terms upon which 'the popular' is

4 This idea has always been much stronger in the USA, largely as a consequence of the different economic and cultural profile of the industry. Again, an issue of *Cinema Journal* usefully reviews the current situation (see fn. 3).

5 An excellent general survey of the deficits of television criticism in newspapers through to the early 1980s is given in Michale Poole, 'The cult of the generalist: British television criticism 1936–82', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1984), pp. 41–61. Mark Lawson, 'Why newspapers should stop publishing TV reviews', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), pp. 104–7, offers a polemical view of the present situation from an arts broadcaster.

6 This idea of interchange is to be found widely in his writings, but F.R. Leavis, 'A note on the critical function', *Literary Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1961), pp. 1–9 gives an early and full exposition.

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constructed as a primary shaper of television, have presented obstacles, including those of direct political objection, to such a means of securing its assessments.

Leavis's 'terms of engagement' became a strong and problematic influence upon the subsequent development of radical literary criticism in Britain, in part through the various phases in the work of Raymond Williams. Less directly, they also had a formative influence upon the development of the 'critical reading' of media texts as a core method of cultural studies in the work of Richard Hoggart and the early work of Stuart Hall, informing their attempts to generate 'critical' (that is, deficit-spotting) social interpretations through 'critical' (that is, closely analytical) attention to textual form.

Interestingly, whereas radical literary critics in general wanted to break out from the subjectivity of the critic–work encounter in the direction of a radical history of *evaluative contexts of writing* (Williams's work on the novels of the 1840s being a classic example),[7] cultural critics of television wanted to break out of it principally in order to comment on likely *evaluative contexts of viewing.* Their critical discourse was ambitious not so much in 'shadowing historiography' as in 'shadowing sociology' by producing an account of effects and influences. This ambition went through a strong structuralist turn in the 1970s, the defining implications of which for theory and method in television studies are still active.[8] However, this turn was itself partly displaced by the 'turn to the audience' that reconfigured much of international media studies in the 1980s. In part introduced to supplement and refine structuralist 'readings', particularly in relation to the vexed issue of television's role as an agency of ideology, this ended up first by problematizing the very idea of analytic textual readings and then, in some versions at least, abolishing the very notion of the 'text' itself.[9]

Given this history, what kind of warrant does 'television criticism' now have for generating propositions about social and political issues? We might want to start by observing that critics in all the arts have a right to extend their accounts beyond their immediate encounter with the perceived qualities of artefacts. This encounter is the primary point of reference for criticism, but a concern with broader questions of the social structures, meanings and values within which the work operates and which it variously reflects and refracts has been an important part of the critical dynamic too. However, even though reflexivity is a requirement of good critical practice at every level, the contingency and speculative character of judgements in this broader sphere warrant a distinctively more rigorous mode of reflexive recognition and monitoring. Television criticism's routine tendency to be at least as interested in social and political settings and consequences as in localized creative practice carries heightened risks of the overstated and the underevidenced claim which it has quite often been happy to ignore in the interest of free-wheeling judgement.

7 Raymond Williams's case-study of the 1840s is developed in the chapter 'The analysis of culture', in *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961).

8 An assessment of the mixture of elements from various 'isms', particularly structuralism in relation to poststructuralism and Marxism in relation to postmodernism, would be an important component of any broader mapping of the current theoretical identity of film and media studies.

9 The idea of the television 'text', though variously at risk of being absorbed within grander, flanking conceptualizations of production or consumption, is a notion with some resilience, as regular moves to 'return to it' suggest.

Criticism and value

Criticism has a strongly normative dimension. In a manner that conflicts with the protocols, if not all of the practice, in social science, material is often selected precisely to illustrate normative judgements and to give them further enforcement. Formal or aesthetic value provides a core element of critical evaluation, although the value of a 'work' cannot be reduced to questions of form even in the case of painting and music, and certainly not in the case of literature, drama, film and television, where social representation and social argument are intrinsic to the identity of the artefact. As noted earlier, the constructions of popular taste provide a determining framework for much television work, whereas for many other areas of the arts (including, for instance, independent cinema) they are a marginal factor. As Jacobs observes, this sustains within the area of television studies a strong version of 'popular–elite' tension.

'Criticizing' high-end drama, where a relative discreteness of textual identity and strong authorial values connect closely with theatre and film, carries the least risk of getting involved in this tension. 'Criticizing' soap opera, sitcoms, reality television, game shows and a whole range of daytime entertainment programmes plays into it directly. And this is to talk only about judgements on the programmes themselves, what I might term *primary judgements*. Any move to *secondary judgements*, direct judgements on the broader culture and politics that the programmes evidence and perhaps support, and to which their audiences might be regarded as variously wittingly or unwittingly affiliated, opens out further the terms of the popular–elite playoff. Jacobs correctly observes that this has become more heightened in recent years with the emergence (as part of the more general if uneasy shift from terms of critique to terms of affirmation) of academic critics who wish openly to align themselves with popular taste (as fan-critics or critical fans) and are, perhaps, suspicious of any moves towards grounding criteria independently of this datum.

Criticism and form/aesthetics

Form is, of course, a core dimension of television's textuality, and a failure to address it brings the risk of slipping into the naivety of discussing 'content' without concern for the transformative work of 'televisuality' as process and cultural mode. Quite rightly, the social sciences have been regarded by many critics as being routinely prone to making this kind of error, and the history of academic television criticism shows regular moves to put form more forcefully on the agenda. In very different ways (and ones interesting to compare), Raymond Williams, John Hartley, John Fiske, John Ellis, John T. Caldwell and, more recently, Karen Lury have been influential in sustaining, through successive revisions, a focus on form in the context of wider developments in the field. These developments include shifts in the

television economy and in the applications of technology as well as revisions in cultural theory and analysis.

'Aesthetics', although sometimes used as a grander alternative to 'form' or 'discourse', raises rather different questions. It is a word that finds it hard entirely to escape its eighteenth-century origins, particularly its use by Kant to indicate the transcendent qualities of creative endeavour. Its strongly affirmative connection to the idea of art and its legacy of application to serious and great combinations of vision and technique in the high tradition have made it quietly strategic in putting the case for the symbolic complexity and 'richness' of television against the prejudices I identified earlier. Unlike 'form', it both suggests significance in the object of inquiry and gives status to the inquiry itself as a mode of intellectual practice.

Again, the sheer range of television as a generic system raises questions of precise application. While it seems perfectly possible to discuss serious drama, quiz shows and indeed the weather forecast under the heading of 'form', framing them in terms of their 'aesthetics' might seem odd. How can study of the densely worked imaginative aesthetics of drama be even remotely comparable to analysis of the modes of portrayal used in weather bulletins? However, I would want to support the idea that all forms of television deserve sustained focus in respect of their 'art-like' properties as well in relation to their other aspects. The fact that many television programmes are more directly about the *production of knowledge* and less about the *production of pleasure* than most traditional forms gathered within the category of 'art' does not undercut an aesthetic approach to the medium, nor does the fact that the pleasures of television are much more deeply and quietly interconnected than most other forms (including cinema) with the everyday. However, these factors do make problematic the idea of a general television criticism – an analytic discourse able to bring descriptive and evaluative precision to bear on any given programme. Moreover, to offer a judgement on the news, a quiz show, a weather forecast or many other kind of programme *primarily* on the grounds of their aesthetic organization is to perpetrate a category error in the terms of engagement. Other factors loom larger, including those to do with their production and organization of knowledge, their handing of the propositional as well as the imaginative and the nature of their functionality within given economic, political and social circumstances. 'Criticism' as a mode of inquiry is stretched well beyond its capacities in trying to handle these on its own and it will, inevitably, have recourse to reduction and foreclosure if it tries.

Criticism and the development of television research

Claims for the further consolidation of the television text as a core point of inquiry have played off against claims for its further dispersal as

merely one point of reference in a processual or systemic field of multiple indicators. Criticism's stock clearly varies with such emphases.

As a contributing discourse to research on television, criticism will always have a distinctive awkwardness. Those wishing to develop it into something more rigorous, something able to segue more directly into the social sciences, are likely to be disappointed. A good deal of critical work will, when judged by the standards of other analytic approaches, seem to be loose, opinionated, speculative and inclined to mix strict argument with assertion. However, the directness of its engagement with television as symbolic practice, its personally-inflected evaluations of quality and meaning, its disputations about deficits and possibilities, are important elements of the attention that the academy needs to bring to the medium as part of its broader intellectual engagement with culture and media.

If wholesale revision of criticism's procedures is unlikely, an increase in its self-awareness is not. Further reflexivity in its acts of claims-making and the contingency of their grounding are urgently necessary.[10] So too are better levels of connection with the formal and aesthetic frameworks (the 'value worlds') of production.[11] An increased engagement with the kinds of consumer aesthetics which might emerge from conceptual renewal in studies of reception is an essential part of further development too.[12] In both cases, such linkage can lead to a thickened rather than a diminished sense of television textuality as the productive focus of critical investigation.

Certainly, the wider involvement of critical readings as one element within studies drawing on other approaches is to be encouraged. There is a tendency for those who do criticism to do it with too much self-sufficiency, while investigations framed largely within social studies frameworks often give too little attention to those issues of meaning and value which criticism takes as its core agenda.

Lacking the relative coherence of 'critical community' that frames the debates of many of the other arts, with a 'critical object' widely heterogeneous in its communicative modes, a strong sociological ambition and a necessary and often uncomfortable articulation to the dynamics of the popular, television criticism's way forward certainly poses a challenge. Further attention both to its intellectual character and its possibilities would be welcome.

10 Robin Nelson brings this out well in 'Quality television', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), pp. 58–71. In its section 'Critical contexts', this issue has other articles showing the liveliness of debate about value that I noted earlier.

11 Significantly opened up in respect of British television by Georgina Born's *Uncertain Vision* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2004).

12 Annette Hill's work is illustrative here, particularly her studies across perceptions of generic coding. See Annette Hill, *Re-Styling Factual TV* (London: Routledge, 2007).

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