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Appreciation and Evaluative Criticism: Making the Case for Television Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. Taking as my reflective starting point the notion that television does more than statically mirror prevailing contemporary cultural traditions, this paper explores the conceptual framework of televisual aesthetics as a means to appreciate and evaluate shifting aesthetic sensibilities in television. I will start by briefly reflecting on the various aspects, comprehensions and interpretations of television. The next section will discuss how the field of television aesthetics approaches aesthetic issues and judgment and provides a broad calculus for aesthetic appreciation. The following section will focus on the question of quality as it is comprehended within the field. The succeeding section develops the idea of what constitutes ‘extraordinary’ television. The final section reflects on the notion of value in television aesthetics before concluding with a metaphysical overview.

1. Introduction

Television has drastically changed since it was invented in 1927 by 21-year-old inventor Philo Taylor Farnsworth of Beaver, Utah (Schatzkin, 2002). Of course, this is a gross simplification as Farnsworth merely encased together the work of two other inventors, Russian Boris Rosing’s cathode ray tube

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and Englishman A.A. Campbell-Swinton's mechanical scanning system, to capture moving images using a beam of electrons (basically, a primitive camera). The first transmitted image was a line.

Since this first rudimentary broadcast (if we can call it that), the television ecosystem has become unimaginably complex, simultaneously representing the neoliberal commercial imperative of advertisers, fulfilling the career ambitions of creatives on the production side, acting as a communicative medium that edifies as well as entertains, mediating our free time, and ideologically shaping viewer opinion about various issues (Bignell, 2012), to name a few. Yet, given that watching television also fundamentally effects an "experience of visual mobility, of contrast of angle, of variation of focus, which is often very beautiful" (Williams, 2003: 75-76), it is surprising that conventional television studies still shy away from aesthetic questions and judgment, methodologically omitting them in favour of representational, theoretical, socio-political or ideological concerns (Morley, 2003). I propose adopting an aesthetic perspective that "acknowledges the roles of evaluation and aesthetic judgment to frame our research and drive our field" (Mittell, 2009: 122) and which therefore complements and extends existing television scholarship.

2. Television Aesthetics

As a subfield of television studies, television aesthetics tends towards close

stylistic analysis and an interest in philosophical aesthetics as applied to television (Cardwell, 2006). Tapping into both strands – stylistic analysis as a methodology and an interest in what aesthetics can bring to the evaluation of television programmes – allows us to explore how our sensorial relationship with televisual spaces depends on their affective power as aesthetic objects. I therefore argue for an approach to appreciating and evaluating television derived from Kant’s moments of “aesthetic judgment” (2000: §1-22). My aim is to contribute to the refinement of the ‘weak understanding of what close textual analysis means’ (Cardwell, 2006: 72) for television.

It entails an appreciation of televisual forms and formats, celebrating the specificity of individual programmes as self-contained units with their own stylistic intentions, creative aspirations and technical achievements that govern “the ways in which [their] formal devices work to create expressive meaning” (Sikov, 2010). This does not discount the significance of genre as a means of organising affective expectations or cinematographic conventions. On the contrary, these are used as reflective starting points; because you care and are invested, what you like is important to you, and these can sustain one’s interest. In particular, I suggest using a kind of stylistic calculus that (1) takes an inductive approach to “television as an art form” (Nannicelli, 2017), (2) isolates the existential factors of television’s “basic image elements (light and shadows, colour, two- and three-dimensional space, time and motion, and sound) and (3) shows how they

interact with one another! (Zettl, 1998: 86) in relation to our specific embodied subjectivity.

Distinct from the subjectivism of Merleau-Ponty (2012), this phenomenological mode is rooted in a relativistic ontology that sees the nature of reality as collaborative and dependent on the experiential interactions of humans with the external world and accessible through actively evolving constructs of language and consciousness (Crotty 2003, Clough 2000). It is opposed to the positivist epistemological paradigm that assumes reality is entirely objective and that it can only be properly observed and measured without bias using standardised instruments. Instead, this approach aims to evaluate personal excavations from ‘the field sites’ of quality television programmes by engaging in a detailed examination of their phenomenal affect through the lens of embodied subjective experience. Though not a truth claim, an evaluative criticism purports “to see a series differently, providing a glimpse into one viewer’s aesthetic experience and inviting readers to try on such vicarious reading positions for themselves” (Mittell, 2015: 207).

3. A Question of Quality

Establishing the criteria for quality television is complicated because there is no consensus among television scholars. In its most general meaning, the term ‘quality’ refers to the degree of superiority that an object or body

possesses. According to the *Random House English Dictionary*, something ‘has’ quality if it is marked by “a concentrated expenditure of involvement, concern, or commitment.” In television aesthetics, quality is “understood as a discursive category used to elevate certain programs over others” (Mittell, 2015: 210). In this definition, quality is a claim of excellence in/of content and formal style. Though not entirely without controversy, most television scholars would likely concur with this formulation.²

In turning to the subjective experience, I am, in fact, returning to the original Greek roots of aesthetics which regarded it as ‘sensitive, perceptive,’ that is, perceived by the senses or the mind, which Kant sees as ‘the treatment of the conditions of sensuous perception.’ (2000: §13) This *aisthesis* is his central concern since he argues that the “subjective condition of all judgements is our very ability to judge...that requires that there be a harmony between faculties” (§35) is aesthetic pleasure. In focusing on the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure as a unique configuration of our sensible and cognitive faculties in harmonious relation with television works, I argue that it is possible to make aesthetic judgements about specific television programmes precisely because they are good, and moreover, that we enjoy – feel pleasure – watching them, and that we can judge them in terms of their aesthetic affectivity. I contend that it is the density of aesthetic cues that occasions judgements of quality.

² Debate continues in their interpretation of the term, divided between three perspectives or categories: generic, discursive and anti-evaluative.

This orientation is “the only way we make sense of the world” (Mittell, 2015: 217) in relation to others. In positioning television works as works of art, or at least having the potential to be, it opens television programmes to an array of aesthetic possibilities. Of course, coupling the formal materiality of programmes with a claim of excellence suggests the set of features be judged according to the ‘subjective factors’ of “personal taste, income, and time” (Brunsdon, 1990: 74) which actuate judgment and give rise to the relationship between generic classification and the function of choice. Like any good work of art, judgments of quality are necessarily contextual and contingent on time and place.

Moreover, the spatiotemporal properties of artworks (e.g. the elements of design: point, line, shape, form, space, colour, texture) correspond with the elements of televisual style (e.g. cinematography, act(or/ing) choices, direction, sound, POV, editing, mise en scène, plot (narrative trajectory), characterisation, theme, etc.) via the aesthetic principles of design: balance, proportion, perspective, emphasis, movement, pattern, repetition, rhythm, variety, harmony, unity). While it is beyond the scope of this article (and my lifetime) to list all the potential regional, cultural, temporal permutations of quality, I posit that the features which constitute quality in American television programmes – high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, careful (or innovative) camerawork and editing, original music, fragmentation in the form of abstraction or defamiliarisation, an intense level of audience engagement characterized by

a complex narrative structure, intricate themes, use of specialised language, and fast-paced delivery – reliably contribute to the pleasure that people obtain from the work (Cardwell, 2007).

4. Extraordinary Television

Mittell focuses on evaluating the excessive narrative transformations in quality television forms and develops a concept of “complexity as criterion of value” (2013: 46). He identifies “two distinct modes of narrative complexity” (2013: 52): vast “centrifugal complexity,” where the force of the narrative expands outward with the addition of characters and settings create “complex webs of interconnectivity,” and dense “centripetal complexity,” where narrative turns inward around central characters with rich ‘layers of backstory’ and internal psychological dynamism. Brett Mills notes that the development of digital technology, changing viewing practices, and the innovations of cinematographers have helped to transform television framing from close/medium to more medium/long shots to establish a “density of visual texture” (2013: 58). ‘Cinematic’ style frequently uses a single-camera setup, changes the visual field horizontally to a 16.9 ratio, increases the clarity of sound and image, and even manipulates it with special effects, though the subtler cinematographic practices may still be assessed using Caldwell’s “videographic” modes of the painterly, the plastic, the transparent and the intermedia (1995: 139).

Mills equates this cinematic style with extraordinary television because it constitutes itself as an opposition to ‘regular’ television, arguing it is rendered in high production costs and consumer expenditure since “the growth of high-definition television equates technology with expense and quality” (2013: 60).

Applying Mittell’s definition of “forensic fandom” (2006: 32) as a mode of viewing that invites viewers to dig deeper and probe into the very materiality of quality television programmes’ stylistic signatures to show how our subjective sensitivities can be used as both as justification and legitimate foundation for making empirical evaluations about television and determining its value by carefully attend to the formal execution or techniques that enable its visual, sonic or otherwise striking stylistic and artistic particularities, and which contribute to its specific extraordinary aesthetic qualities (e.g. feeling and tone, or beauty). This suggests that a judgement of extraordinariness is a derived value that itself takes many forms – crucial here is the “subjective experience of an appreciative viewer who feels something towards it’ and that that affect is fundamentally a *positive* one’ (Cardwell, 2013: 32, emphasis author’s own).

Moreover, I link extraordinary television to the experience of the sublime. The sublime as excess of quality features is accomplished emotively with exceptionally fast-paced language, diegetically synchronous maudlin music, novel material integration of extant comedic references and “already existing and validated art forms” (Brunsdon, 1997: 113) and a

powerfully affective biomediation of the face (sometimes pejoratively referred to as melodramatic acting). Sublimity also manifests in the manipulation of genre insofar as it registers my preference for feelings of apprehension, suspense, confusion, tension, shock, surprise, heightened anticipation, anxiety, hope, arousal and thrilling sensations (excitement and pleasure) structurally embedded in thrillers.³ This extraordinary television instantiates Kant's "dynamically sublime," which represents how the negative feeling of fear can be transformed into pleasure. That is, because the aesthetic medial distance is ontologically afforded by television, we can take pleasure in overcoming that fear because "it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended" (§28, p. 144). Thus, sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind and, by extension, our perceptive prowess.

5. Appreciating Value in Television

While stylistic analysis tends towards the evaluative, aesthetic appreciation, on the other hand, entails the philosophical reflection on the ideas, concepts, connections and orientations that emerge in the course of the analysis. This

³ I hope that is it clear at this point that the subjective positionality of a viewer determines which genre and affective states they value. It is up to the viewer to work out which television programmes succeed in drawing their attention, stimulating their imagination and sustaining their interest.

extension, according to Nannicelli, is the apprehension of value wherein the determination of creative “agency is central” (2017: 17) to making objective evaluative judgments about subjective observations (2016). He asserts that being sensitive to the details of a programme (and episodes within) not only permits the work to be individuated from other arts, artworks and artistic practices, but also demands that any account of television aesthetics “respect the material conditions” (2017: 22) of the television production. Despite George Dickie’s stance that “no special kind of aesthetic appreciation exists” (1971: 105) that ‘transforms’ an ordinary work into a work of art, much more recent research in cognitive and psychological aesthetics is beginning to show that

aesthetic appreciation is grounded in the relationship between the amount of information of stimuli and people’s capacity to process this information. This relationship results in information load, which in turn creates emotional responses to stimuli. As an individual learns to master information in a domain (e.g., photography), the degree of information load which corresponds to aesthetic appreciation, increases (Axelsson, 2011: 4).

This suggests a fruitful way forward is by looking at the different ways individual viewers process particular stimuli and see hidden relations to assess the value of their evaluative claims about their subjective televisual aesthetic experiences. Indeed, since “the extent to which experiential aspects

may be understood depends in part on our knowing the medium's technological capabilities” (Degge, 1985: 94), this approach strives to bridge the gap between theoretical academic models and the actuality of production practices via philosophical aesthetics. Of course, determining what one values in television happens when the critical viewer experientially mediates a “final blurring of boundaries” (Peacock: 2010: 108) between the television (as medium and work and art) and their own evaluative criticism.

6. Conclusion

This “attunement or synchronizing of body with [televisual] technology” (Blackman, 2012: 22) is at the heart of television aesthetics. Insofar as televisual style is affecting, one of its central qualities lies in its capacity to move people through the arousal and fulfilment of formal expectations – getting them to *feel through* the evocative power of their resonant associations. Oddly, by self-consciously engaging with our own biases and values, we can contribute to both a broader and more nuanced understanding of what it means to derive pleasure from television.

Akin to Kant’s modal concept of necessity in which a unique arrangement in the presentation of an art object instigates complex feelings of pleasure (Kant, 2000) that enable us to shift our apperception of the television works from the quotidian to the aesthetic by acknowledging both

their instrumentality as mediums of entertainment and as aesthetic conduits of affect, this disposition is a psycho-subjective state where the unity of form and content correspond with percept and feeling to produce a double apprehension, simultaneously experienced as a socially-situated physical detachment from the aesthetic object and positively as an investment of psychic and emotional energy in the televisual moment (Caldwell 1995, Geraghty 2003, Mittell 2006, Cardwell 2013). This goes beyond a mere description or simple synopsis of what is happening onscreen to a careful and close observation of the textural features that isolates what we perceive are exemplary aesthetic cues and expressions, describes them, and finally posits the ways in which their various affects configure our perception and subsequent affects. Instead, it proceeds by valuing television as art and thereafter developing a carefully tailored analytic approach that combines close stylistic analysis with the philosophical tools that address the specific issues and feelings the programme raises.

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