

Reconsidering Formal Analysis

Not Just for Formalists: The Broad Utility of Formal Analysis in Television Scholarship

Danny Baldwin, University of Southern California

While Matt Zoller Seitz's piece trumpeting the virtues of formal analysis is addressed at film and television critics, its message is even better suited to scholars. Critics often disregard the formal elements of a work for a variety of practical reasons listed by Seitz—publication space, audience sensibilities, and in the case of many self-proclaimed “critics” on the Internet, sheer ignorance—that scholars cannot claim as excuses. Furthermore, whereas the critic is free to arbitrarily create his/her own rubric of how a work should be judged, scholars should aim for a more rigorous, encompassing set of standards for analysis. Thus, a quality piece of television scholarship must at least perfunctorily confront the formal elements of the show(s) being analyzed, as these often tell the scholar as much about what the show is saying and doing as narrative and character.

I am not attempting to convert scholars into formalists, and I am sympathetic to the reasons why *formalism* has become a dirty word in certain scholarly quarters. I am just as averse to analyzing form in a vacuum as anyone. Rather, I simply mean to argue, in a similar vein as Seitz, that whatever one's area of television scholarship—representational, political, theoretically- or rhetorically-framed, contemporary or historical—one's analysis of a show is always strengthened by the consideration of the show's formal elements. These elements complement and frame the more readily apparent aspects of narrative and character. This is not only true for so-called Quality TV shows, where the production value is superlative and the thought put into the technical components is evident. Examining the formal elements of shows belonging to “lower” genres like Reality TV can often be just as illuminating for scholars, as I demonstrate below.

Consider how an analysis of gender representation on ABC's reality dating show *The Bachelor* is complicated by a consideration of the show's formal elements. On a narrative level, *The Bachelor* is irredeemably misogynistic—twenty-five women vie to convince one hunk that they're the best “wife material”—and indeed, virtually all existing scholarship describes the show as sexist. But certain formal contradictions reveal the possibility that the show is actually intended to function as a progressive critique of the mass audiences who respond favorably to its offensive surface narrative. Take what happens near the end of each “rose ceremony,” the concluding ritual of every episode in which the Bachelor gives roses to those women he intends to keep in the competition. When he only has one rose left to hand out, the flower is shown in an extreme close-up (a formal choice). Despite this visual confirmation, host Chris Harrison then steps into the frame to announce, “Ladies, this is the final rose tonight.” This custom suggests that the show's producers imagine the average viewer of the show as either *so stupid* that they can't count a single flower in close-up, or *so dependent* on the superficial drama of the show (heightened by editing and music selections) that they crave for this basic fact

to be proclaimed twice, visually *and* aurally. The possibility that the producers are actively parodying their primary audience, critiquing this audience's enjoyment of the misogynistic surface narrative, emerges. Without the close-up of the flower, however, this possibility evaporates. Thus, the scholar who ignores the show's formal construction bypasses a radical, polar-opposite reading of the text, worth considering in the study of representation — hardly formalist analysis for the sake of formalist analysis.

If this alternative reading of *The Bachelor* is too "out there" for some to swallow, I'll provide a more modest example of the benefits of formal analysis of current Reality TV. It seems likely that will-they-or-won't-they "showmance" between male contestants Frankie and Zach on this summer's season of *Big Brother* will soon be analyzed within the context of queer representation on television. The pair's frank sexual dialogue and the implication that Zach, a stereotypical jock who identified as straight, might be open to homosexual experimentation were seemingly "progressive" for CBS primetime. Scholars examining this thread purely on a narrative level might characterize it as an open-minded and positive depiction of same-sex flirtation. However, the formal elements reveal a more conservative attitude toward "Zankie's" activities. Out of hours upon hours of footage, the producers initially chose that which made the relationship appear the most illicit: a night-vision tinted shot of the two in bed, heightening the show's surveillance aesthetic, and another scene in which a fellow houseguest "spied" on the pair flirting by pretending to be asleep next to them, with multiple close-up reaction shots of the eavesdropping houseguest reinforcing the idea that Zankie had reason to hide.

Thus, even in the schlockiest and least reputable of genres, like Reality TV, it's important for scholars to acknowledge that things are happening outside of—and often directly contradicting—the narrative. One needn't be a formalist to consider the formal elements relevant to one's preferred mode of study.