

CHAPTER 1

The Work of the Critic

Oh, gentle lady, do not put me to't. For I am nothing if not critical.

—Iago to Desdemona
(Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 2, Scene 1)

INTRODUCTION

What is the advantage of knowing how to perform television criticism if you are not going to be a professional television critic? The advantage to you as a television viewer is that you will not only be able to make informed judgment about the television programs you watch, but also you will better understand your reaction and the reactions of others who share the experience of watching. Critical acuity enables you to move from casual enjoyment of a television program to a fuller and richer understanding. A viewer who does not possess critical viewing skills may enjoy watching a television program and experience various responses to it, such as laughter, relief, fright, shock, tension, or relaxation. These are fundamental sensations that people may get from watching television, and, for the most part, viewers who are not critics remain at this level. Critical awareness, however, enables you to move to a higher level that illuminates production practices and enhances your understanding of **culture**, human nature, and interpretation.

Students studying television production with ambitions to write, direct, edit, produce, and/or become camera operators will find knowledge of television criticism necessary and useful as well. Television criticism is about the evaluation of content, its context, organization, story and characterization, style, **genre**, and audience desire. Knowledge of these concepts is the foundation of successful production.

THE ENDS OF CRITICISM

Just as critics of books evaluate works of fiction and nonfiction by holding them to established standards, television critics utilize methodology and theory to comprehend, analyze, interpret, and evaluate television programs. As a critic, you can gain greater understanding

and appreciation about television programming, as well as about your own culture and the social forces within it. You may also be able to demystify the meaning of a television program and create new perceptions for other viewers by communicating the criticism to them. As a critic, you become a “transformer” capable of generating new understanding and new awareness in the minds of other television viewers. Your comprehension of the importance of producing, writing, directing, camera work, sound, sets, costumes, and other production values opens up your understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic pleasures of good television and provides specific reasons for the displeasure caused by what some regard as poor television. As a critic, you will engage with the essential organization of television programs, context, time-space manipulation, the use of images and language, conventions and variations of genre, narrative patterns, character development, and the episodic nature of television. You will appreciate the recurrence of enduring myths, legends, and character types as they re-appear both in fiction and reality programs. You will also examine social and cultural values, ideology, possible meanings, codes, and the representation of gender, race, sexuality, age, ethnicity, employment, and nationality. As a critic, you must also understand the nature of the business of television and the viewing audience, its expectations, desires, participation, and satisfaction. Criticism also goes beyond understanding of the program itself and asks what conceptual or theoretical implications have resulted.

JOURNALISTIC TELEVISION CRITICISM

Journalists began writing television criticism in 1946, when Jack Gould of *The New York Times* and John Crosby of the *New York Herald Tribune* began reviewing television program content. From that time and into the 1950s, television critics had to wait to see the programs when they were aired in order to write about them because television was broadcast live. After more television programs were made on film, beginning with *I Love Lucy*, critics could preview the shows and have their columns published before the shows were on the air. The critics' reviews were influential because television executives and producers monitored their evaluations of programs; thus the importance of professional television criticism increased. Yet, the programs that the critics praised—e.g., *Studio One*, which broadcast modern plays and adaptations of Shakespeare, and *Playhouse 90*, a televised anthology of 90-minute original and adapted plays—were often not as well liked by the public, which appeared to prefer the classic sitcoms, such as *The Honeymooners* with Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Audrey Meadows, and Joyce Randolph, and *I Love Lucy* with Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. In later years, print television criticism became less important as an influence on program decision making, although government agency personnel read television criticism in trade publications in order to examine responses to possible government policies.

Today there is a decline in newspaper readership, and revenue-starved newspapers have let their television reviewers go or have given them other assignments. Consequently, many former newspaper critics have turned to the Web to continue their work. David Bianculli, former critic for New York's *Daily News*, founded *TV Worth Watching* (<http://www.davidbianculli.com>), where he posts his daily reviews. The site has several contributors, some of whom post lengthy critiques of various programs. There is also a list of other websites for

episodes, segments, and information. Another website (<http://www.metacritic.com>) lists television shows by title with links to TV critic reviews. The critics rate programs with scores on a hundred-point scale. Viewers also enter their ratings on a 10-point scale. Journalist “criticisms” typically range from mere listings of current programs and their broadcast times to descriptive vignettes of upcoming programs. However, critics such as Tom Shales of *The Washington Post*, Robert Bianco of *USA Today*, and Howard Rosenberg of the *Los Angeles Times* write about television’s style and taste. The Television Critics Association (TCA) represents more than 200 journalists who write about television for print and online outlets in the United States and Canada. There are links to them on the TCA website (<http://tvcritics.org>). Many newspapers now rely on copy supplied by wire services, such as the Associated Press. As James A. Brown explains in Newcomb’s *Encyclopedia of Television*, journalistic television criticism is part of the publisher’s larger purpose to gain readers for the newspaper or magazine, thus it

puts a premium on relevance, clarity, brevity, cleverness, and attractive style. The TV column is meant to attract readers primarily by entertaining them, while also informing them about how the system works. . . . The critic serves as a guide, offering standards of criteria for judgment along with factual data, so readers can make up their own minds. . . . The critic-reviewer’s role grows in usefulness as video channels proliferate; viewers inundated by dozens of cable and over-air channels can ensure optimum use of leisure viewing time by following critics’ tips about what is worth tuning in and what to avoid. (Brown in Newcomb, 1997, p. 1643)

Brown lists the criteria for good journalistic television criticism as “sensitivity and reasoned judgment, a renaissance knowledge coupled with exposure to a broad range of art, culture, technology, business, law, economics, ethics, and social studies all fused with an incisive writing style causing commentary to leap off the page into the reader’s consciousness” (Brown in Newcomb, 1997, pp. 1643–1644). These criteria would serve the academic television critic well, but they are general and have no specific reference to standards of judgment and methodology.

THE CRITICAL STANCE

The word “criticism” tends to have a negative connotation because we often associate it with finding something wrong with objects and people. If a person finds fault with something or someone, we are likely to say, “He or she is too critical.” If your parents do not like your hairstyle or the way you dress, you might say, “Don’t criticize me so much.” We see the judges on *American Idol* or *Dancing With the Stars* criticizing the contestants, usually by drawing attention to positive and negative attributes of the performances.

Yet we define criticism differently when we check the newspaper or a website to find out what a television or film critic wrote about a television show or film before deciding what to watch. In this context, the critic usually writes about the quality of a television show or film—the story, the acting, the visual and sound aspects, and special effects. A critic may

praise or pan a television program or film, thus telling the reader what is good and/or bad about it. For several years, I wrote film criticism in the local newspaper for the Bozeman Film Festival that featured independent and international films. If I thought a film had good qualities, I would urge my readers to be sure to see it. Sometimes filmgoers would disagree with my judgment, telling me, "I did not like the film. It was too long and moved too slowly." Others would thank me for alerting them about a film they might not otherwise have gone to see had they not read my review. This illustrates two points: (1) criticism is subjective, and (2) criticism can be persuasive.

Criticism is subjective. We bring to criticism our life experiences, our beliefs, attitudes, and values. Thus, we observe the critical object through our own perceptual filters. Perception is the process of extracting information from the world outside us as well as from within ourselves. Each individual has a perceptual field that is unique to that person and shaped by many influences, and this field forms the filters through which we perceive (O'Donnell & Kable, 1982). Our perceptions are based on our values, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Thus, as a critic, you are likely to have a perspective that includes biases and past experiences. You are also apt to select certain parts of a program to criticize. Thus, in addition to being subjective, criticism is also partial. Because most dramas and comedies on television are episodic, it is not likely that you would take on an entire season of a series to criticize unless you were writing a doctoral dissertation or a book about a series. The usual selection is a single episode, although you are advised to be aware of the other episodes in a series. A television program is not a reality that can be examined or proven in a completely objective manner. Therefore, you should not be concerned with finding the single correct interpretation, for there may be many possible ones. There may be a dominant meaning inscribed within the script, but different viewers can give alternative or multiple meanings to the same script. Many of my students like *The Bachelor* because they think it is glamorous and suspenseful, whereas I think it is banal and artificial. Some academics have criticized its representation as too "White." A television performance is potentially open to alternative interpretations. However, a competent critic who applies systematic analysis based on sound principles is not only more likely to evaluate fairly but also to illuminate. Readers of good criticism may have their appreciation of the critical object enhanced and thus may be moved to watch it.

Criticism can be persuasive. A television critic often functions as an advocate on behalf of a program or even a network, urging viewers to tune in to it. Further, a critic may construct a persuasive argument, offering good reasons and evidence to support the evaluation of a program. Criticism is capable not only of affecting our choices to watch a television program, but, more important, it can alter our perceptions, enabling us to see and hear more details, to anticipate certain moments, to ponder certain questions, and to recognize special qualities. Most students who take film and television criticism courses tell me that they see so much more than they did before taking the course and, furthermore, they are eager to talk about what they see. On the other hand, their friends, who have not studied critical methodologies, report that they do not like to watch films or television with their critic friends because they interpret too much and then talk about it during the screening.

Since television is so pervasive and—together with the Internet—is the most significant form of communication in the world, it is important to be sensitive to and understand what is communicated. Television is a cultural mirror, but it is also a two-way mirror in that it not only reflects our culture but also illuminates and influences how we see ourselves and others. Social science researchers have produced hundreds of studies regarding the influence of television on viewers. Whether viewers' behavior and/or attitudes are changed is not the primary concern of the television critic; however, the critic is an important observer of the content of television programs who can help us understand why such influence may occur.

Cultivation studies claim that people who watch television view the world as more violent than it actually is, causing them to be fearful, insecure, and dependent on authority as the result of seeing violence on television. The researchers concluded after their long-range study of heavy television viewing that “one correlate of television viewing is a heightened and unequal sense of danger and risk in a mean and selfish world” (Gerbner, Gross, Signorelli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979, p. 191). A television critic may note that, while physical violence is depicted in some television programming, notably historical dramas like *Game of Thrones* and vampire shows like *True Blood*, characters dealing with the consequences of violence are a more recent trend on shows such as *NCIS*, *NCIS: Los Angeles*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Hawaii Five-0*.

Fashions, body image, and hairstyles are also copied from actors on television. Critics can note that imitations occur from show to show or appear in magazines and other publications. Subtle attitudes toward gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, and occupation as represented on television may or may not shape or reshape viewers' perceptions of reality, but you as a critic can observe changes in television programming itself. Cultural studies researchers use audience-response studies, wherein viewers are interviewed in depth to determine how television programs affect viewers (Morley, 1988). Television situation comedies, such as *The Cosby Show* and *Will & Grace*, appear to have made programs with African Americans or gays in leading roles more acceptable to the viewing public, but they probably did not resolve the actual tensions experienced by the general public concerning racial issues or homosexuality (Dow, 2001). Television viewers tend to make what they watch fit their own lives and experiences; therefore, the television critic can note other aspects of these programs. For example, according to John Marcus, writer for *The Cosby Show*, Bill Cosby insisted that the parents on the show be smarter than their children and that the characters' behavior be true to real-life behavior. The viewers would therefore comfortably identify with Cosby as a parent but not necessarily with his race. Since audience **identification** with television characters is a major key to audience enjoyment, approval or disapproval of controversial issues may not be the most important factor.

CRITICISM AND CULTURE

Television programs reflect a society's values, norms, and practices as well as its fads, interests, and trends. Because of this, your awareness and understanding of your own society give you insight into the meanings generated in television's fictional stories, coverage of

real-life stories, **reality shows**, and other types of programming. Here you must use your own interpretative resources to make inferences about social relationships and configurations of value. Television programming, its structure, timing, and commercialism appropriate the structure and priorities of society, the distribution of goods and **power**, values and motives for behavior, and systems of reward and punishment. Its focus is tempocentric; that is, the time we live in is the most important time. Although television programs reflect the nation's cultural pluralism and may present a multiplicity of meanings, television programming, in general, reflects majority preferences because its commerce needs to appeal to the largest possible target audience. This is especially true for network television, but also for cable and satellite programs with their specialized target audiences. One can even say that television not only reflects culture, but that it also creates culture. As David Marc pointed out:

Culture today is produced and distributed by a very few corporations, which, through their many divisions and subsidiaries, make decisions about what culture all members of society will consume, from the top of the social ladder to the bottom. . . . The success of the system is dependent on its ability to persuade the public to collaborate with it in the creation of a social product. (Marc, 1995, pp. 53, 56)

While the networks such as ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC try to appeal to viewers between 18 and 49 years old, cable stations such as MTV, Lifetime, ESPN, E1, Food Network, Disney, Discovery, Animal Planet, History Channel, Home Shopping Network, SOAPnet, and Syfy appeal to very specific interests. This is known as “**brand identity**” because specific channels appeal to target audiences. For example, Lifetime appeals to adult women with stories featuring strong women and their relationships, while FX has introduced charismatic but deeply flawed men in various professions (plastic surgery, firefighting, law enforcement). This specificity, too, may be a reflection of culture in that it suggests that we live in an era of individualized culture, what Walt Whitman characterized as an America of “contradictory multitudes.” We have so many choices—and we have television sets in different rooms as well as television reception on computers and telephones—that each member of a family can watch selected channels according to individual interests.

Because television programming is a reasonably good mirror of American culture, television criticism can go beyond description and evaluation of a television program or series to a level of deeper cultural diagnosis.

NARRATIVE AND CONTEXTUAL REALITY

Several television programs represent actual news events in fictional stories. In this way, television echoes real-life drama and reinforces its credibility by presenting familiar and true-to-life stories that appeal to viewers' interests. Three months after the mine explosion that killed 29 miners at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, *Leverage*, a TNT show about a team of three men and two women who expose corruption and take revenge on

perpetrators, aired an episode in which the team infiltrated a mine in West Virginia to expose safety violations after a deadly explosion. One month later, an episode of *Leverage* featured the team going after a pharmaceutical CEO who wanted to release under a new name a dangerous drug capable of killing thousands of people. The story mirrored numerous newspaper releases about diet drugs that were recalled after several people died from taking them. The premise of the critically acclaimed show, *The Good Wife*, built on recent scandals involving prominent married, elected officials who were exposed in relationships with prostitutes. *Army Wives* on Lifetime has many fans among actual army wives because it is about the spouses and parents of military personnel who are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Scenes often depict these soldiers fighting battles, getting wounded, or killed, but they also feature the mutual support that military spouses receive from one another. An article in *The Washington Post* revealed how this dramatic series offers an outlet to lessen stress on military spouses (Honan, 2010). The most specific reference to a major news story was on a former FX show that is now on a DirecTV channel, *Damages*, in which a high-powered lawyer, Patty Hewes, played by Glenn Close, attempts to recover billions of dollars for her clients from the family of a Wall Street financial advisor who was convicted for running a major Ponzi scheme. This was a direct allusion to Bernard Madoff, who was imprisoned for securities fraud, a Ponzi scheme that moved \$65 billion out of investors' accounts. The investors sued to recover their money, mostly without success. *Law & Order*, a popular series that was cancelled in 2010 after 20 seasons, coined the phrase "Ripped from the Headlines" to introduce episodes about familiar events. Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Center for Popular Television, said of these stories that reflect the news: "It's gripping and disturbing. Television is kind of the way that the entire collective subconscious of our culture plays out these issues" (Reuters, 2001).

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation and *CSI: Miami* utilize actual forensic science as the basis for their programs. Because both fictional and real-life crime scene investigators work for the state and must testify in court, they have to produce provable evidence based on scientific procedures. Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer of both shows, said, "On *CSI* I told them to use the correct terminology even if the audience doesn't know it, because even if they don't understand it, they'll know it's real" (Stein, 2003, p. 71). Consultants for the *CSI* shows include a forensic pathologist and a former crime scene analyst (CSA) as well as science researchers.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and United Flight 93, television responded with shows about 9/11. *Rescue Me*, an FX summer series that concluded in September 2011, had a long-term commitment to story lines about the fallen firefighters of 9/11—stories about memories and grief. The lead character, Tommy Gavin, played by Denis Leary, lost his cousin and many friends in the Twin Towers. The 2010 season had a firefighter character who became seriously ill with cancer, apparently caused by his work at ground zero. Leary, one of the producer-writers, uses anecdotes he hears from real-life firefighters in the scripts. Other series have alluded to the unsettling fear of terrorism in the world with shows about strange deaths and unexpected phenomena (*The Event*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Falling Skies*).

Of course, not all cultural context plots are so tragic or serious. Comedy series also draw from real life for their humor. Through comic situations at home or at work, we

Photo 1.1 *Rescue Me's* brave firefighters, Black Shawn and Sean, depicted as a tribute to the real New York City firefighters of 9/11.



can recognize our own fallibility and laugh at it. In contextualized situations, we experience the fictional comedy more intensely because it takes place in a real setting. Sometimes the decision to film in an actual setting is driven by production decisions. On March 3, 2004, *Yes, Dear* featured the former governor of California, Gray Davis, in a scene at a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game. Tim Conway, who played the lead actor's visiting father, got into a scripted argument with Davis in the team owner's special box. Conway made a joke that criticized Davis's handling of the state's budget and threw a glass of water in his face. Davis then chased Conway out of the owner's box, through the bleachers, and onto the floor during halftime—in front of the game's real spectators, who were unaware that a television show was being filmed. Jeff Meyer, the director of that *Yes, Dear* episode, said in a personal interview that the choice to film at an actual game was made because they wanted to have a live basketball audience in the show (O'Donnell, 2004). *Yes, Dear*, like most sitcoms, was normally filmed before live studio audiences in order to enhance the actors' sense of performing. To film the episode at a real basketball game was worth it to the producers of the show even though they needed to obtain complicated permissions from the NBA and the Lakers organization. Later, when Alan Kirschenbaum, *Yes, Dear's* co-creator and executive producer, returned to his seat in the stands after filming, he overheard the man next to him saying to his friend who had just returned with their drinks: "You won't believe it, Joe, but Tim Conway was just chasing the former governor, Gray Davis, around the court," to which Joe replied: "No way, man!"

CRITICAL CATEGORIES AND CRITICAL CHOICES

The narrative of the aforementioned television shows, the remarks of Thompson, and the real-life context behind the programs are just a few of the items that a television critic would consider. Television shows are rich with issues; cultural values; legal information; courtroom ritual; psychological subtexts; controversy; family norms; gender, racial, age, and employment representation; and ideological hegemony or dominant cultural beliefs. Each has a distinctive style, a signature look, ensemble acting, realistic sets, and musical themes. Viewing audiences are expected to be informed, thinking, and feeling audiences that actively participate in the program by responding to and grappling with the issues. Critics may choose to deal with one or some of these categories, utilizing theoretical background and methodological analysis to appreciate, understand, and evaluate their observations.

How then do you, as a television critic, differ from other television viewers? You will analyze a television program in order to understand how it works and the choices its creators and producers made. You take television seriously and evaluate its expression of ideas, values, and conflicts, which give you and your readers deeper insight into our culture. You may make observations about what seems to be lacking in a program—but subsequently, you need to know what possible alternatives there are. As a competent critic, you know that different viewers derive different meanings from the same television program; therefore, you can interpret several possible meanings and their importance to those who might determine them. Further, you will go beyond the program itself and ask what conceptual or theoretical implications may have resulted. Finally, you will communicate to others the results of the critical observations in ways that can enrich their understanding. These critical observations are based on your informed judgment. Different academic television critics do not necessarily agree on what are the best critical methods and theories through which to criticize television, but as Horace Newcomb pointed out in the sixth edition of *Television: The Critical View*, their works are

good faith attempts to recognize and understand how social life, now dependent on mass media, on popular forms of expression and entertainment, on the far-reaching lines of information afforded by new technologies, can best be taught and understood, learned and used by all citizens. (Newcomb, 2000, p. 6)

In order to do the work of a television critic, you have to (1) choose a television program to criticize, (2) submit yourself to the program and stay alert, (3) determine what questions to ask as you watch the program, and (4) choose or develop a methodology to answer the questions. Thus, your work as a television critic is to *understand* the various elements of a television program from script to performance in order to *analyze*, through *critical methodology*, how the elements make a program what it is; to *interpret* the sundry meanings that the program may have by understanding the nuances of the culture in which it appears and the multiple meanings it may have for different audiences; to pass *judgment* on the quality of the program; and, finally, to *communicate* that judgment to an audience. The chapters that follow will help you decide what questions to ask by presenting both theories and

methods for analysis, as well as necessary information regarding the phenomena that make up a television program. It is also essential to understand that television production and distribution is a business dependent on profits.

THE BUSINESS OF TELEVISION

Because television production is a business that depends on public support measured by the ratings systems and paid subscriptions to cable channels, the programming norms tend to appeal to what the public prefers. From a business perspective, television programming is a product that is funded by advertising and/or subscription to cable and satellite services and used by the viewing public. The motive of television executives whose networks and cable channels are funded by advertising is simple: to deliver viewers to advertisers and advertising to viewers. Television commercials cause audiences to be the true medium of exchange. What sells products is what supports television programming. Therefore, the product culture largely determines what cultural models go on the air. Advertising is maintained if viewing levels and profiles support it; it is a matter of supply and demand. In other words, programming is determined by the interests and profits of the institution that produces and backs it. Network decisions also reflect the tastes and political ideologies of the controlling executives and the advertising sponsors. Chris Carter, creator of the successful television series *The X-Files*, told an audience at Montana State University that every script for his show had to be approved by the Fox network executives and “censors.” In the second season of the show there was a script about a necrophiliac, a person who likes to have sex with corpses. The script was finally approved when the word “necrophiliac” was changed to “death fetishist.” Another script for *The X-Files* that featured a story about incest and inbreeding was originally vetoed, but then, Carter said, it was allowed during “Sweeps Week,” the times in January, May, September, and November when ratings companies measure viewing statistics for local television stations in each television market nationwide to set advertising rates (C. Carter, 2001). This latter example underscores the priority of the need for mass audience support. Television executives and producers try to figure out what it is that audiences desire and then satisfy that desire in order to maintain an audience following. Once the formula of desire/satisfaction is embodied in a television program, the show is then marketed to the consumers, the viewing public. Unhindered by advertising and the FCC,¹ HBO and Showtime cable subscription networks, have taken risks by developing programs that depict nudity, violence, and the use of obscene and sexually explicit language. *Boardwalk Empire*, *Deadwood*, *True Blood*, *Big Love*, *Game of Thrones*, and other HBO programs have attracted discriminating audiences and have won many awards. FX, a basic cable channel owned by Fox, has included shows that have violence, sex, foul language, and drug use in popular series such as *Sons of Anarchy*, *Rescue Me*, and *Justified*.

Knowledge of the critical methodology for analysis of television, together with an understanding of the business of television, enables you to realistically evaluate what you view. A competent television critic also knows his or her own culture and recognizes its representation in a television program.

¹Because access to HBO is by subscription only, it is considered a private contractual agreement between viewers and HBO and not bound by FCC rules.

THE FAMILIAR AND THE UNFAMILIAR IN TELEVISION

Technological developments—satellite transmitters, DVD recorders, the DVR, cable and digital systems, HDTV, 3-D television, the Internet, and the development of interrelationships between and among different media—have given viewers an array of choices and enlarged awareness of the world and its people. Television today allows us to view programs from unfamiliar communities and countries, sometimes in other languages, giving us the experience of hearing and seeing different narrative forms and representations of cultural norms other than our own. These exposures and the choices they give us also provide opportunities to compare the familiar with the unfamiliar, and this requires knowledge of the familiar. Critical methodologies enable us to enhance our knowledge of the familiar and equip us to confront the unfamiliar. It is also important to recognize that the institutions of United States television are the dominant television industries in the world, and that American programming has become popular around the globe. While visiting the Tate Gallery in London, I noticed that the woman at the information desk had a picture of George Clooney as the screensaver on her computer. She told me that *ER* is her favorite television show, although now it can only be seen in syndication, DVD box sets, and on NBC.com. American programming has, in many cases, been adopted as a model for programming in other countries. A few years ago, my husband and I checked into a small hotel in Milan. The desk clerk was watching Italy's version of *The Dating Game*, a game show in which men and women choose a date by asking questions of several candidates. Except for the language difference, the show was nearly identical to America's *The Dating Game*. Of course, it works both ways. England's *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, *The Office*, and *Life on Mars* were the prototypes for America's versions of these shows. *Ugly Betty* was modeled after a telenovela from Colombia.

This chapter started off with the notion that critical acuity would give you a fuller and richer appreciation for a television program, as well as a better understanding of viewer response to it. Each of the chapters of this book is designed to help you become a critic who not only knows how to evaluate a television program but who also can construct a persuasive argument to support that judgment. To get started, you may be asking some very basic questions, such as, “How do I choose a television program to criticize?” and “How do I know what methods to use to criticize it?” So let us examine some basic, critical orientation concepts.

CRITICAL ORIENTATION

First, it is perfectly acceptable to choose one of your favorite television programs to criticize. Your familiarity with the show will enable you to select critical questions more easily, and your resulting critique will help you gain a deeper understanding of why you like it. For example, I like *The Good Wife*, and I often watch it for pure enjoyment as opposed to criticizing it. If I were to do a critique of *The Good Wife*, my job would be somewhat easier because I am familiar with the format and style of the show; I know most of the characters' names and their fictional histories; I have read articles about the show and watched an Academy of Television Arts and Sciences seminar (online) with the actors and writer-producers, who discussed the characters, the plot, and the production (“An Evening with *The Good Wife*,” 2011).

Second, you may select a television program that grapples with issues that interest you. What interests me about *The Good Wife* are the strong, professional women in the show. Each one has a different and complex personality, but they work as a team together with the male lawyers. Each episode has one court case, and I enjoy the way they uncover evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and interact with the judges. Perhaps there are issues that you would like to be involved in, and therefore you may select a television program about the law, medicine, crime, children, teenagers, reality, music, dance, science, animals, sports, or politics. Perhaps you are interested in how television presents information about disease or the environment. You may wish to observe how certain occupations are portrayed on television or how gender, age, race, and ethnicity are represented. Perhaps you would like to compare and contrast the ways in which the news is presented by different networks or by different anchors, or you may want to trace the human values that underlie the format and presentation of news stories. You may wish to examine certain sports coverage or look at the role of celebrities on television **talk shows**. You may be especially interested in a certain type of television program or a genre, whether it is a miniseries or reality-based television.

Third, you may want to attempt the application of a methodology to see what you can learn by applying it. You can examine how a narrative is shaped and structured, examine the conventions of genre, look for the various codes of television and try to extrapolate meaning from them, examine the characteristics of “families” and family values, look for evidence of the **postmodern** phenomena, and/or observe and evaluate the “look” and style of a television program. The following chapters present ways of observing, analyzing, and evaluating television programs. Chapter 9 consolidates those that precede it into a set of critical questions to ask of a television program.

Fourth, you may be interested in the making of a television show. Television programs are the result of the work of the creators, the executive producers, producers, writers, directors, actors, set designers, costumers, music directors, visual and sound editors, camera operators, and other staff, who may or may not be an independent production company. You can enjoy the convenience of the vast amount of information on a program’s website. You can usually access character back-stories and interviews with the actors, producers, and other staff. Their creative work and the ways in which a television show is initiated and produced is the subject of Chapter 2, “Demystifying the Business of Television.”

SUMMARY

Criticism is the practice of informed judgment through which a person understands, evaluates, and communicates to others the what, how, and why something is considered to be of quality. The result can illuminate, enlighten, and bring about appreciation for that which is criticized. Television criticism can bring about a fuller and richer understanding of people’s reactions to a television program. Because television is ubiquitous in society, it is important to practice sound television criticism. Not only will the television critic gain deeper understanding of the production process, aesthetics, and genre standards, but also

the critic can develop insight into cultural contexts and cultural norms inherent in the narrative and action of programs.

Television critics choose a program to criticize, watch the program in an alert state, determine what questions to ask, and choose or develop a methodology to answer the questions. The subsequent analysis and evaluation are then communicated to an audience.

Television criticism is subjective in that it subjects a program to interpretation through the critic's perceptual filters. Television criticism can also be persuasive in that it can alter the perceptions of viewers.

Television production and distribution is a business dependent upon advertising and subscriptions as well as audience support. Television production develops a "look," a visual style that should enhance the narrative as well. Mainstream representations of race, gender, sexuality, age, and occupation reflect societal changes and new norms. Narratives on fiction and nonfiction television reinforce cultural values. Television programs and their scheduling are bound by genres. These aspects, all of which you should be familiar with as a television critic, are explored in each of the parts of this book.

EXERCISES

1. Think of a time in your life when you received personal and constructive criticism. How did it help you in a positive way? Did it change you in any way?
2. Make a list of what you can gain from being an informed television critic.
3. What does it mean to be a "transformer" when you are a television critic?
4. Read an example of television criticism online or in a newspaper like *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, or any other major newspaper, or go to <http://www.tvcritics.org> and find the list of critics. Read a few critiques. What does the journalistic television criticism tell you? Do you think it is objective? Does it persuade you to watch a particular show?
5. What does it mean to say that television criticism is subjective? What does it mean to say that television criticism is persuasive?
6. Watch both a fiction and a nonfiction television program of your choice. Analyze your own perceptions of the content. Does this reveal your own biases and past experiences?
7. Have you ever been influenced by someone else to watch a particular television program? If so, did you continue watching the same program?
8. Have you ever been persuaded to adopt a hairstyle, a type of clothing, or an attitude because you observed it in a television program?
9. Can you name the "brand identity" of the television cable station that you watch on a regular basis? How do you regard yourself in terms of that brand?

10. Watch a television show such as *Leverage*, *Damages*, *Army Wives*, *NCIS*, or any of the episodic dramas. Can you identify true-to-life events in the story?
11. How do you, as a television viewer, participate when you watch? Do you fill in the blanks or predict what will happen?
12. Why is it important for a television critic to take television seriously?
13. What does the desire/satisfaction formula mean from a television business perspective?
14. What should you consider when you select a television show to criticize?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Archive of American Television. Half-hour interviews with television actors, producers, writers, casting directors, and other production staff. <http://www.emmys.tv/foundation/archive>. Also <http://www.tvinterviewsarchive.blogspot.com> for access and links to the newest interviews.

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