

# Television aesthetics, media and cultural studies, and the contested realm of the social

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Abstract: This article seeks to intervene in the ‘television aesthetics’ versus ‘media and cultural studies’ debate. It argues that aesthetic evaluation does not necessarily rely upon bad textual others or result in canon construction. It engages with Bourdieu in order to demonstrate that his account of cultural capital and distinction is more nuanced than is suggested by its uptake by scholars who want to use it to argue against evaluative activity. Finally, it argues that television aesthetics cannot be divorced from ‘media and cultural studies’ to the extent that some of its practitioners appear to want.

Keywords: Bourdieu, evaluative criticism, higher education, television aesthetics.

Because those who take part in a game agree on the stakes, at least sufficiently to fight for them, one may choose to emphasize either the complicities which unite them in hostility or the hostilities which separate them in complicity. (Bourdieu 1984: 315)

When advocates of television aesthetics seek to describe the nature of their approach, they will often distinguish it from other approaches to the study of television that form part of ‘media and cultural studies’. For example, Sarah Cardwell emphasises that her broad preliminary definition of television aesthetics makes ‘deliberate use of vocabulary drawn from philosophical aesthetics, rather than media or cultural studies’ (2006: 73). In the opening pages of the introduction to the anthology *Television Aesthetics and Style*, editors Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock contrast the approach that they are recommending for attention with other approaches which possess a ‘lack of attention to style’, in which ‘theory is mapped onto the television “text” to decipher its so-called coded meanings’, and which favour ‘contextual readings’ and ‘socio-cultural readings’ rather than ‘focus[ing] in on the text itself’ (2013: 1-3). It does not seem an imposition to gather all of these features under the heading of the disciplinary territory mentioned in direct connection to the ‘lack of

attention to style' on the introduction's first page: 'Media and Cultural Studies' (ibid: 1).

This differentiating impulse of those working within television aesthetics, a routine manoeuvre of a new mode of enquiry within a discipline or field, becomes even more understandable when one notes that certain television scholars more aligned (than television aestheticians) with the traditions of media and cultural studies effectively argue that their disciplines' insights pre-emptively forbid or negate the activities that television aestheticians undertake. Cardwell seems to me entirely correct when she suggests that to date:

40 the wariest responses to this nascent field [television aesthetics] come from within television studies itself – especially from those scholars working comfortably within the traditions of media and cultural studies. [...] In a subject area that, generally speaking, exhibits an easy-going, all-embracing pluralism, television aesthetics triggers exceptionally strong objections from its dissenters. (2013: 24)

Recent examples of these strong objections can be found in Matt Hills's article 'Television Aesthetics: A Pre-structuralist Danger' (2011) and Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine's monograph *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (2012). On the first page of the former, Hills argues that the 'pre-structuralist' strand of 50 television aesthetics that he identifies 'not only neglect[s] issues of cultural power linked to canon-building, but in fact wilfully dematerialise[s] what amount to symbolic relations of inequality embedded in canonicity' (2011: 99). In the chapter of the latter which critically explores the 'legitimation' of television within academic television studies, Newman and Levine acknowledge that '[i]t is understandable that scholars might engage in comparative analyses of TV aesthetics', but immediately add a sharp warning: 'Yet, in so doing, we

should remember that, as Henry Jenkins has written, “Aesthetics is a discourse of power, claimed as the exclusive property of dominant classes as a club to use against the ‘debased’ tastes and preferences of the lower orders” (2012: 166). Such objections are not new. They are what Charlotte Brunsdon is reacting to in her exhortation in the seminal ‘Problems with quality’ that ‘We do not defeat the social power which presents certain critical judgements as natural and inevitable by refusing to make critical judgements’ (1990: 73). Their persistence (and, some would add, the insistence with which they are presented) is what lies behind Jason Jacobs’s rather testy response to Hills: ‘nobody has to pay any attention to canons’ (2006: 27) (which Hills’s subsequent reference to wilful dematerialisations of symbolic power quoted above is a response to in turn).

Scholars informed by the disciplines of media and cultural studies, including Hills and Newman and Levine, seek to demonstrate that aesthetic analyses of television always (and perhaps also only) constitute displaced demonstrations of the cultural capital and distinction of their authors and the class fractions to which they belong, and are therefore not the defensible species of discourse those authors think they are, and are moreover a departure from the political and social progressiveness of other work within television studies that demands moral censure. Television aestheticians, on the other hand, often eschew the vocabulary, approaches and areas of attention of media and cultural studies –which tend to emphasise first and foremost the social dimensions of the production and (especially) the reception of media texts – and lay claim to precision, delicacy, and attention to textual construction and detail as correctives to the blunt instruments, pigeonholing and blind spots they see in their opponents. When these divisions and hostilities are at their sharpest, it can seem that for adherents of media and cultural studies, the all-pervasiveness of the social leaves no room for the aesthetic (other than as a disguised product of relationships of social

80 power), whilst the polemics of television aesthetics, reacting against and seeking to correct this perspective, focus on the aesthetic in a way that screens out the social.

The issues and debates surrounding the relationship between television aesthetics, the practice of evaluation, and what I will provisionally term ‘the realm of the social’ are what I seek to explore in this article. In such territory, the formidable intellectual work of Pierre Bourdieu looms especially large and cannot be ignored, but what I hope to demonstrate is that this work should not be allowed, as it so often is, to act as an intellectual roadblock. My discussion is structured around three questions: 1. Does aesthetic evaluation necessarily rely upon bad textual others and does it necessarily result in canon construction? 2. Are there other ways in which aesthetic evaluation might perpetuate or be complicit with social  
90 inequality? 3. Can television aesthetics be divorced from media and cultural studies to the degree that some of the practitioners of the former sometimes appear to want? I am not straightforwardly aligned with one side of this debate or the other, as shall become clear, and at the end of my survey of the terrain as it currently exists, I offer some recommendations about how television aesthetics might proceed.

**Does aesthetic evaluation necessarily rely upon bad textual others and does it necessarily result in canon construction?**

100 In the (to date) four articles that comprise the exchange between Matt Hills and Jason Jacobs (Jacobs 2001; Hills 2005; Jacobs 2006; Hills 2011), one passage around which disagreement has unfolded is the following, from Jacobs’s initial article:

Clearly, it is not appropriate to apply criteria of authenticity, creativity and innovation in the same way to *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (ITV, 1998-) and *ER* (NBC, 1994-).

The terms of judgment will vary according to what is under consideration: we will not consider a game show or a news programme in the same way as a serial drama even if they share, on the face of it, dramatic force, narrative dynamics and creativity. (2001: 430)

110 I will not rehearse in its entirety the debate that this passage has given rise to, but will instead begin by jumping forwards to Jacobs's assertion, which forms part of the debate, that 'Criticism that wishes to understand and account for excellence does not require a bad "other"' (2006: 30). Hills, responding to this assertion, claims that:

for [Jacobs's] position to make sense [...] he requires that 'excellence' (that is an identification of genre-specific 'goodness' or sub-generic 'fitness for purpose' or 'innovation' or 'creativity') be identifiable without criteria! [...] Jacobs [...] seems [...] to want to wish away structuralism and its focus on meaning as relational rather than transcendent and therefore in the text itself.

120 For, of course, if excellence was based on any criteria whatsoever, then its recognition and identification could emerge only through a series of binaries, being set against 'bad' Others such as 'ordinary' TV (Bonner 2003), 'non-innovative' TV, 'unremarkable' TV and so on. And this would remain the case even if we followed Jacobs's helpful reminder that 'TV' is too big a category, and that specific genres and types of texts might be a better mid-range option for analysis. (2011: 112)

It is not clear to me that either of Jacobs's statements above commit him to the notion that evaluation can proceed without criteria (although it ought to be mentioned that elsewhere in his argument Jacobs *does* register disagreement with Geraghty's suggestion [2003: 32] that it

130 would be desirable and possible to develop a ‘clear evaluative method’ for television criticism, because he believes that ‘criticism should evolve from our engagement with ... texts’ and that we should not ‘theoris[e] ahead of experience’ [2006: 24]). Rather, his point is that ‘to compare different types of television according to the same aesthetic criteria would be inappropriate – not because of any question of value, but because it would do enormous damage to the achievements of game shows or news programmes or serial dramas to treat them as if they were the same thing’ (2006: 30). This statement echoes Brunsdon’s point that ‘the generic diversity of television must be taken into account in discussions of quality’ (1990: 77). (The rest of Brunsdon’s sentence can be read as an anticipation of Hills’s claim that ascriptions of excellence denigrate other types of television: ‘...but not in ways which  
140 makes quality “genre specific”, creating certain “sink” or “trash” genres of which demands are not made’ [ibid].) It also echoes Geraghty’s suggestion that, because of the ‘extraordinary range of programmes on television’ (2003: 29), aesthetic judgments about television ought to proceed ‘within categories’ (ibid: 32) so that (and here Geraghty echoes Jacobs) ‘the criteria used for drama are not the same as those for quiz shows or sport’ (ibid).

It is true that proposing criteria for judgment gives rise to a framework within which more and less successful instances of the same type of object or practice can be identified – but the ‘bad’, or ‘less good’, objects would not be bad *others* so much as bad or less good instances of *the same thing*. As Mittell (2013: 47) argues, ‘we must think beyond a reductive binary logic that insists that value is a zero-sum game where lauding any single criterion  
150 inherently derides its opposite.’ For Hills, it seems, ‘ordinary’, ‘non-innovative’ and/or ‘unremarkable’ television *must exist* as entities, real or imagined, against which television valued for being extraordinary, innovative and/or remarkable must, even if only implicitly, be being valued. But again: a charge of a lack of innovation, for example, only really sticks, and matters, if what is discerned is a *failure* of innovation – something an object has striven for,

or, as an instance of a particular kind of thing, ought to have striven for, but not achieved – as opposed to its mere absence. Jacobs’s invocation of news programming is instructive here: innovation is by no means necessarily unwelcome in the genre, but its presence is neither necessary nor sufficient for us to evaluate a token of that type positively; other qualities matter more. Likewise, ‘ordinary television’ can function as a descriptive term (as it  
160 predominantly does in the account of Bonner, 2003) rather than an evaluative one, and as with the related category of ‘lifestyle’ television, there can exist (as Brunsdon, 2004 has persuasively argued) better and worse instances of its programmes, but we will not necessarily get at these evaluative differences using the vocabulary or criteria of ordinariness versus extra-ordinariness or innovation versus familiarity or reliability, and we will certainly not get at them by adding a consideration of a completely different genre to the equation.

A further point of debate between Hills and Jacobs concerns the status and functioning of canons. Hills attributes to Jacobs (at one remove: via Matthew Arnold and F R Leavis, with whom he aligns Jacobs) the position that ‘canons are good, canons are “real”’ (Hills 2011: 110). However, whilst Jacobs offers a critique of the editorial abstention in the  
170 anthology *Fifty Key Television Programmes* (Creeber 2004) from offering ‘artistic or creative excellence as a criterion [of selection]’ (Jacobs 2006: 27), one does not find, here or elsewhere in Jacobs’s writing, a sustained defence of canons as a way of organising television studies curricula or research agendas. What one certainly does find is sustained argumentation in favour of granting the *activity* of aesthetic evaluation a more significant place in television studies than it currently possesses. In trying to drive a wedge between the activities of judgment and evaluation on the one hand and the potential outcome of an agreed-upon group of excellent television programmes on the other, it is useful to first turn briefly to Mittell’s work.

After presenting a comparative evaluative analysis in which he celebrates the  
180 contrasting qualities and achievements of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13) and *The Wire*  
(HBO, 2002-8), Mittell suggests:

Making an evaluative claim is not necessarily designed to construct a canon to exclude  
other possibilities, but rather to posit a contingent perspective on why something  
matters, both to me and presumably to other viewers who similarly embrace it. It is  
neither a statement of fact nor a proof, but an invitation to dialogue and debate. (2013:  
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Mittell's work is driven and shaped explicitly by his high regard for most of the programmes  
190 he discusses at length in his account of 'complex TV.' I mention this as a way of introducing  
a further reason why, for Mittell and others like him who seek to articulate the qualities and  
achievements of television programmes they value, the desired result is not the inscription of  
those programmes' names on a list ratifying their pre-eminence in such a way that all that  
remains is for everyone to assent to the completed act of judgment and its validity, having  
been saved the bother of considering and experiencing the programmes for themselves. The  
desired result is, rather, that the critical attention and evaluative claims offered will aid others  
in their own critical analyses and evaluative judgments, thus potentially deepening these  
engagements (the fact that such critical accounts are amenable to being used as a way of  
sharpening counterarguments which advance a negative evaluation of the same text would no  
200 doubt be welcomed by Mittell and others). This attention to textual detail, which  
characterises the best acts of evaluative criticism, can also be used to reflect upon why the  
activities of criticism on the one hand and the warnings that aesthetic evaluation is always

and necessarily an expression of taste determined by social status and/or that judgments about meaning or value are hopelessly contingent on the other often seem to fail to meet.

In his book *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, as a way of challenging the tendency of those sceptical of the viability of evaluative criticism to ‘cover too much ground too simply’ (Booth 1988: 101), Wayne C. Booth offers a brief experiment, based upon an often-repeated class exercise of his. He presents W. B. Yeats’s poem *After Long Silence* alongside various alternative versions of it – some written by Booth for illustrative purposes, 210 others earlier drafts by Yeats himself – and invites appraisals of the relative success and value of the different versions. For example, Booth first replaces the poem’s first two lines (‘Speech after long silence; it is right,/All other lovers being estranged or dead’) with ‘Speech after long silence; it is appropriate,/All other lovers being estranged or passed to the other side’. In the face of unanimous agreement that the poem as it stands is superior to the suggested changes, Booth reflects upon the implications of this:

By changing our questions from ‘Is this poem absolutely good (or good for us)?’ and ‘Is evaluation objective?’ to ‘Are these lines better than those, *in this poem?*’ we have found an astonishing consensus on a value judgment about a literary question – 220 astonishing, that is, if all value judgments are merely ‘personal’ or ‘subjective.’ (Booth 1988: 103, original italics)

We are in part here retreading the ground we covered earlier when considering Jacobs’s suggestion that ‘Criticism that wishes to understand and account for excellence does not require a bad “other”’ (2006: 30). The only bad ‘others’ in Booth’s experiment are alternative versions of the same poem. It is possible to do a great deal of critical and evaluative work by assessing the poem’s construction, and the quality of the relationships that

it creates between its parts. This type of evaluative procedure possesses its literary studies locus classicus within the school of 'New Criticism'; within the fields of film and television studies it has also informed the work of, for example, what we might call the *Movie* tradition of mise-en-scène criticism, as well as the very different formalist poetics of David Bordwell, upon which Mittell draws extensively in his analysis of complex TV in general and the 'intrinsic norms' of particular programmes. The kinds of accounts that the fledgling sub-field of television aesthetics has thus far offered are often characterised by this kind of parsing of 'internal construction' or 'intrinsic norms'; surely such an approach eludes the necessity of evaluation based on aesthetic binaries, which are always also social binaries, and thus avoids being implicated in the troubling idea that the 'deepest function of taste distinction is to reproduce the dominant social structure, to perpetuate unequal divisions by class and other social groupings' (Newman and Levine 2012: 6)?

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**Are there other ways in which aesthetic evaluation might perpetuate or be complicit with social inequality?**

When one confronts this question, the primary source that demands to be engaged with is Pierre Bourdieu's monumental *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Bourdieu 1984). Hills cites Bourdieu and *Distinction* during his debate with Jacobs (Hills 2011: 110-2). Newman and Levine use as an epigraph to the opening chapter of their *Legitimizing Television* Bourdieu's pithy aphorism (in translation) 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (2012: 1). During the course of his hailing of the category of 'invisible television', Brett Mills uses a quote which is from another of Bourdieu's works, but would not be out of place in *Distinction*: 'Pierre Bourdieu empirically demonstrated how "art

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and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a function of legitimating social differences” (Mills 2010: 11).

260 Within television studies, it has been argued in a range of ways that evaluation is not (or at least, need not be) disempowering of others, or socially prejudicial. One idea that recurs with slight variations is the idea that the process of making judgments is liberating and/or emancipatory (the first word pointing the direction of the more liberal inflection of the argument, and the second in the more socialist one). This is what Brunsdon (1990: 87) detects in Raymond Williams’s writing on television (‘There is here no fear that to exercise judgement, to make discriminations, is elitist. Engaging critically with presentations, issues and stories is seen as emancipator.’) and is a thread one can detect in Brunsdon’s own work. Cardwell (2006: 75) has written that ‘television aesthetics opens up to the television audience valuable skills of discrimination and evaluation that are ultimately empowering. To avoid critical judgement, to deny it to our students, is to deny them an essential critical education’. The same line of thought underpins Jacobs’s invocation of Frank Furedi and the notion of ‘anti-elitist elitism’ towards the end of his response to Hills when he argues that ‘The flattery of the ordinary, while it purports to be ever so democratic and inclusive is actually patronising and reactionary: it rests on the assumption that the audience is incapable of change, cultivation or enlightenment’ (2006: 31). Thinking about how these acts of evaluative criticism might generate or feed (other) activities, Brunsdon (1990: 67) argues that there is a pressing political need for academics to commit themselves to such evaluations and to intervene, to avoid a situation in which ‘only the most conservative ideas about quality are circulating, and will therefore win the day’; and Geraghty (2003: 41) argues that ‘[o]ur students are future makers ... of television’. Robin Nelson (1997: 209-34), adopting a different approach, tries to excavate a core of ‘common [human] meaningfulness’ (ibid: 228) from the individualistic, relativistic and nihilistic impulses of contemporary Western society

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and thought, and uses this as a basis for a model for evaluating television output which  
'embraces diversity without sacrificing a sense of community. Ideally it would encourage  
both sympathy with and respect for others, and contribute to the restoration of a mutuality  
280 based in our common being in the world' (ibid: 232). The lines of argument offered above are  
vital contributions to the debate within television studies concerning the interrelation of the  
aesthetic and the social, but because their engagements with Bourdieu's work are brief at  
best, thinkers committed to Bourdieu's position regarding this interrelation may require a  
more thorough engagement with that work before considering it worthwhile to revisit their  
commitments and position.

In fact, it is not only those who do not embrace his position that do not engage closely  
on the page with Bourdieu: whatever the depth of their off-the-page engagements with him,  
in the sources cited above, Hills, Mills and Newman and Levine invoke Bourdieu rather than  
meaningfully engaging with him. The result is that one might well be left with the sense that  
290 Bourdieu's account of 'distinction' is more static and binary than it is: there are those with  
high degrees of cultural capital (in this case, television scholars) who, through exercising  
their taste, oppress those without it (in this case, other kinds of television viewer).  
Bourdieu's account certainly relies upon the structuralist credo that there exist binaries that  
shape perception and become ranked pairs awaiting deployment, consciously or  
unconsciously, in social hierarchies and related acts of distinction; however, and thankfully,  
his account of the class fractions he surveys is much more dynamic and fine-grained, and in  
frequent methodological asides, he is at pains to distance his account from any 'one-  
dimensional image of social space' (ibid: 119). Bourdieu does not present the agents and  
structures he examines as eternally fixed, but rather pays attention (especially in the first  
300 chapter of the book's second part) to the dynamic positions and trajectories of individuals and  
class fractions over time. Within an overall picture of class habituses as coherent sets of

dispositions and preferences, Bourdieu acknowledges complexities and partial exceptions – noting that, for example, ‘at equivalent levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin in the practice- and preference-explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture’ (ibid: 5). One is more likely to acquire a taste for Strindberg than to lose a taste for fish and chips. (The question of where along the spectrum from cultural illegitimacy to legitimacy television lies is an interesting one. Newman and Levine’s account is dedicated to exploring and revealing the ways in which television is currently undergoing a process of ‘legitimation’, and although, as may now be becoming  
310 clear, I disagree with several of their assumptions and conclusions, I find this central element of their argument convincing.) The aspects of Bourdieu’s account that I want to focus on principally here are the multiple roles he presents education as playing in social distinction and reproduction, and the subdivisions he pursues between the fractions of what he terms ‘the dominant class’.

Bourdieu distinguishes between ‘cultural inheritance’ and ‘educational capital’ (ibid: 84, for example) – that is, between the acquisition of culture outside and inside of formal education, respectively – and explores how the possession of different permutations of these two assets might affect a person’s ability to negotiate social space and appropriate ‘legitimate culture’:

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The Parisian or even provincial primary teacher, who can beat the small employer, the provincial doctor or the Parisian antique-dealer in the tests of pure knowledge, is likely to appear incomparably inferior to them in all the situations which demand self-assurance or flair, or even the bluff which can cover lacunae, rather than the prudence, discretion and awareness of limits that are associated with scholastic acquisition. One can confuse Bernard Buffet with Jean Dubuffet and yet be quite capable of hiding one’s

ignorance under the commonplaces of celebration or the knowing silence of a pout, a nod or an inspired pose. (84)

330 Bourdieu puts it most succinctly when he suggests that in order to inhabit the highest levels of cultural distinction ‘the important thing is to know without ever having learnt’ (ibid: 330).

There is much – legitimate – fuel here for those who would want to point to the baseless snobbery and pretense that often occur within social interaction and the distinctions that are enacted there. Within the realm of higher education, it would be difficult, I think, to dispute the idea that some students benefit from their cultural inheritance in the seminar room, and perhaps even on the assessment page – from, to borrow Bourdieu’s terms, the self-assurance, flair, bluffing and commonplaces of celebration that form part of a particular class habitus. However, and thankfully, that is not all there is to it. In Bourdieu’s account, the core of the habitus of educators and intellectuals – that is, categories into which we would

340 probably wish to put those who teach and research television studies within higher education – is not the posturing and snobbery of the kind indicated above, but a deeper disposition of a different sort.

Bourdieu asserts that ‘the dominant aesthetic – of which the work of art and the aesthetic disposition are the most complete embodiments – proposes the combination of *ease and asceticism*, i.e., self-imposed austerity, restraint, reserve, which are affirmed in that absolute manifestation of excellence, relaxation in tension’ (1984: 172, italics added).

Bourdieu begins by contrasting this with ‘the dominated condition’ (and therefore, we might say, with Bourdieu, the dominated aesthetic) of the dominated class, ‘characterized, from the point of view of the dominant, by the combination of forced poverty and unjustified laxity’

350 (ibid). However, he also takes care to distinguish *between* the fractions of the ‘dominant class’:

Whereas the dominant fractions of the dominant class (the ‘bourgeoisie’) demand of art a high degree of denial of the social world and incline towards a hedonistic aesthetic of ease and facility, symbolized by boulevard theatre or Impressionist painting, the *dominated fractions* (the ‘intellectuals’ and ‘artists’) have affinities with the ascetic aspect of aesthetics and are inclined to support all artistic revolutions conducted in the name of purity and purification, refusal of ostentation and the bourgeois taste for ornament; and the dispositions towards the social world which they owe to their status as poor relations incline them to welcome a pessimistic representation of the social world. (Ibid, italics added)

What Bourdieu refers to at times as *the* aesthetic disposition is, essentially, the Kantian view of the aesthetic; and *Distinction*, as its full title acknowledges, is implicitly in dialogue with Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* from start to finish. However, Bourdieu postpones until his postscript a ‘direct confrontation’ (488) with Kant. In one crucial passage of this postscript, Bourdieu observes:

Pure pleasure – ascetic, empty pleasure which implies the renunciation of pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure – is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence, and the work of art a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man. [Endnote omitted.] What is at stake in aesthetic discourse, and in the attempted imposition of a definition of the genuinely human, is nothing less than the *monopoly of humanity*. (493, original italics)

This is indeed troubling. In his article on ‘invisible television’, one of Mills’s answers to his question ‘Why Does It Matter if Some Television is Invisible?’ (10) is presented under the heading ‘Rejecting the Mass’ (12), and in that subsection he cites John Carey’s *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1800-1939* (1992), and that book’s account of how ‘intellectuals actively engaged in “denying that the masses were real people”’ (Mills 2010: 12). Kant’s false universalisation, Bourdieu argues, constitutes a failure to recognise the socio-economic underpinnings of the aesthetic he presents and endorses (Bourdieu 1984: 495).

Even if we are wary – as we certainly should be – of equating ease and asceticism with the supremely human, and therefore, implicitly or explicitly, dehumanising those who do not enjoy such dispositions, it remains worth considering what such dispositions might have to recommend them. ‘Ease is so universally approved’, Bourdieu convincingly suggests, ‘because it represents the most visible assertion of freedom from the constraints which dominate ordinary people’ (ibid: 252). Asceticism, as we have seen, is less universal, and Bourdieu’s incisive turns of phrase do a good job of pinpointing the smallness and narrowness that are part of such a habitus: ‘With his petty cares and petty needs, the petit bourgeois is indeed a bourgeois “writ small”. [...] [S]trict and sober, discreet and severe, in his dress, his speech, his gestures and his whole bearing, he always lacks something in stature, breadth, substance, largesse’ (339). Opposed on the one side to the expansiveness of the bourgeoisie, the asceticism of the dominated fraction of the dominant class is similarly distinct from what Richard Hoggart called ‘the full rich life’ (1957: 132-66) of working class culture (Bourdieu’s dominated class; although they are a smaller part of his book than Hoggart’s, and although they are observed from what is palpably a greater distance, *Distinction*’s discussions of working-class habituses and lifestyles sometimes sound strikingly similar to Hoggart’s). Certainly, the disposition towards and sources of pleasure of

the dominated fractions of the dominant class constitute a libidinal economy that entails a high degree of repression, and is therefore susceptible to Freudian laughter. However, whilst these sources of and routes to pleasure can be seen to be a *contingent* product of a set of socio-economic conditions, this does not make them *arbitrary* (any more or less so than the other habituses to which they stand in contrast) or unreal.

Many features of the Kantian aesthetic are hard to separate from the features of education, perhaps especially higher education. This, perhaps, is the level at which Bourdieu's argument about the deeply determinant nature of habitus is difficult to avoid  
410 entirely or in good conscience. It is not as simple as television scholars choosing television programmes whose *representations* flatter or replicate their worldviews or social fraction. What is much harder to avoid is the fact that the discourse of higher education, almost by its very nature, demands that its participants embrace norms of distancing and debating that impose a rather Kantian way of seeing (ways of seeing which certain kinds of television programmes will reward more deeply and thoroughly than others – a conclusion which will be unattractive to many television scholars, but which Cardwell [2013] has begun to do the work of acknowledging and defending). We are in Foucauldian territory here, arguing that the normalizing forces of higher education do not allow all possible things that might be said about the objects it studies to be said. It is hard to think of a way out of this situation, given  
420 that these same norms are the ones that underpin the social world of democracy in general: the ability of individuals to meet and exchange ideas in a manner aimed to promote the speaking rights and the safety of all parties.

A feature of Kantian ethics is the idea that an action or quality can only be truly good if one is able to argue that it is desirable that everyone perform that action or possess that quality (this is a paraphrase of Kant's Formula of Universal Law). Clearly, this returns us to the dangerous territory of universalism (and its shadowy accompaniment, dehumanisation).

However, we might also note, in this context, that it is the opposite of ‘distinction’!

Intellectuals and, especially, educators do not (or perhaps we should say not only) jealously guard the culture they have inherited and the ways of seeing they have acquired; they (also) seek to pass it on to others – and not just others like themselves. (Bourdieu would argue that this still constitutes a way of perpetuating definitions of and ways of approaching ‘legitimate’ culture, to the benefit of those doing the perpetuating, and their descendents – and that in the very act of performing the ‘passing on’, they shape social subjects like themselves. It is hard to refute such an argument, but one might reasonably suggest that it is not the whole story.) One word for this is ‘cultivation’, a word that Jacobs pauses upon towards the end of the latest article of his in his debate with Hills: ‘The sense of cultivating the public imagination – not imposing, not leading – but *cultivating* seems to me to be central to what it is to be a scholar and an academic’ (2006: 31). I shall return to the matter of ‘cultivation’ in the conclusion, after I have addressed the last of the three questions posed at the beginning of this article.

**Can television aesthetics be divorced from media and cultural studies to the degree that some of its practitioners sometimes appear to want?**

In this section I would like to apply a little critical pressure to a particular passage of criticism during which two prominent scholars advance certain claims regarding how television aesthetics stands in relation to media and cultural studies. My aim is to explore the relationship between the approaches and assumptions of these two ostensibly opposed areas, before making (at the end of this section and in the conclusion) my own suggestions about how the relationship might best (that is, most accurately and most advantageously) be conceived.

Jacobs and Peacock, in the introduction to their anthology *Television Aesthetics and Style*, after praising the ‘critical comportment’ of certain of the anthology’s contributors and favourably contrasting such comportment with ‘the overconfidence of television and cultural studies in the certainty that often accompanies its translation of the content of television into neatly defined socio-cultural objects’, offer a discussion of a moment from *Mad Men* (implicitly, as a brief example of this comportment), taken from the fifth season episode ‘Mystery Date’. I will quote the discussion in its entirety:

460       Joan [...] tells her husband Greg, an army surgeon who is voluntarily returning to Vietnam, to leave. ‘If I walk out that door, that’s it’, he shouts at her; ‘That’s it’, she replies, effectively ending their marriage. After he slams the door, her mother (who has been living with her and helping with their baby) comes back into the kitchen holding a coffee pot; ‘It’s over’, Joan tells her. The pot is put down: she discards it in one motion, and sits in silence with her daughter, as if in that instance it becomes a quaint irrelevance, once an emblem of servitude now just a raw, gross object. That gesture, the holding with two hands – one on the handle the other protected by a cloth under it, taking its weight in two ways before abandoning it, is marvellous, eloquent. But it is difficult to translate such eloquence into words, hard to be expressive in the face of

470       such expressivity; indeed we might feel haunted by the sheer apparent *obviousness* of what it must be, had we the words to express it. Of course, we might want to say, in that gesture in this arrangement of objects there is something to be said about the domestic labour of women in history, at this time, something that demands a feminist response, or some version or variation of that. But in its discoursing on our recent history, one that seems only an eye-blink from the present, yet sufficiently distant to allow us to be distant too, *Mad Men* is both a temptation to and a warning against this

kind of critical hubris. It is doubtful that wanting to tie feminist thinking to this moment could sufficiently capture its expressive *punctum*. Not at least, until there had been the time – for the show and for us – to allow it to settle into the sedimented geology of the cultural imagination. (2013: 13, original italics)

Before commenting on this passage, I want to make it clear that I do not view it as representative or symptomatic of Jacobs and Peacock's introduction as a whole.

Nevertheless, it is part of their account, and the part where the proposed divorce of television aesthetics and cultural studies is pushed to its furthest extreme – one which I find untenable.

It is not clear to me *why* 'it is doubtful that wanting to tie feminist thinking to this moment could sufficiently capture its expressive *punctum*', or why a feminist response to this moment would necessarily constitute an act of critical hubris. In fact, by describing the coffee pot as an 'emblem of servitude', have Jacobs and Peacock not already drawn implicitly upon feminist thinking? The lassitude and vagueness of the sentence that begins 'Of course, we might want to say...' fits the writers' rhetorical purposes in wanting to position feminism as a way of seeing that lacks the fine-grainedness to capture expressive punctums, but it is hardly an adequate picture of feminism's possibilities. Jacobs and Peacock are making a point of calling attention to a moment which they think would be screened out by an approach in search of 'neatly defined socio-cultural objects' such as oppressed housewives. They are probably right about this but what is at stake is not a distinction between aesthetics and feminism. One might go even further, and observe that the focus on, and the attempt to reclaim, the texture of lived experience (eschewing large, abstract categories), and on the difficulty of finding the words to capture and account for it, echoes these words – 'As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and

Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she [each American suburban housewife] was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: “Is this all?” – taken from the first chapter (entitled ‘The Problem that Has No Name’) of a significant *Mad Men* intertext: the seminal text of second wave feminism, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963: 13).

Surely what is at stake is not what is discussed but how it is discussed: it is a question of priorities and purposes, not of making a priori declarations about what things might be included in, or excluded from, our aesthetically-oriented conversations. To analyse a text for its representations of particular dimensions of socio-cultural identity and to treat it as an aesthetic object are different activities, but not necessarily mutually exclusive ones. One is on firmer ground when one is being prescriptive and exclusionary in one’s aims, one’s principal reasons for writing; it is often much harder to justify the exclusion of the consideration of particular issues or topics in pursuit of those aims, even if some of those issues and topic might irksomely lead one back (at least part of the way) to places one was seeking, in the framing of one’s aims, to get (and stay) away from. As Cardwell notes, “aesthetic vision” [...] entails a heightened alertness to the formal, sensory and “design” qualities of the artwork under scrutiny’ (2013: 32), but as she also notes, this does not entail ‘the exclusion of concerns “beyond” the formal qualities of the text’ (ibid: 36). One extremely valuable and vital thread in the discussion of television aesthetics and evaluation is that accounts and activity in this area must be informed by (and seek to do justice to) the diversity (in the intentions of the programmes’ makers, and the ‘contracts’ implicitly struck with viewers) of television output. The specific instance of this general point that it seems to me to be most pressing to acknowledge at this juncture is that the overwhelming majority of television *represents the social world*. Pure form, such as one finds in non-representational art and sometimes in music, if it features at all in television programmes, will almost always be a minority component. Attending aesthetically to the formal, sensory and design qualities

of an artwork will in large part entail attending to how representational content has been given significant form. This is not a bad description of the creative work of the television artist, and I would feel confident in assuming that most key creative television personnel do not view the representational content as an unfortunate imposition upon or corruption of their pursuit of pure form, but an irreducible component of what they are trying to achieve, and of what makes their work valuable. If aesthetic analysis also involves an attempt to do justice to the specific ways in which an artwork has been constructed and is trying to ‘speak’ to us, then again, we find ourselves in the realm of the social. When this happens, judgments that bear upon the social world will rarely be absent for long. When Jacobs and Peacock describe the business with the coffee pot as eloquent, they are highlighting a moment of experience, which, as their earlier reference to servitude indicates, is at least in part a reference to social experience. The excellent, deep traditions of, say, philosophical aesthetics and filmic mise-en-scène criticism will furnish us with specialist vocabularies and ways of seeing that will help us to apprehend and discuss matters of aesthetic conventions, artistic intention, irony, the relation of parts to wholes, and matters to do with the unassumingly elegant and significant staging of action for the camera – vocabularies and ways of seeing that other traditions are less well-equipped to provide. However, if we also want to talk about the achievements represented by *Mad Men*’s historical imagination (as Jacobs and Peacock do), or the satisfying complexity of *The Wire*’s depiction of the social determinants of individual and institutional behaviour (as Mittell does), both of which are at least in part aesthetic achievements, then the vocabularies and ways of seeing of, for starters, history and sociology, respectively, should not be eschewed as lifeless frameworks that would constitute impositions on these artworks, and come between us and our aesthetic experiences, but as tools that might fine tune our ability to do justice to the aesthetic achievements of these works.

Some on the television aesthetics ‘side’ of the debate may feel that I have ceded too much ground to ‘the social’ here, and I acknowledge that it is extremely difficult to strike the right balance and tone when discussing these matters. A few disclaimers seem to be in order, then. First, and once again: the crucial matter seems to me to be *the points at* and *the ways in which* ‘the social’ (re-)enters aesthetically-oriented accounts. A television drama might be fully in line with a particular viewer’s convictions regarding a particular political topic, but that would not necessarily lead to a positive *aesthetic* evaluation. On the other hand, a drama which endorsed the opposite of a viewer’s deeply-held convictions would, whatever artistry that viewer conceded, be tainted aesthetically for that viewer. In the first hypothetical

560 instance, the perceived deficiency and demerit might be triteness; in the second, it would be dishonesty. Both evaluations carry a charge that is simultaneously aesthetic, social, and moral. I would also want to define ‘the social’ as an area of experience that exceeds matters of power and (identity) politics. Robin Nelson, as we have seen briefly above, seeks to theorise abstract principles underpinning our shared humanity and common being-in-the-world, and to use this as a basis for evaluation. The other key example I would invoke is Paddy Scannell, who focuses less upon abstract principles than upon the ways in which television (and broadcasting more generally) is imbricated with areas of human life that precede or otherwise sidestep the political. Scannell is not concerned with aesthetics or evaluation, but his work can be used to inform these areas of concern. I am willing to

570 concede the possibility that there *may* be areas of concern within television aesthetics where ‘the social’ can be held at bay more fully. Cardwell and Nanicelli’s pursuit of ontological and metacritical questions derived from the philosophy of aesthetics seem to me the best candidates for this category. However, I am convinced that as soon as a writer declares, implicitly or explicitly, ‘this television text has value, an irreducible part of which is aesthetic

value, because...’, then a consideration of matters that fall within the realm of ‘the social’ is unavoidable if a full case for that value is going to be presented.

## Conclusion

580 In this article, I have tried to unpick what I see as some pressing problems on both sides of the ‘media and cultural studies versus television aesthetics’ debate. In this debate, the tremendous intellectual work of Pierre Bourdieu has unfortunately been reduced to the status of a roadblock. He is invoked, but often not meaningfully engaged with by those who want to argue that ‘art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’ (Bourdieu 1984: xxx). He is usually simply ignored by television aestheticians. However, if we think Bourdieu through, and try to think with him, the results are rewarding, and sometimes surprising. Bourdieu does not subscribe to the Manichean view of social power and space that his position is often and unfortunately reduced to in thumbnail sketches of his research on culture and taste. Nor is he

590 easily categorisable as a populist; *Distinction* includes some stern asides against populism, including Bourdieu’s description of it as ‘inverted ethnocentrism’ (1984: 375). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu convincingly displaces the Kantian aesthetic from its position as *the universal* aesthetic, but his account is not committed to exposing its arbitrariness or its oppressiveness. Rather, Bourdieu’s thorough research and sociological methods reveal the deep logic of the habitus of the class fraction most fully aligned with the Kantian aesthetic of ease and asceticism: the dominated fraction of the dominant class. As this label indicates, Bourdieu takes care to identify this aesthetic as residing in the social space not only ‘above’ the dominated class (which means it may indeed operate as a source of repression, or aspiration) but also below the dominant fraction of the dominant class (which means that it is

600 a reaction to subordination, or restriction); and as Bourdieu also notes, this in-between position can help to explain the sympathy of those possessing this habitus for aesthetic revolutions and negative portrayals of the social world. And although it does not appear to be one of Bourdieu's direct aims, one can also glean from *Distinction*, thanks to his gifts of observation and his frequent deployment of novelistic passages of sympathy-in-detachment, a sense of what is particularly (*not* universally, *not* exclusively) valuable about the values of this particular class fraction and world view. These observations may not overturn the objections that have been raised against television scholars (many of whom, and perhaps an increasing number given certain trends in employment status within higher education, surely qualify as members of the dominated fraction of the dominant class) bringing their native  
610 habitus to bear upon television programmes, but I hope that they do at least make such activity begin to appear less pernicious and more defensible.

My essential point 'against' the attempted bracketing of 'media and cultural studies' by some television aestheticians is that the status of most television programming as some form of representation of the social world means that one cannot usefully remain in the realm of pure form for very long. In Film Studies, the scholar who surely represents the most monumental and sustained effort to afford the social and the cultural only a limited and prescribed place in his method is David Bordwell. However we evaluate the success of the model offered by Bordwell, it seems clear that it is not currently the prevailing direction of travel in television aesthetics. In the introduction to *Television Aesthetics and Style*, Jacobs  
620 and Peacock correctly identify Jeremy Butler as the closest equivalent to Bordwell's approach within television studies (2013: 10), only to quickly proceed to align themselves more closely with an approach that blends attention to 'style, interpretation and evaluation' (ibid). However, as soon as one enters such terrain, and as soon as one finds oneself, in the course of one's stylistic and evaluative interpretation, having to make, as part of that activity,

claims about a programme's historical or cultural imagination, and its achievements in those realms, it becomes much more difficult to defend an exclusion of non-aesthetically-oriented methods.

It is ill-founded to suggest that claims for value cannot or should not be made because they fall short of the universal. Contingent value is still value. And although it may be hard  
630 to entirely uncouple evaluation and social distinctions, oppression is not the sole outcome of the former activity. It also seems difficult to reasonably maintain that television aesthetics can flourish without making the insights and traditions of media and cultural studies *one part* of its intellectual armoury. A method blending aesthetic and cultural orientations – for which we have numerous valuable precedents in the work of, for example, Richard Hoggart, Robin Wood, and especially, Raymond Williams – whilst it can hardly be recommended as the only game in town, ought not to be seen as outmoded. Audience research, fan studies, popular aesthetics, explorations of political economy and questions of technology are all crucial parts of contemporary television studies. There remains room, however, for television scholars to engage closely with the television programmes that *they* deem valuable, and to attempt to  
640 explicate this value (which will be both aesthetic and cultural) and to cultivate a sense of it in others. This is one of the roles that I see television aesthetics as being particularly well-placed to fulfil.

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