

Conference review: American Quality Television

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Conference review

*American Quality Television*¹

Reverberations

Given that television is a notoriously ephemeral medium and that TV drama has a rapid turnover, it is perhaps ironic that the reverberations of this international conference on American Quality Television are likely to be felt far and wide. (Indeed, this conference witnessed the launch of new approaches as well as concrete artefacts.) First, the 80 or so delegates demonstrated an enthusiasm quite unusual at academic gatherings: the debates of the 'fan-scholar' and the 'scholar-fan', although academically rigorous, were shot through with declared interests. Second, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's edited collection, *Reading Sex and the City* (2004) was appropriately launched, if not quite with cosmopolitans, then at least with pink champagne. That the book has gone to reprint within three months of its first impression should indicate to publishers the commercial potential of at least some books on TV drama. Third, speaking of books about television, three keynote speeches were delivered by visitors from the US: Jane Feuer, whose *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (1995) and *MTM: Quality Television* (Feuer et al., 1984) are seminal in the field; David Lavery, whose edited collections on *Twin Peaks* (1995) *The X-Files* (1996) and *The Sopranos* (2002) have made contributions to the study of TV drama over the past decade; and Rhonda V. Wilcox² who, with David Lavery, has recently published a book on the American small screen phenomenon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2002). Together these publications represent a body of scholarship on television drama to emerge from America where, until recently and with the exception of the work of a few people such as Jane Feuer, Henry Jenkins and Robert Thompson, popular television fictions have not been an object of academic study. More matters arising from these keynote contributions will follow below.

The fourth reverberation of the conference will hopefully emanate from the involvement of the fourth keynote speaker, Dermot Horan of RTÉ (Radio Telefís Éireann), and panel chair, Mark Lawson of the BBC, who brought two varying industry perspectives to bear. As Director of

Broadcast and Acquisitions for RTÉ, Dermot Horan shared insights into the critical judgements involved in the purchase of TV drama in the global marketplace, in his case to balance the output of an indigenous production culture in Ireland. Journalist and BBC broadcaster, Mark Lawson, who chaired the final panel on 'Debating Quality', embodies the popular/high culture mix of interest in television in the public domain. The insights of both these contributors demonstrated another category of delegate, the 'culture industry-scholar'. Although Lawson mildly protested that he might not share some academic vocabulary, any notional discursive binary between 'the academy' and 'the industry' had evidently collapsed as the 'fan-scholar' engaged readily with the 'industry-scholar'.

Horan, for example, offered an insight to qualify the manifest conference enthusiasm for American quality TV: that US output is no longer the driver that it used to be in British and Irish television scheduling. In a shrinking world, the US no longer represents the distant and exotic since the glamour of *Dallas* no longer bedazzles a popular audience which takes its holidays with Disney in Orlando. Horan noted that increasingly in a multi-channel context, US imports function better on minority rather than main channels (for example, *The X-Files* was the last BBC One purchase of this kind). Significant incompatibilities in scheduling also pose problems, since British and Irish schedules are now based on blocks of six episodes in a run whereas the US is based on 22 for reasons of profits made ultimately through syndication. Such a dialogic engagement between industry-based and academic perspectives is to be welcomed in an inclusive space for a broad range of scholars.

The fifth reverberation, and overall legacy of the Dublin conference, should be the final laying to rest of the idea that television – and TV drama in particular – is not worth talking about, let alone that it is not a worthy object of academic study. Several delegates acknowledged the standard response to talk of 'quality TV', namely, 'is there such a thing?' or 'is that not a contradiction in terms?'. I will return to these entrenched reactions below. Even under challenge from the home personal computer (PC), however, television remains a – if not the – dominant domestic cultural phenomenon and the television medium, along with its cultural implications, matters. Indeed, they have long since been established as objects of media analysis. What perhaps marked a significant shift in Dublin was the attention paid by delegates to the compositional principles, even to the aesthetics, of recent TV drama output. TV drama remains at the heart of the television schedules. The emphasis placed in media and cultural studies approaches on institutions and audience response to the study of television, while offering very valuable insights, has tended to preclude analysis of the programmes themselves and how their construction, their principles of composition, might have an impact upon readings.⁵ The balance afforded by aesthetic approaches in Dublin, exemplifying arguments with close textual analysis, is a welcome redress



in approaches to TV drama study. A specific legacy of the conference inviting the continuation of such analysis is a forthcoming online and, in time, hardcopy journal *Critical Studies in Television* for scholarly studies of small-screen fictions.⁴

What television quality might be

Inevitably, questions of quality television reverberated throughout a conference entitled 'American Quality Television'. A number of contributors evoked Robert Thompson's seminal formulation that American 'quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not "regular" TV' (1996: 13). David Lavery's opening keynote took up and elaborated upon this theme. Lavery marked the paradox that David Chase, 'author' of *The Sopranos*, is notorious for his detestation of television. After an almost invisible 25-year career as a writer in which he 'had it up to here with all the niceties of network television', Chase feels finally freed up from the bland, LOP ('Least Objectionable Programming') products of the network era. For him, HBO (Home Box Office) affords an open space for the writer's creative imagination. The question, perhaps, is whether subscription channels are a different space altogether from cable, satellite and the networks. Looking back, there is a minority tradition of 'quality' American television from *Hill Street Blues* through to *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *Northern Exposure*. However, this output might be marked along the LOP/'not regular TV' binary. I will return to this theme in respect of Jane Feuer's keynote outlined below.

Referencing Chase, Lavery pointed out that while the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) proscribes the level of violence, nudity and profanity in HBO products, it does not ban complex characters, storylines that unfold slowly, oblique storytelling or stupid bad jokes. Thus, while HBO's freedom as a subscription channel from certain FCC constraints affords some aspects of its product distinctiveness, other aspects of 'quality' are readily available to the networks. Indeed, Lavery proposed that the real constraint of the network era was ideological, the LOP perpetuation of an image of America based on a pseudo-democracy of Uncle Sam sameness. Overlaid with an upbeat, feelgood aesthetic, the ideology of network television was incompatible with 'quality' TV. Hence the American tradition of 'quality TV' noted which defines itself against regular output.

In her keynote towards the end of the conference, however, Jane Feuer initially stressed the continuity and similarity between HBO, cable channels and the networks in the contemporary context. All sectors of the industry talk today in terms of the demographics of smaller audiences rather than in terms of mass audience in the days of the 'Big Three' (CBS, NBC, ABC). Although renewed subscriptions ultimately matter most to HBO, ratings still figure and Nielsen undertakes ratings for HBO as for the



other channels. With regard to quality, however, Feuer reminded the conference that discourses of 'quality' are always situated. In the history of the debate about American television, the discursive position of the Viewers for Quality Television was located in a liberal tradition of moral choice. The industry now speaks the language of demographics when once it focused on aggregate numbers, whereas Robert Thompson's academic discourse, noted above, is located in a frame of relatively traditional cultural judgement derived from literary studies.

Feuer proceeded to sketch a comparative model which, acknowledging situated practice, distinguished *The West Wing* from *Six Feet Under*. *The West Wing* was presented as a textbook case of 'quality' TV drama defined in accordance with Thompson's model. In contrast, Feuer proposed that *Six Feet Under* is implicitly located in HBO's model of 'not TV' in a claim to distinction drawing upon the auteurist tradition of modernist theatre and art cinema, filtered through postmodern irony.

The West Wing, so Feuer's argument ran, makes claim to 'originality' in the manner of traditional quality drama's self-assertion of distinction from mass-produced, LOP output. Declining the melodramatic style of more populist product, *The West Wing* is nevertheless a soap opera in narrative form but with smooth orchestration of its serial storylines. Its musicality and balanced sense of rhythm are underscored by traditional television theme music. The various levels of plot are interwoven in a mode of seriousness through a multiple plotting which appears to add up to more than the sum of its parts. As in Thompson's formulation, the notion of 'quality' evoked here is not a radical departure from 'regular TV' but a more sophisticated version of it, potentially offering richer rewards to viewers who give it their more concentrated attention rather than a fleeting glance.

Six Feet Under, in the manner of the HBO stable, sets out to be radically different in the manner of modernist theatre or European art cinema. HBO's brand identity is located in bumpy orchestration of its serial storylines. In *Six Feet Under*'s structured ambiguity, ghosts populate the show to create a deliberate confusion of dream and reality, echoing stylistically the art cinema of the *nouvelle vague*. The complexity of the characters is revealed through uncommonly slow unfolding of narrative, at times reminiscent of the oblique revelations of post-Chekhov, modernist theatre. The soundtrack, paralleling an art-cinematic visual style, is comprised of a range of musical modes involving non-western forms and instrumentation. Although its self- and intertextual referencing affords a postmodern overlay (linking interdiegetically at times with other HBO programmes), *Six Feet Under* makes its claim to value fundamentally in being 'not TV' at all. Its lineage is located, as noted, in modernist theatre and art cinema where *The West Wing* claims in comparison merely to be 'not regular' TV.

116 In sum, Feuer articulated for the conference an extension of range of



discursive positions from which claims to quality in American television may be made. Adding to the pseudo-democratic network era model of: 'it must be good if X million people regularly watch it', and its binary opposite model of: 'it's good because it is "not regular TV"', Feuer delineates another model which, through its explicit associations with modernist theatre and European art cinema, evokes a 'high culture' discursive position in a medium which hitherto has been seen as distinctively lowbrow. It is worth emphasizing, moreover, that Feuer bears out her argument with an insightful aesthetic analysis of the principles of composition of the respective texts, to which the sketch above, lacking the illustrations of the presentation, cannot do full justice. As noted above, detailed discussions of the composition of programmes was an innovative feature of the conference.

Close textual and contextual analysis

The analyses of selected texts in a range of conference presentations pointed up the specific qualities of their chosen examples. High production values and the involvement of esteemed or 'star' actors emerged as a common feature in speaking of American quality TV and its aspiration to cinema. Such accounts tended to indicate the much-improved quality of the widescreen, digital television image with digital surround sound. The advanced technology not only enhances the visual pleasures of viewing but has achieved a standard whereby a greater range of camera angles and more careful attention to the construction of shots is worthwhile. Thus there was a sense that quality television now aspired to the visual style of cinematography generally and, in certain instances as noted, to avant-garde film styles. In turn, less emphasis is placed on fast action and motivated plotting as the stories unfold increasingly slowly and obliquely, obliging a more attentive concentration to television output than is typified in the concept of the glance.⁵

By way of illustration, I recount here three examples which typify the drift of current TV drama scholarship and demonstrate how presentations were broadly informed by detailed analysis. The first example, a paper by Silvia Barlaam (2004), concerns the 1997, bilingual, English-Spanish HBO product *Oz*.

Barlaam's paper aimed to account for the relative exclusion of *Oz* from critical debate when so many other HBO products were widely discussed within the academy and beyond. Superficially, *Oz* appears to share many of the textual features for which other HBO dramas are valorized. It is made in the context which, as Chase noted, frees producers from delivering happiness to middle America. It is aimed accordingly, in the words of writer-producer Tom Fontana, at 'intelligent, adventurous viewers'. It is a hybrid product, the title *Oz* itself denoting Oswald Prison in which the series is located but carrying also the fairytale associations of the Emerald



City in *The Wizard of Oz*. The prison building has glass walls which, while affording constant surveillance, contribute televisually to a fantasy–reality mix. The loopy storylines unfold obliquely in the ‘bumpy’ construction noted by Feuer.

Oz breaks the frame in that it has direct address to camera by a blind, black inmate, reminiscent perhaps of figures in Greek drama. Through his commentary on the action, he poses awkward questions about contemporary society. And here, Barlaam discerned a difference from the much talked about *Sex and the City*, where direct address to camera by the narrator, Carrie Bradshaw, is fully part of the text, not a commentary on it. Drawing out other differences, Barlaam observed that, although *The Sopranos* is noted for its violence, devoted *Oz* viewers witness the deaths of 72 characters in just 56 episodes and not even the major characters are safe. Such a breach of trust in the conventions of regular TV is aimed at creating an ambiguous viewing position. Furthermore, the male nudity in *Oz* reveals the male body in humiliation (e.g. Chris Keller urinating) and men are shown to be vulnerable whereas, in the more glamorous *Sopranos*, male power is ultimately affirmed. In sum, by analysing the specifics of *Oz* relative to other HBO output, Barlaam is able to support illustratively her thesis that *Oz* ‘pushed the envelope’ a bit further than even adventurous viewers were prepared to go. It set a level, perhaps, for the mix of challenge with glamour in the more visible HBO products, but as a consequence is relatively marginalized in both scholarly and popular debate.

Visual excess and spectacularization, particularly of the body, emerged as themes in a number of presentations. Simon Cowell’s (2004) account of *ER* was one such, evoking psychoanalysis to draw attention to a ‘compulsive spectatorial pleasure in viewing the abject other’. In analysing a specific sequence, Cowell pointed out how the camera takes a circular path around the wounded body. But this is not a hand-held documentary camera, rather a steadycam which fixes the body firmly at the centre of a 360 degree pan as if it were a warden carrying out surveillance. The camera becomes Foucault’s ‘eye that knows, the eye that governs’. Offering another take on the point made by several presenters about the diminution of forward narrative drive, Cowell suggested that the camera in *ER* makes regular detours, lingering over damaged bodies. Referencing Tasker (1993), he suggested that this technique ambiguously positions the spectator in a conflict of desire for forward trajectory and desire to linger over the body. Such spectacularization of the traumatized body, Cowell suggests, is a filmic development to capture somatic truths previously beyond the range of regular television. In the post-presentation discussion it was remarked that *Nip/Tuck* (‘a disturbingly perfect drama’; Turner MGM and Warner Brothers Entertainment, 2004) goes way further down this path than anything in *ER*, and that *Alias* affords another interesting example of visual excess with a superficial giddiness.



Amongst a range of presentations on *24* (series 1), Stephen Peacock (2004) anatomized the text in taking on Rob White's dismissive observation in *Sight & Sound* that the use of split-screen in the series was 'purely functional, subservient to the onward rush of the story' (2002: 7). Peacock demonstrated with conviction that the split-screens were not subservient flourishes but precisely used. In a series with an unfashionably clear narrative progression without flashbacks or ellipses and eschewing the fashion for open-endedness, indeed achieving ultimate closure, the split-screens of *24* are central to its compositional principle. Indeed, to Peacock the uses of split-screens *is* the story. They set up the relationships between the characters (a point illustrated by the rape scene); they connect disparate spaces and characters; the telephone conversations reinforce the sense of immediacy of real time marked by the digital clock, the foregrounding of which is precisely placed. The aggregate effect of the numerous uses of the split-screen device is *24's* exploration of its own status as television. In this respect the series perhaps aligns itself with that American 'quality' output which expresses a desire not to be television by gesturing towards the prestige and value of the art film.

These examples, to which I hope to have done at least summary justice, show how scholars are bringing textual analysis to bear in elaborating a range of arguments about contemporary television. In making detailed analyses, they are calling into question implicitly the more extreme accounts of individual readings by inviting a consensus at least about the qualities of texts. But the argument about quality television does not end there.

Questions of quality revisited

To establish that American 'quality television' today has different qualities which align it with cinema and differentiate its products from the dominant conventions of the TV medium is to establish a common discursive position within a speech community. It is to show that at least the community of delegates at the Dublin conference, *pace* Wittgenstein's later theory of language usage, talk about quality television in these terms. It is not, however, to address the metaquestion of worth. As Sarah Cardwell (2004) reminded the conference, there is a difference between 'quality' television expressed in terms of a range of textual characteristics and 'worth' in the sense of 'good for' its viewers.

Despite the relative consensus at the conference, there was an uneasiness when speaking of quality with presenters marking inverted commas with raised fingers, as if installing rabbit's ears above their own. Similarly, differences of taste were openly acknowledged. David Lavery, for example, who is a self-confessed *Buffy* fan, owned that he just does not get *The West Wing*. Some devotees of *The West Wing* in turn find *Buffy*



somewhat puerile. Thus Cardwell's point is borne out: to note signifiers of 'quality' may be to say nothing about a programme's value. We can agree the characteristics as brought out in the kinds of detailed analysis cited above, and yet still meaningfully say, 'but I don't like it' (a matter of taste) or 'it's rubbish' (a question of value). Cardwell asked, how as a critical community are we to get beyond the rabbit's ears inverted commas to coherent, persuasive evidence about value? To determine real value, she suggested, we need to interpret and evaluate over and above bringing out the characteristics of texts.

Such a stance may herald another turning-point in critical approach to television. Talk of value has been very unfashionable over the past two or three decades in the full flush of postmodern relativism. Sarah Cardwell was kind enough to point out that my own work on value (Nelson, 1997; particularly chapter 9) is an exception in the context of television drama studies. If, on the one hand, there are no absolute or universal values and if, on the other hand, we acknowledge with Derrida and other poststructuralists that there is no innocent truth language, then description is an imaginative and inevitably evaluative act. Since part of the practice of the American Quality Television conference was to review television history and the modes in which it has been constructed, it is worth reiterating contemporary approaches to history itself. As Hutcheon has formulated it:

[I]nstead of seeking common denominators and homogeneous networks of causality and analogy, historians have been freed . . . to note the dispersing interplay of different heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past. (1989: 66)

This postmodern challenge to totalizing and objectively truthful accounts of the past begins to collapse the notional gap between fact and value by recognizing that the historian is not a neutral recorder of events, but actively creative in accounting for them. Similarly, it must be acknowledged that the detailed analyses of television texts will be coloured by the analysts' dispositions. This is evident in the conceptual frameworks brought to bear in those accounts sketched above. It is worth noting also the implicit challenge to hierarchies of knowledge in contemporary history, in which the perspectives of those formally excluded from official history have been reclaimed. The parallel in TV drama studies would be the valorization of popular culture marginalized traditionally by the value assumptions of an élite. It is interesting in this regard that the allegiance of American quality TV with modernist theatre and avant-garde film in Feuer's (and others') accounts of 'not TV' rescues popular television fictions from their exclusion from worthiness of study only by relocating them in the value frameworks of high culture. As David Lavery (2004) put it, 'bad literature gives you what you want; good literature gives you what you didn't know you wanted'.



If, then, we cannot avoid evaluation since it is built into discourse, and we cannot assume any value position will be universally shared, can we speak sensibly at all of 'quality television'? A pragmatic way out of this dilemma is offered by Rorty (1989) who advises that, if solidarity is not to be found in the core self of human beings, it may have to be made rather than found. And Rorty sees symbolic formations, and television in particular, as important factors in this construction process.⁶

Sarah Cardwell's reminder is timely: in the attempt to establish worth, it is not enough to establish the qualities of texts. To achieve that aim fully in a pluralist world involves self-reflection on the implicit values structured in our analytical discourses and positing value through an additional process of interpretation and evaluation. Although cultural values may not be universal, they are not simply personal in the way that the most reductive, relativist positions would have it. The value basis of a consumerist, individualist society is equally as open to question as any other, particularly in its over-readiness to reduce everything to 'a matter of personal choice'. In practice, values are established through intersubjective agreement within – and at best, between – speech communities. Thus they are not private and personal, but consensual. For example, feminist, green or multiculturalist positions in contemporary culture are not universally accepted but they have been established beyond the personal or idiosyncratic.

To make these abstractions more concrete and return to the business of the conference, Joke Hermes' analysis of *24* (series 1) placed textual analysis, as applauded above, in a more interpretative and evaluative context. Hermes saw the series as a 'usable fiction from a feminist perspective' but not without its faults from this value position. She acknowledged that, in *24*, men originate the action and that the idea of the strong male hero (Jack Bauer, David Palmer) was reinforced at the centre of a male action narrative in which Bauer's wife dies at the end. Against this traditional masculinity, Hermes drew attention to the soap qualities of the family drama which offset action-adventure in yet another generically hybrid product. Besides originating the action, Bauer and Palmer are family men, in touch with their emotions. Overall, *24* might be said to invite a reconsideration of fatherhood, with both Bauer and Palmer having to deal with the impact of their powerful public roles on their wives and children. The progressive tendency of the series in this respect, however, was almost undermined by the failure to take opportunities with the female characters and narratives. As Hermes saw it, the majority of the women, although professionals, were introduced through their sexuality, with Kimberly Bauer constructed as 'a babe'. Key women, Nina Myers (Bauer's lover and professional partner) and Sherry Palmer (wife of the presidential candidate), were shown to betray their men treacherously, using their sexuality to achieve their ends. Whether or not *24* is read ultimately as a tale of male resentment of female emancipation, Hermes' critical approach engages

with the text not to *find* it but to *make* it a 'usable fiction from a feminist perspective'.

Recognizing with the historians that documentation is not neutral, nevertheless we might applaud the value of detailed textual analysis as the equivalent of investigating the facts. For unless we capitulate to the most reductive postmodern free-for-all, documented evidence is useful so long as it is not treated unproblematically as signifying the truth of the matter. The qualities of the text, insofar as they can be established through analysis and intersubjective agreement, serve our understanding. As the example above demonstrates, critical study of quality television beyond that involves a creative engagement with the qualities of the text from a (preferably self-avowed) value position which is itself located in culture (that is to say, not simply personal). The very idea of the fan-scholar and the scholar-fan acknowledges that critical discourse is shot through with our passions and interests.

In conclusion then, the American Quality Television conference lays open a rich field for the future of TV drama studies. A renewed vigour of analysis of textual qualities, redressing an over-emphasis on disparate readings, was harnessed to debates about the aesthetic, and ultimately cultural, value of television. Particularly through the involvement of industry-scholars, but also through the investigative research of contributors such as Deborah Jermyn, Máire Messenger and Roberta Pearson, texts were located in the contexts of production and reception. The new journal, *Critical Studies in Television*, will afford a space to disseminate the range of work in TV drama studies which is demonstrably burgeoning. Contributions to continuing debate are welcome.

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Notes

1. Acknowledgement for facilitation of the conference is due also to the Samuel Beckett Centre and, in particular, to Professor Brian Singleton. I am indebted to the scholars whose contributions to the conference I have cited and apologize if I have in any way misrepresented their presentations from my scribbled notes. Silvia Barlaam, Simon Cowell and Stephen Peacock are doctoral students respectively at the Universities of East Anglia, Sussex and Kent.
2. Owing to a car accident, Rhonda was unable to be physically present at the conference but joined the discussion of her paper by telephone link.
3. There are notable exceptions to this point, such as Glasgow Media Group's sustained analysis of the content of news and its construction, but elsewhere readings have been privileged at the expense of analysis of textual composition. For example, Schroder asserts that: 'The text itself has no



existence, no life, and therefore no quality until it is deciphered by an individual and triggers the meaning potential carried by this individual' (1992: 207).

4. The editorial board of *Critical Studies in Television* is comprised of Kim Akass, Stephen Lacey, David Lavery, Janet McCabe, Robin Nelson and Rhonda V. Wilcox.
5. The concept of the 'glance, a look without power' was established in Ellis (1992[1982]: 163).
6. For a fuller discussion of Rorty and questions of value, see Nelson (1997), chapter 9.

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Biographical note

Robin Nelson is Professor and Head of the Department of Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University. Besides numerous articles and chapters on theatre and media topics, he has published (with Robert Millington) *Boys from the Blackstuff: The Making of TV Drama* (Comedia, 1986) and *TV Drama in Transition* (Macmillan, 1997). He is currently working on another monograph on contemporary television drama for Manchester University Press. ADDRESS: Manchester Metropolitan University, MMU Cheshire, Hassall Road, Alsager ST7 2HL, UK. [email: r.a.nelson@mmu.ac.uk]