

Missing in Action: Quality TV and Canonization

The Problem with 'Quality'

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I have a problem with the term 'Quality TV'. I feel that it has begun to lose whatever utility it once had. The term in its current incarnation dates back to the late 1970s, although to confuse matters more, it means something completely different in the British context of the 1950s. However, even this later incarnation is a term of confusion. Jane Feuer's initial discussion of Quality TV is very audience focused, interested more in the types of demographic that a particular series might attract. By contrast, Robert Thompson's use of the term is far more focused on the text and mode of production, looking at narrative complexity and serialisation, extended casts, and the artistic history of the creatives. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass have picked up on both these definitions, and have worked to bridge them. However, this has led to a term that is complicated, convoluted, and loses some of its utility.

In addition, the terminology "Quality" has its own inherent problems. Using the term leads to inevitable value judgements, and a conflation of Quality and quality. While there is certainly a place to make value judgements about television, I believe that this additional conflation simply serves to complicate the term even further, especially as it can mean that some scholars stretch the definition even further, when wanting their preferred texts to be seen as having quality. Part of the issues inherent in the canonisation issues we are discussing here rest on some of these value judgements that we make as scholars, often subconsciously. In addition, for some scholars, it can be easier to justify working on a text of perceived low culture (i.e. television), if we separate it out and define it as Quality.

I propose that we actually need two separate categorisations, one based out of Feuer's definition, the other stemming from Thompson's. Both of these definitions have utility to scholars, and there is useful analysis to be done of both these categories. However, we need new terms for both of these, terms which do not evoke value judgements, but which instead actually connect to the specific elements of the texts which connect them. Tighter definitions, free of value judgements, may make it easier to codify appropriate texts, and make it less concerning when some texts do not fit within these definitions.