Policing the people: Television studies and the problem of 'quality'[1]

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NECSUS
European Journal of Media Studies

In *Television Studies: A Short Introduction*, Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz argue for 'television studies as an *approach* to studying media' rather than as 'a field for the study of a singular medium'.[2] The critique of 'Quality TV', I argue, furthers the disciplinary lure of medium singularity by recourse to essentialising notions of 'the people' and by extension 'popular culture'. A simplistic equation between aesthetics, audiences, and programs produces an imaginary construction of both television and the people. Interrogating television studies and the policing of the people is crucial for developing a critical and historically-nuanced *mode of approaching* a shifting cross-medial landscape as well as the politics of culture in general. Given the Leavisite-inspired hostility to 'mass culture' and the accompanying discourse of elitism, sexism, and class disapproval, television studies and its recourse to the people was both necessary and critically important. However, the actual construction of the popular in television studies as a concept forecloses on the *critical* study of television, first of all through the risk of essentialising a static, simplified, and often patronisingly benevolent notion of popular culture; and second, by responding defensively rather than proactively to the historical shifts in programming, genre-hybridisation, and television production.

In recent years much venom has been directed by many in television studies towards the term 'Quality TV'.[3] Michael Newman and Elana Levine's *Legitimating Television* provides a book-length example of how television studies as disciplinary control produces television as a 'singular medium'. They argue that 'cultural elites' produce 'patterns of taste judgement' by 'nudging it [television] closer to more established arts and cultural forms'.[4] Invoking Bourdieu, they argue that contemporary television minimises the value of popular television and popular culture in general while marketing and addressing seemingly non-televisual programs to upscale television audiences. Media convergence and the hybridisation of 'cultural forms' are cast as threats to both television's integrity as a popular cultural form and to the field of television studies as the study of a singular medium (popular television). Their limited disciplinary perspective (field/medium) produces *Legitimating Television* as a legitimating of television *studies* in precisely the way that Gray and Lotz want to move beyond. Conjuring popular culture is crucial to Newman and

Levine's own legitimating strategy and it is precisely this disciplining of the people that I will interrogate towards re-thinking television studies today.[5]

The debate around 'Quality TV', I argue, is completely uninteresting if it revolves around the term 'quality'. By framing the popular within the high/low cultural divide – a frame all the more powerful because it remains hidden – critics of 'Quality TV' repeat the problematic conceptual framing of quality by its proponents. By simplifying and then deploying an unequivocal notion of popular culture, television studies runs the risk of turning a necessary detour (the critique of elitist deployments of the term quality) into a *cul de sac*. The dead end nature of the quality debates distract from the much more intellectually productive and politically important task of engaging with contemporary forms of television programming. The latter provide an invaluable opportunity for reflecting on strategies of textual analyses, the politics of aesthetics, transformations in the conceptualisation of audiences, and wider shifts in production and distribution.

The bulk of this essay will investigate how the term 'popular' was approached intellectually, deployed by the television industry, and now re-deployed by television studies itself. Productively complicating the term in order to underline the political stakes of taking the popular seriously, the remainder of the essay will briefly address how contemporary changes in television around textuality, audiences, and production make a re-thinking of the reliance of television studies on the popular all the more urgent.

Re-constructing the 'popular'

In 2003 Mark Jancovich and James Lyons edited a volume with the title *Quality Popular Television*. In the years to follow, the conjunction of the terms 'quality' and 'popular' would seem antithetical, with the popular being constructed as a realm radically separated from the elitist connotations of the term quality. Fandom, engrossed spectatorship, and the institutional marketing of television shows (such as *Ellen*) provided the bulk of the focus in the book. Four years later an important collection of essays edited by Kim Akass and Janet McCabe was published under the title *Quality TV*; the word popular had dropped out, signalling a marked change in focus of the essays. The opening essay by Sarah Caldwell engaged with the conceptual and textual aspects of the programming labelled 'Quality TV' by the industry and by journalists. Her astute reading of the problems of generic classifications and evaluative judgements presciently broached the problem of quality, which I shall argue that critics have ignored in their invocations of the popular.

The shift of focus from one book to the other might suggest that the popular and articulations of the people had been replaced by a focus on textuality. However, this surface shift powerfully articulated a defense of popular culture and the people via the medium of textual analyses. Despite some excellent analyses of changing

strategies, on the whole, *Quality TV* took the term quality to task for either betraying or sidelining the interests of the people. Before looking at some of these defenses of the people it is necessary to return to one important formulation of both the importance of and the dangers attendant to such an invocation.

In 'Notes on deconstructing "the popular"', Stuart Hall argued '(I)n the study of popular culture, we should always start...with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it'.[6] The context for Hall's essay was the ongoing debate between socialist historians on how to approach the problematic concepts of class and the popular, given that capitalist social relations worked precisely through a complex dialectic of resistance to and incorporation of cultural forms and practices of the dominated. The popular, in other words, had a complex historical and spatial dimension. The boundaries of what constituted the popular were always shifting as a result of the ongoing dialectic of containment and resistance. If the adjective popular was to have any analytical purchase and political efficacy, it had to be historically sensitive to the constituency whose culture it was describing – i.e., 'the people'.

In other words, the people did not exist in some kind of social space untouched by the ongoing dialectic of capitalist culture. In fact, the political stakes of defending the people were predicated on a historically sensitive analysis of how specific fields of cultural practices were caught in complex power relations. Michel Foucault's felicitous formulation of power is relevant here. Rather than conceive of power in static and spatially immobile terms, he argued for thinking power as a 'moving substrate of force relations'.[7] This conjoining of antithetical terms ('moving' and 'substrate') captured the fluidity that was essential to how power operates through relations of force.[8] The relation between the people and the elite (or the dominant) is clearly one that implies force. However, it does not imply that force is able to stabilise separate domains of culture once and for all, let alone produce some unequivocal notion of the popular.

Hall addresses the historical specificity of this dialectic by arguing, '(T)here is a continuous struggle to explain the culture of the working people, laboring classes, and the poor. This struggle grew increasingly difficult after capital became the organizing principle of culture: first with agrarian capitalism and then industrial capitalism'.[9] Furthermore, 'Capital had a stake in the culture of the popular classes because the constitution of a whole new social order around capital required a more or less continuous, if intermittent, process of re-education, in the broadest sense'.[10] It is precisely for this reason that Hall insists, 'There is no separate, autonomous, "authentic" layer of working class culture to be found...Could we expect otherwise?' In other words, 'the culture of a dominated class...[cannot] remain[ed] untouched by the most powerful dominant ideology...?'.[11]

The culture of the people is thus both an incorporated product of and resource for resistance to capitalist relations of power. Furthermore, the cultural forms and

practices of the powerful themselves underwent transformations. Specific cultural forms such as literature, theatre, and music did not possess a fixed value but were themselves the site where the relations between the powerful and the dominated were blurred. If this double-movement, this fluidity and historical specificity of 'the popular', is not addressed, Hall presciently warned that, '(T)he study of popular culture keeps shifting between these two, quite unacceptable, poles: pure "autonomy" or total encapsulation'.[12]

The critics of 'Quality TV', I argue, ignore precisely such an understanding of the popular by assuming an independent, autonomous, and separate sphere of the people. This argument is predicated on placing fixed attributions of value to other cultural forms such as film, theatre, avant-garde art, and literature. By ranging 'Quality TV' within a social space and media culture altogether separated from the culture of the people, the discipline of television studies runs the risk of betraying its own inability to grasp the undisciplined trajectories through which the people are constituted and re-constitute themselves. To understand the problematic nature of this invocation of the people, I will stage an encounter between the discourse of quality deployed by the television industry itself and the critical discourse against 'Quality TV', ultimately to argue that both display important and disturbing parallels. Television studies and the convincing critique of the marketing of quality as a term of distinction by the industry become all the more ironic when the discipline starts repeating the very discourse it vilified.

Constituting 'the people'

Kirsten Marthe Lenz's essay on the marketing of 'Quality TV' by the industry in the 1980s analyses the alignment between the aesthetics of the text and the construction of the people as an ideal type in the context of institutional changes in television in the 1980s, as well as the ongoing shifts in gender and race politics in the United States. Her analysis engages with the dialectic of containment/resistance and provides a historiographical reflection on the popular through an analysis of the term 'quality'. It is through the stabilisation of a triple relationship between text/viewer /medium that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, as an example, deploys the discourse of quality. As I will argue below, it is this triple relationship that critics of 'Quality TV' themselves deploy in an un-critical way.

Lenz analyses the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show (MTMS)* and *All in the Family*, classified respectively in terms of quality and relevance. The quality of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* derives from specific aesthetic features which are also qualitative judgements: 'It represents *The Six O'Clock News* as an example of bad television in order to establish *MTMS* as good television'.[13] 'Quality TV' is nothing less than 'the emancipation of television'[14] from its inferiority to film and theatre through the representation of women's emancipation in the figure of Mary Tyler Moore. Qual-

ity connotes emancipation from television's feminised position vis-à-vis its bad elder sibling (old television) and high cultural forms.

Aesthetically, the self-referentiality, inter-textuality, and the high quality along with the saturated colors of the show produce a 'politics of the signifier' which is less interested in referential verisimilitude than in drawing attention to the artfully constructed image. The coupling of aesthetic innovation and self-referential medium critique is then aligned with a particular subject: the white, middle-class woman and her upward social mobility through professional proficiency. Text-audience/protagonist-medium are aligned in this discourse of quality television by the equation of a high cultural text – the middle-class audience/protagonist – transformed into a superior medium. *All in the Family*, on the other hand, is 'socially relevant' rather than a manifestation of quality. In particular, the mode of appearance of race politics so central to the series and its protagonist Archie Bunker is that of 'representational realism'[15] *sans* aesthetic innovation, self-referentiality, and reflexivity. Lower-class audiences and the show's protagonist, it is assumed, require a realist text easily comprehensible to a naive viewing public. As I argue below, critics of 'Quality TV' borrow this dubious marketing logic of the television industry in their defense of the people.

Keeping in mind Hall's conceptual rendering of the problematics of popular culture, the stabilisation between text/audience/medium is deeply ideological in a number of ways. One would have to assume that middle-class white women are inherently attuned to appreciating aesthetic innovation and textual complexity and would be dismissive of more straightforward realist aesthetic strategies. One would also have to assume that African-Americans and those on the lower rungs of the class ladder are ontologically incapable of comprehending, appreciating, or engaging with reflexivity, aesthetic experimentation, or textual complexity; in other words, no dialectic here, no processes of boundary-crossing between text and audience. Consequently, all transformations in a medium can be neatly characterised by the production of static categories ('quality' TV or 'realist' TV).

Newman and Levine argue '[S]ocial identity is produced through differences not only in economic or social circumstances but in aesthetic preferences. The system of taste judgements works by joining together groups in common preferences, but also by rejecting the tastes of groups of differing status'.[16] The argument that social identity is produced by differences is unimpeachable – but can the equation of tastes and status be justified, and by reference to a system of taste judgements? In the hybrid, cross-medial, and multi-textual landscape within which contemporary television (over)flows and in which 'wandering audiences' demand 'nomadic critics', is not the equation of taste with one group too simple a picture to characterise the reality of both television and its audiences in a cross-medial landscape? This assumption of an essence possessed by specific groups in the social order and the corresponding distribution of capacities smacks precisely of the 'police' which

Jacques Rancière argues 'is an order of bodies that defines the allocations of ways of doing, ways of being and ways of saying'.[17]

Disciplining 'the people'/condemning 'the elite'

Engagement by Evasion: In his witty and acerbic piece 'Lines in the Sand: Media Studies and the Neoliberal Academy', Hollis Griffin confesses that his plan to publish a piece on Omar, the gay African-American gangster from the television series *The Wire*, was consciously shelved the more aware he became of how this show smacks of 'quality television' which he claims 'has become something of a fetish object in the academy'. Regrettably then for this reader, an expectation of how race, class, and sexual orientation are dealt with in the show gave way to disappointment and irritation. What seemed like the occasion for an analysis of textual and identity politics in television quickly turned into a now-familiar screed against an 'affluent taste-stratified audience', which Griffin believes turns Omar into an 'avatar for fantasies of raced, classed fantasies of power and recklessness'. Griffin's piece is a symptom of the defensive stance of critics of quality television for a number of reasons. Let us leave aside the exorbitant claim that Omar's importance can simply be reduced to an alibi for bashing a suspect audience whose own attitudes and fantasies we are assumed to take for granted because Griffin thinks so. Once again the people and the popular emerge as the absent presence, which we are led to assume Griffin is defending against affluent, high-cultured audiences, including academics.

This argument is symptomatic because, like the television industry's discourse in the 1980s, it simply assumes some fixed relationship between text/audience/medium, i.e. *The Wire* = elitist audience = 'Quality TV'. Too many suspect assumptions run through Griffin's argument; this phantasmagorical audience he assumes to exist is simply conjured with no consideration. Could it be that non-white, non-elite audiences also watch and enjoy the series? Griffin's essay symptomises what I have called the *cul de sac* which critics of 'Quality TV' run into in their often patronising defense of the people. Griffin's essay ignores Omar the character and *The Wire* as a text vanishes. Chuck Kleinhans responded to Griffin's piece in the following manner:

> People are drawn to writing about *The Wire* because it is complex on many levels, addressing sex, gender, class, and race all at once and through a variety of characters who themselves change and develop. So: both addressing serious contemporary issues and showing character psychological and moral complexity, and with a fairly elegant visual and narrative style. As various people have pointed out, the serial TV drama can approach the complexity of the 19th century social novel: something that is pretty difficult for the feature length nar-

> rative drama film. This is exactly what academics are by training prepared to think and write about. In contrast, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot to say about most sitcoms or reality contest shows once you've pinned down the basic tropes and gimmicks.

Kleinhans' studied response addresses what is really at stake in the politics of cultural analysis: addressing pressing social issues and their changing modes of representation.

Engagement by Discrimination: In a detailed and substantive analysis of the series *Lost*, Michael Kackman attacks a creeping aestheticism in the discourse around 'Quality TV'. Parenthetically, it should be stated that Kackman frames his analysis by critiquing the aesthetic pretensions of Terry Gross, presenter of NPR's *Fresh Air.* I have yet to read an essay on 'Quality TV' written by an academic who bemoans television for having been trash and unworthy of analysis, only then to celebrate the appearance of 'Quality TV' with relief as justification for their work in 'the neoliberal academy' (Griffin's terminology). Almost all critiques of the discourse of 'Quality TV' are aimed at journalists and media pundits. In other words, some television studies practitioners continue to target a group which has in any case not been intellectually important in the development of the discipline. Kackman's detailed and substantive reading of the textual strategies of *Lost* is compelling, but it speaks to an interlocutor that is absent. I doubt Terry Gross needs to be convinced. Given the other television studies practitioners who are reading the essay, its value resides in the analysis of the series rather than any pronouncement on 'Quality TV'.

Kackman points out that what should be at stake in admiring the narrative and textual complexity of a well-crafted show is less some superficial aestheticism than recognition that these productions are 'broadly meaningful' because they broach cultural questions around the politics of representation. Until this point in his argument, Kackman convincingly deploys a rich knowledge of television history and analysis to frame and analyse the spurious claims of quality. Kackman shows that *Lost* relies on conventions of melodrama despite pretensions to novelty based on episodic complexity. To that end the term quality, if it is meant to demarcate itself from 'lowly forms' like melodrama, fails. Kackman is absolutely right.

However, by disputing the term 'Quality TV', by showing its existing lineage, a particular genre – melodrama – is linked to a particular kind of audience. As we know, this audience is characteristically described along the bottom half of the high/low cultural divide. In other words, a critique of 'Quality TV' is constructed by conjuring up an audience and a kind of programming limited to that audience. Kackman argues that *Lost* deploys the '"low" pathos' of melodrama, whatever its claims toward being 'Quality TV'. Indeed the show does work in this realm; though by reminding his readers about discourse of a gendered (and of course sexist) and classed distinction, Kackman reinstates a differentiation between the popular and

the elite rather than focusing on the meaningful implications of the narrative strategies in *Lost*. Precisely because his analysis of *Lost* is framed by a critique of 'Quality TV', the critical thrust of his argument seeks to prove that 'Quality TV' is nevertheless low and melodramatic. The constricting categories and focus of a clear-cut popular/elite distinction derails a convincing textual analysis.

In a typically substantive, trenchant, and historically-sensitive essay on HBO, Jane Feuer critiques the BBC's Mark Lawson and his championing of *Six Feet Under* as 'Quality TV'. Feuer's deployment of television's textual genealogy convincingly debunks Lawson's elitist pretensions. The text, however, once again becomes the condition of a possibility for implying specific kinds of audiences and making judgements about their capabilities. While Kackman argues that the low form of melodrama is present within the high cultural pretensions of *Lost*, Feuer shows that many so-called 'Quality TV' programmes are not televisual and incorporate other high-cultural genres within their structures. This argument is repeated by Newman and Levine, who see television being 'nudged closer to more established arts and cultural forms'.[18] The details of her historical argument are convincing but the *use* she puts these historical details to is predictable, once again reinstating the high/low cultural divide and by implication, at times explicitly, figuring the people problematically in the bargain.

Feuer relates the television series to two sources; first, 'European art cinema', which she argues *Six Feet Under* 'reeks of'.[19] The stench of what Feuer calls the 'non-televisual genre of European art cinema'[20] that invades the television show is proven by referring to episodes that reference Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* and Rodrigo Marquez's 'magical realist' rendering of an installment, mimicking his Nobel Prize-winning father's literature. To accept Feuer's argument then, one has to accept that film and literature must be seen as 'non-televisual' and that their incursions into television programming confer the gloss of quality. Given the long history of the mobility of specific art forms across different media (which Feuer herself convincingly shows), the question must be asked regarding whether this mobility of genres, their transformation in different formats and contexts, and the splintering and diversification of the audiences exposed to them, can justify continuing to rigidly cast them in terms like 'televisual' and 'non-televisual' genres. Is there something ontologically specific to art-house cinema itself, or the soap opera for that matter? They do have specific histories and modes of construction and address but does this necessitate making the ahistorical claim that both their historical transformations and their trans-medial mobility leave them untouched? By rigidly adjudicating between what is and what is not television or film (or theatre), the entire complex history of genre mobility and indeed audience mobility is denied, which is all the more harder to sustain as a convincing argument given the even greater contemporary acceleration in the mixing of genres, the mobility of audiences, and the circulation of texts.

Discussing the magical realist dimensions of *Sex Feet under*, Feuer comments, 'I would argue that it is a phrase that, to the American television viewing public, would still be considered a manifestation of high culture'.[21] Does the effectiveness of *Six Feet Under* rely on its audience knowing the term literary critics coined for Marquez's fiction, or the inter-textual references to Bergman? If they did know this term and these references, would 'the American television viewing public' simply tune out because only high culture audiences watch such programs? In a manner strikingly similar to the marketing of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Feuer's argument implies that realism and its attendant representational simplicity is the appropriate mode for addressing the average television viewer. Kirsten Lenz argues that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is marked by the 'politics of the signifier' – that is, textual and visual experimentation and innovation, which is how the show was packaged for its middle-class audience. Feuer implies that HBO deploys a similar strategy for *Six Feet Under*: high culture, literary experimentation which 'the American television viewing public' is incapable of understanding. These judgements which line up aesthetic strategies with very specific publics reproduces a suspect equation between text/audience and more problematically, distribute capacities for comprehension across fixed categories of the people and the elite, the high and the low.

On what basis can broad claims about the American public and its capability or incapacity be made? This strategy is one of argument by insinuation rather than evidence. Just as racial politics requires realism for the simple folk in *All in the Family* and consumerist feminism requires reflexivity and textual complexity, now critics of 'Quality TV' claim aesthetic complexity is high culture for rich television audiences plugged into cable; this while the average American viewer, impoverished by a limitation to network television, would not understand such high culture. There is something disturbing in being told what the people are capable of or not, particularly within television studies, which (as a discipline) was founded precisely on a critique of the kind of benevolent, patriarchal discourse regarding what people are capable of understanding.

Undisciplined culture and wandering audiences

Feuer's essay, as well as recent books such as *Legitimating Television*, convincingly underline that specific mediums like television are the channels through which a variety of different forms and genres of texts are produced and circulate. Newman and Levine also point out the history of mobility between the boundaries of what constituted high and low culture. It is now a commonplace that processes such as convergence, digitalisation, and commercialisation have transformed the media landscape and forms of textuality. Despite this acknowledgement of the mobility of textual forms, media platforms, and cultural discourses, when it comes to discussions around 'Quality TV' the discipline of television studies sees a recru-

descence of rigid distinctions between high and low, the popular and the elite. Clearly we are not witnessing some kind of random cultural melt-down. Genres, broadcasting institutions, and television programmers do not operate in a power vacuum. Commercial interests and distinctions of taste still factor; but *how* they factor and what consequences this altered media landscape has for our theorisation of popular culture is a different matter. A knee-jerk response that summons up disturbingly patronising and historically inaccurate characterisations of what Hall called 'pure autonomy' does not do justice to the politics of popular culture and culture in general.

As an example, HBO has rightly garnered criticism for their 'It's not TV, It's HBO' slogan. Feuer has convincingly shown that a multitude of such programming relies on genres with a long history within television. Her own argument also emphasises that the kind of texts produced by HBO straddle and often complicate what is television and what is not. If that is so (and I am convinced Feuer is right here), on what basis can one dismiss certain programmes simply because they include 'non-televisual' forms such as film? Is the existence of television studies as a discipline predicated on policing the boundaries of pure television (Gray and Lotz's 'singular medium') from its contaminated other? By implication, is our job as television analysts to protect the people from the stench of such alien intruders? It seems to me that the challenge for television studies is precisely in tackling the increasingly complex cross-fertilisation of media forms.

Avi Santo's analysis of HBO is instructive in this regard. His historical consideration of the genesis of programming on HBO encourages him to produce the term 'para-television'[22] rather than distinctions such as 'television' or 'not television'. Santo shows that HBO adopts a complex programming and marketing strategy that borrows across the board from different styles including soap opera, documentary, melodrama, literature, and theatre. Through tie-ins with network broadcasters like FOX, the programming on HBO is not just limited to high-end cable subscribers but also reaches non-cable viewers. Rather than dumping it into the trash can for its 'Quality TV' claims then, as an institution and a strategy, HBO exemplifies the kind of interdisciplinarity that television studies as a field needs to deal with rather than discard as pretentious programming for elites.

Santo's term para-television can be seen as an example of what Ackbar Abbas has called 'postculture'.[23] Abbas argues 'A postculture is culture in a situation where available models of culture no longer work and where culture is experienced as a field of instabilities'.[24] Postculture signifies the kind of complex cultural landscape we inhabit today. Abbas rightly insists that rather than 'assuming that cultural objects have a fixed value' one needs to 'keep in mind that *culture is what puts value at* stake' (emphasis added).[25] Put another way, politics puts at stake the manner in which the value of culture is allocated to specific groups. The previous section has illustrated how the instabilities of an undisciplined culture are responded

to by critics of 'Quality TV' by producing older and, more importantly, conceptually inaccurate and politically suspect arguments of the 'pure autonomy' of popular culture. Such arguments simply take for granted a fixed value for specific cultural objects and cannot acknowledge that cultural shifts are precisely what *produce* value in a postculture.

In his essay 'Wandering Audiences, Nomadic Critics', Larry Grossberg addressed the challenges for cultural studies in locating, fixing, and circumscribing audiences in media ethnography. In contemporary media culture, a neat lining up of specific demographic groups with the consumption of specific media products – and further, with specific intellectual capacities – is simply untenable. As Abbas argues, 'Dislocation affects not only objects, but subjects as well...subjects are dislocated not because they are alienated from culture [Feuer's 'magical realism' argument for example], but because they are positioned in a reversible, asymmetrical, mobile field of shifting identities'.[26] Keeping in mind Hall's nuanced understanding of the popular, Abbas' statement clearly helps to argue that the people have no fixed identity, particularly within a media landscape where textual forms and avenues of circulation are themselves being dislocated, recombined, and transformed.

A couple of examples displaying the complexities of audiences and their interaction with televisual texts might help flesh out why the critique of 'Quality TV' is wrong-headed. In her analysis of the cyberfans of *Six Feet Under*, Rhiannon Bury critiques the bombast with which critics celebrated the show in terms of quality. However, rather than reinstating the spurious distinctions between the people and the elite, her concrete analysis of the actual responses of cyberfans reveals a bewildering range of attitudes to the show which disobeys 'models of culture' based on rigid distinctions between different kinds of audiences. Bury argues:

> ...Fans, commonly perceived as mindless consumers of mass culture, make a clear distinction between quality popular texts such as *Six Feet Under* and the usual network "crap", as one participant bluntly put it. In doing so they mobilize a powerful discourse of modernist literary criticism...*At the same time*, they mobilize a populist discourse of personal response, emotional attachment and admiration associated with fandom (emphasis added).[27]

Bury feels that the responses to the show indicate 'the complexity of the meaning-making processes as well as the pleasures and displeasures afforded by quality texts'.[28] The fans of *Six Feet Under* are clearly invested in the show; though if we are to understand their identity as an audience (or 'subject' in Abbas' words), they are clearly dislocated. They are not just elitist snobs or mindless emotional addicts – they seem to be both, possibly even more. The dislocations produced by so-called 'Quality TV' engender complex and unclassifiable responses from audiences who

themselves become hard to categorise within the rigid protocols of high/low distinctions.

Inspector Morse qualifies as another 'quality' TV programme. Broadcast by British Public TV (BBC), its title protagonist a silver-haired opera lover in Oxford, the show would invite a peremptory dismissal by those in television studies keen on defending popular culture. If such critics were to be believed, one could quite easily assume that the series speaks only to elitist, white male middle-class audiences with intellectual predilections – thus the stench of hegemonic high culture. Clearly acknowledging this as a possible framing of the series, Lyn Thomas quite counter-intuitively analyses *the feminist perspectives of its female audience* in her essay 'In love with Inspector Morse: Feminist Subculture and Quality TV'. By deliberately steering away from an easy dismissal of the show, Thomas focuses instead on a seemingly unlikely group – women, some with clear feminist leanings – and delineates the complexity of their often ambivalent investment in the pleasures afforded by this 'Quality TV' text. Women viewers of the series are quick to point out the problematic gender politics in the series while also deriving pleasure from the fact that the same show critiques gender and class norms.

The value of Thomas' intervention lies precisely in focusing on this audience that is not expected to exist. Like Bury, Thomas avoids the easy temptation of 'pure autonomy or complete encapsulation' that Hall had warned invocations of the popular invite. The women viewers of *Inspector Morse* are neither deluded consumers of sexist ideology nor are they hyper-critical defenders of popular culture – if they were they would not be watching the show anyway, since a discourse of the people would imply they are constitutionally incapable of appreciating 'Quality TV'. Their marked ambivalence towards the show and its title character is an expression of both the pleasures and displeasures of a text that itself cannot be simplistically characterised as elite. Thomas both acknowledges the importance of this series for those we would be led to believe would not find it interesting and then reads their reactions from a feminist perspective that neither essentialises feminism nor the text. Her analysis clearly breaks open the spurious line between text type/audience type politics, upon which much of the critique of 'Quality TV' and almost all invocations of the people rely.

Aesthetics, audiences, politics[29]

Kackman's studied response to the 'Quality TV' discourse opened with a telling framing of the issues at hand. He argued that both television and the academic discipline that has developed around it have steadily gained legitimacy and accrued cultural capital over the past two decades. The medium (once roundly dismissed as a guilty pleasure) is now regularly discussed in aesthetic terms previously reserved for the relatively more legitimate popular art form of cinema. Auteurism and for-

malist narrative analyses are resurgent, finding their preferred object in the mature complexity of the contemporary serialised prime-time drama.

To analyse television in aesthetic terms, he argues, is to partake in a game for the accrual of cultural capital. Close attention to the ways in which a text is constructed does indeed have an institutional and disciplinary history that is tied to fields such as literary studies and film studies, disciplines whose legitimacy is now unquestioned. However, to claim that an analysis of aesthetic strategies is *only* to engage in plays for cultural capital is simply wrong – it is wrong because it denies a fundamental concern around the politics of representation. Thus, while Kackman in his analysis of *Lost* himself deploys the tools of close textual analysis, he feels obliged to construct an opposition rather than a *relation* between the aesthetic and the social. To focus on how a text is put together, he argues, 'is, essentially, a cultural operation, not an aesthetic one'. It is precisely this distinction between the aesthetic and the social which has fuelled much of the animosity of critics of 'Quality TV'. In his lecture 'The Uses of Cultural Theory', Raymond Williams energetically argued that if cultural theory had any political significance it was because it avoided both the temptations of insulated art-specific formalism and the simplistic sociology of culture. A close attention to precisely how a text is formed and how political and social issues are rendered in material form was crucial to how Williams saw cultural theory contributing to an analysis of the social formation. Systems of representation, in other words, derived their social and political power precisely because of the ways in which the ideological struggle over social meaning was refracted, produced, and reflected in the modes of representation within culture.

To analyse the aesthetics of a text is thus hardly elitist, apolitical, or simply a strategy for amassing capital; it is political because it analyses systems of representation and their relationship to the politics of a social formation. Decades of feminist, post-colonial, queer, and other intellectual work has gone into taking the aesthetics of representational strategies seriously as one of the modes through which social power is both maintained and resisted. Television studies as a discipline has itself produced powerful analyses within these fields, yet when it comes to 'Quality TV', aesthetic analysis becomes either out of bounds (Griffin) or problematic (Feuer, Kackman).

While Kackman is clearly signalling a *disciplinary* context within which television studies arose, his argument cannot deny the *intellectual* importance of taking aesthetics seriously. Recent work in the field has been developing this aspect of television, such as Jeremy Butler's *Television Style* and Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose's edited volume *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*. Questions of style, narrative construction, seriality, color, and sound are not peripheral; neither are they forms of currency to be exchanged on the open market. They are

the material resources through which ideological discourses are constructed, reframed, and resisted.

Critics of 'Quality TV' base their hostility on this reduced understanding of aesthetics. There is a political element to aesthetics, a fundamental insight that has guided critical intellectual work for decades if not centuries, which is simply ignored. Charlotte Brunsdon already broached this vexed relation in her essay 'Television: Aesthetics and Audiences', which Sarah Caldwell continued in her exploration of the quandaries of aesthetics and evaluative judgment. Textual analysis, it seems, must have a proper object, i.e. reality television, soap operas, dating shows, and the like. 'Quality TV' is the new harmful object for the defenders of the people.

A historical example of the text/spectator relation might help clarify what is at stake.[30] In his essay 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', Thomas Elsaesser argued that directors like Minnelli and Sirk 'encouraged a conscious use of *style as meaning*, which is a mark of what I consider to be the very condition of a modernist sensibility working in popular culture'.[31] Family melodrama calls attention to the materiality of signification in film that disrupts any easy reading emanating from the surface of the visual. The meaning of the text does not emerge unambiguously. The family melodrama sought to convert the spectatorial experience from one of ready-made comprehension to active interrogation by borrowing from a certain kind of modernism. In Abbas' terms this would be an example of a 'dislocated' object, a genre that disobeys any constricting rules of generic law. Elsaesser drew attention to the stylistic rendering of a narrative and its relation to audiences. There is a relation between the aesthetics of the text and the politics of the social formation. Close attention to stylistic features such as music and color produce a perplexed response, or what Marcia Landy calls the 'What happened?' question, thus 'destabilize[sing] normative responses to the world that conventional forms of cinematic representation produce'.[32] This aesthetic rendering was the specific mode through which constricting sexist, classist, and often racist norms were figured in order to characterise the social immobility of the characters in the plot and of individuals of the 1950s in the United States.

In series such as *Mad Men*, it is precisely this artificially stilted *style* of representation – saturated colors, elliptical dialogue, slow motion, the manipulation of sound or its disappearance – that easy derails attribution of meaning to the text. Such elliptical narrativity and visualisation, for example, provokes thought rather than provides immediate meaning. In her analysis of gender politics in *Mad Men* (an egregious example of 'Quality TV' for its critics), Mimi White addresses this play between textual opacity and formal experimentation on the one hand, and what Lenz calls 'representative realism' on the other. Far from exemplifying aestheticism, White's analysis is an example of how aesthetic and cultural questions are inextricably linked to the politics of gender representation. When understood in terms of formal play and experimentation, visual texts are not only about *who*

gets represented (women, homosexuals, immigrants, etc.) but also about *how* a medium and its stylistic strategies complicate the process through which we ascribe meaning – that is, complicate the fixation of images as being 'about' a particular category of person.

The above examples provide simply *one* strategy of how an aesthetic analysis is political. I am not implying that opacity and the indetermination of meaning is the only way that a text is counter-hegemonic. What is more important is to consider the relation between the aesthetic and the political. In the context of discussions of popular culture, the text/spectator/medium relation is problematised if one acknowledges the complexities of textual construction. We have seen that critics of 'Quality TV' assume a simple relation between text type and audience type. Bury and Thomas provide two examples of how audience responses to texts are far more complicated than the simple dichotomy of high/low culture allows. The above example of aesthetic analysis intensifies this disturbance of a text/audience relationship. If the meaning of a televisual image is to produce interrogation and provoke thought then how would it be possible to neatly align the meaning of a text to a particular kind of audience?[33] One easy counter-argument would be, 'The people are incapable of being provoked to think, they prefer to be spoon-fed clear meanings'. As pointed out earlier, when critics of 'Quality TV' repeat the discourse of the television industry they align texts, viewers, and the medium in ways which are highly problematic. The essentialist presumptions of such discourses (realism for the average viewer, 'mimetic realism' [Harper] for blacks, modernism for the elite) are inaccurate, patronising, and often intolerant.

Conclusion

While the task of taking despised cultural forms and practices seriously is unquestionably important, the rapid institutionalisation of television studies and the high profile of some of its practitioners makes a vanguardist stance in defense of the people problematic. Conceptually, by returning to the slipperiness of the term popular culture and the complex dialectic of incorporation and resistance within which this term needs to be understood, my argument questions how the popular is deployed in a facile manner by critics of 'Quality TV'.

Empirically, the discipline of television studies, to the extent it limits itself to defending popular culture against 'Quality TV', exhibits an inability to acknowledge that the 'proper object' of its investigation has changed and that television is 'a medium in transition'. The mobility of aesthetic strategies across cultural forms and institutions invite serious academic study of what Santo calls 'para-television'. Gary Edgerton's *Mad Men*, for example, ignores the dead end repetition of the 'Quality TV' discourse, the essays instead exploring the implications of the institutional, textual, and ideological issues for television studies. Convergence, Digi-

tal TV, transformations in network television, the relationship between television, film, and DVDs – all of these developments are symptoms of a changing media landscape which is garnering increased attention.

In terms of technology, broadcasting strategies, textual experimentation and more, the study of television promises exciting and innovative possibilities. It is for this reason that the term quality needs to be shunned. Not because it is accurate or convincing (it never was), but because critiques of quality produce a conceptually inaccurate and politically disturbing invocation of the people. Rather than continuing to summon suspect and ideologically loaded distinctions as well as the attendant patronising attitude toward the people, television studies instead is perfectly situated to seriously explore the dislocations and transformations of postculture.

Author

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Notes

1 A version of this essay was delivered as a paper at the conference *Cultural Studies and the Popular* held at the American University, Paris in 2011. The essay constituted part of a larger lecture delivered at Northwestern University in 2011 at the Summer Institute in Critical Theory titled 'Jacques Rancière: Politics and Media Aesthetics'. My interlocutors on both occasions have enriched my argument. I am especially grateful to my colleagues Markus Stauff and Judith Keilbach. This essay is in part a response to their critical and nuanced investment in popular culture and the discipline of television studies.
2 Gray and Lotz 2012, p. 3.
3 Throughout the essay the term 'Quality TV' will appear in quotes. The burden of my argument is predicated on the assumption that this term is an ideological one that does not refer to any actually existing media form.
4 Newman and Levine 2011, p. 7.
5 *Legitimating Television*, while providing excellent analyses of technological shifts brought about by convergence, remains bound to repeating a populist discourse against these changes.
6 Hall 1981, p. 228.
7 Foucault 1990, p. 93.
8 For a nuanced reading of Foucault's formulation of power see Spivak 1993, pp. 25-52.
9 Hall 1981, p. 227.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p. 229.
12 Ibid., p. 232.
13 Lenz 2000, pp. 45-93.
14 Ibid., p. 49.
15 Ibid.. p. 62.
16 Newman and Levine 2011, p. 7.
17 Rancière 1999, p. 29.
18 Newman and Levine 2011, p. 7.
19 Feuer 2007, p. 145.
20 Ibid., p. 150.
21 Ibid., p. 153.
22 Santo 2008, p. 19.
23 Abbas 1996, p. 289.
24 Ibid., p. 295.
25 Ibid., p. 293.

26 Ibid., p. 294.
27 Bury 2008, p. 191.
28 Ibid.
29 This section is a brief engagement with the aesthetics/politics relation. An essay-length treatment through an analysis of the show *Mad Men* is forthcoming.
30 My argument here draws on Dasgupta and Staat 2008, pp. 43-59.
31 Ibid., p. 54.
32 Landy 2003, p. 123.
33 A recent answer to this question may be found in Rancière 2011. Roberto Rossellini's television films are the objects of Rancière's analysis of the philosopher's body in relation to the people. See also the English translation of the prologue for the book in this issue of *NECSUS*.