

## How to Study Television: a conversation

### Jason Mittell

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(a cura di Valeria Cavalloro e Filippo Gobbo)

Osservando il panorama degli studi dedicati alla serialità televisiva, e in generale alla storia della televisione, salta agli occhi la presenza di una serie di fratture che attraversano il campo degli osservatori e separano punti di vista diversi in bolle discorsive che a volte sembrano andare alla deriva le une rispetto alle altre. Specialisti di *television studies*, critici letterari, storici della cultura, opinionisti, persino il pubblico occasionale che oggi, grazie alla rete, ha la possibilità di sviluppare un discorso critico su ciò che vede: uno sciame di prospettive che partono da presupposti diversi – di analisi testuale, di sistema industriale, di uso ricreativo – e trasformano “la televisione” in tante diverse televisioni.

Abbiamo chiesto a Jason Mittell, docente di American studies e Film and media culture al Middlebury College, autore del fondamentale *Complex Tv* e curatore, insieme a Ethan Thompson, della raccolta di saggi *How to Watch Television*, di concederci una breve conversazione sui problemi che ruotano attorno al discorso accademico (ma non solo) sui prodotti televisivi: dalla necessità di integrare una molteplicità di prospettive specialistiche diverse alla definizione (im)possibile di un canone televisivo, fino al ruolo del gusto personale nei nostri processi di valutazione e analisi.

La speranza di questo breve scambio, di cui ringraziamo nuovamente Jason Mittell, è di mettere un ponte attraverso la spaccatura che sembra separare la televisione vista e studiata dai critici letterari e la televisione vista e studiata dagli specialisti di *tv* e di *media studies*. Ma anche un ponte tra lo sguardo del lettore-spettatore critico, che osserva i programmi televisivi tenendo sempre alta la guardia dei propri strumenti analitici (tanto più allertati in quanto assediati dalla presenza di uno stigma culturale non ancora disperso), e lo sguardo ingenuo e in qualche modo “di grado zero” che persiste in noi in quanto pubblico di questi programmi: quel livello di apprezzamento e giudizio sempre presente, anche se non sempre articolato, che chiama in causa le nostre preferenze personali immediate e che spesso tendiamo a rimuovere dal dibattito accademico sulla televisione, anche se può offrirci uno strumento aggiuntivo per mettere a fuoco i meccanismi che stanno alle spalle dei nostri discorsi.

**Valeria Cavalloro - Filippo Gobbo:** *First of all, we would like to thank you for taking the time for this interview. As literary critics, we thought that it would be useful talking about “our mutual issues”, so to speak, and in particular about the ideas of criticism, evaluative judgment, personal taste, and canon in our respective fields. We can begin talking about your idea of television criticism against other ones, outside and inside your academic field. For example, in the introduction to *How to Watch Television*,<sup>1</sup> you and Ethan Thompson distinguished a pop “thumbs up/down” model of criticism from a complex one (that doesn’t coincide necessarily with a particular method). What are the main differences between these two models?*

**Jason Mittell:** I think that the common sense practice of television evaluation is to judge whether a particular program is good or bad – certainly many streaming platforms have embraced such a rating system, often with thumbs up and down icons. And yes, each of us can certainly fall into this mode of binary judgment, asserting whether we like or dislike any given program. But television is always more than just an aesthetic form that might be evaluated on such merits – television is something that is used by viewers in a broad variety of contexts. Most people consume television in an array of different ways, and a program that fits well into one of those contexts might fail in another – for instance, a series that demands a great deal of engagement might be great if you can watch it with such attention, but it would be quite bad for television while you’re folding laundry or riding a stationary bike. Sometimes we watch to relax, to learn, to get immersed, to escape, etc. Thus instead of asking “is a given television program good?” we might ask “what is a given television program good for?”.

That’s all true to a degree of any medium, but both the experience of television and how it’s evolved means that it serves a broader array of purposes than most media. So while literature might have some different uses – think of a “beach read” vs. a challenging experimental novel that needs close analysis – television is something we watch in a wide range of situations for an equally broad number of reasons: for news, for entertainment, for distraction, for community, for aesthetic engagement, etc. The idea that all of those purposes and contexts could be distilled into a thumbs up or down is untenable.

1 *How to Watch Television*, eds. E. Thompson, J. Mittell, New York University Press, New York and London 2013. Il volume ha recentemente ispirato una raccolta di saggi che ne riprende esplicitamente lo spirito pluralista e interdisciplinare: *Come guardare la televisione*, a cura di L. Barra e F. Guarnaccia, minimumfax, Roma 2021.

**VC.-FG.:** *You and Thompson talk about «how to watch» rather than «what to watch». In your mind, is this a rigid distinction, or could it be a relation of mutual exchange? In other words, can we learn «how to watch television» in a way to understand better «what to watch» on television?*

**JM.:** Definitely. There are certainly some programs whose mode of engagement needs to be understood before diving in and appreciating it. For example, American daytime soap operas have very particular styles and rhythms that developed over decades – If someone turned on an episode without understanding those traditions, they would certainly find it off-putting and confusing, especially if they were more used to primetime dramas. But once you learn to understand soap operas on their own terms and contexts, they can be quite enjoyable – but you need to know how to watch them to justify watching them. (Abigail De Kosnik's chapter in the book does a great job of orienting readers on how to watch soap operas!).<sup>2</sup>

I think there are broader cultural assumptions and norms that value particular uses and modes of engagement over others. There's no doubt that we generally value serious dramas over goofy comedies, or documentaries over reality competitions, and that's because the functions of education or emotional empathy are more valued than having a good laugh or vicarious participation in a contest. But I think we should avoid projecting those cultural hierarchies onto the programs themselves, but instead evaluate them each based on what they set out to do on their own terms. Because there are many times when a good laugh is much more valuable than learning about a serious topic!

**VC.-FG.:** *Reading academic studies of television, we get the impression that they are more focused on contextual aspects (industrial, reception, and so on) than on textual ones. The overall impression is that in-depth text analysis of great television series is more likely to be found in the newspaper (or magazines) that publish the work of TV critics (Sepinwall, Nussbaum, Zoller Seitz), or just left to fandoms. Is it true? What's your stance on that?*

**JM.:** I think that's partially true. To me, the two most common modes of television studies are contextual (concerning production and reception, for instance), and representational, analyzing the meaning in a text via a political lens. Much of my scholarship does cover those grounds as well, but I have also attended to formal aspects of television more than the field tends to (although certainly I am not alone – Jeremy Butler, Trisha Dunleavy, and Sean O'Sullivan are other scholars who have done great work on this front, just to name a few). Sometimes my work aims to connect formal

2 A. De Kosnik, *One Life to Live: Soap Opera Storytelling*, in *How to Watch Television. Second edition*, eds. E. Thompson, J. Mittell, New York University Press, New York and London 2020, pp. 70-78.

concepts with the more political and contextual ones, and blur the divide between these approaches – that’s the purpose of my book *Genre and Television*.<sup>3</sup> But I also felt like television’s formal attributes changed significantly in the 21st century, and thus I have tried to account for that via the analysis of its historical poetics, especially concerning serial storytelling.

But one thing I particularly like about television studies is that the lines between academic criticism and popular / journalistic work are more blurry than in a lot of other fields. All the critics you mention (and many others) are incredibly insightful writers and well-versed in the history of the medium. Some prominent critics have academic backgrounds as well, like James Poniewozik and Kathryn VanArendonk, and all of these journalistic critics are attentive to contextual, political, and formal analysis to different degrees. Coupled with that, the rise of the internet has meant that more academics are engaging in public scholarship and reaching a broader audience than just other scholars, so many of us write in a more accessible and public-facing way. One of the goals of *How to Watch Television* was to feature scholars writing television criticism for a non-specialist audience, highlighting the benefits of the discipline’s insights to all readers.

**VC.-FG.:** *In your 2015 book Complex Tv,<sup>4</sup> there is a chapter titled «Evaluation». It’s maybe the most important for understanding your idea of criticism. There, you claim that your personal preferences and tendencies toward a TV show, as a viewer, could be important and, in some respect, have a critical value. Could you explain this idea?*

**JM.:** I think that television studies has a strange relationship to evaluation. On the one hand, it emerged in an environment where the medium was viewed skeptically (at best) by academia, so its academic analysis needed to be framed as *critical* in the “negative” dimension of the term. And most of that criticism was aimed at the political problems with most television, ranging from reinforcing sexism and racism, to fueling dominant consumer capitalism, to misinforming viewers about public affairs – It was just generally assumed that television was aesthetically barren or at least “less than” compared to film, literature, and theater. When scholars did provide positive evaluations, it was primarily political, praising progressive politics, groundbreaking representations, or satirical boldness of particular programs.

3 J. Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, Routledge, London 2004.

4 J. Mittell, *Complex Tv. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York University Press, New York and London, 2015.

On the other hand, one of the primary topics of study for television scholars was reception, especially fandom, where evaluation is a huge dimension of the experience. So evaluation, in terms of taste judgments and aesthetic pleasure, was on the agenda of television studies, but it was held at a remove: we study other people's taste practices, but not our own. And yet many of the programs that people chose to write about were the ones they loved (see the glut of *Buffy* scholarship in the early 2000s and beyond), even if that love could not speak its name. So I think that returning to evaluation out in the open is both more honest, and can get us to engage with aspects of the experience of television that were not on the field's agenda for many years.

What can we learn by engaging with this evaluative practice? I think quite a lot, although it will certainly vary by critic and case study. For me, I felt like putting my own taste under a microscope helped me better understand the differences and distinctions between three of the most lauded primetime dramas of this century, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*. In the book, I try to understand why I love the first two and dislike the latter; in doing so, I gained real insights into how each works as a serial narrative and aesthetic experience, and hopefully conveyed those ideas to readers. Did I convince anyone to love *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* or dislike *Mad Men*? Perhaps, but that was not my goal. I wanted to provide a perspective on how I experienced these series, and share my own aesthetic engagement with these texts. I love reading such criticism, where I gain insight into the critic's experience watching a series and then can reflect on how it relates to my own. Alas, the majority of such work is in the realm of popular criticism more than academia (although I do think video essays are a space where personal aesthetic engagements are more commonly expressed by scholars than via written scholarship).

**VC-FG.:** *At one point, you write: «I fully acknowledge that my identity is similar to the class habitus that has long policed traditional aesthetic judgments». This sentence opens your arguments to an idea of television criticism that reaches out to other “readers” of television storytelling, to involve in the conversation a wider range of perspectives. How do you picture this dialogical and pluralist approach, especially as long as evaluation (and de-evaluation) is concerned?*

**JM.:** When I write up my views on *Mad Men*, for instance, I am not trying to persuade you to dislike the series along with me. I am trying to share how I experience the series. I acknowledge both that my *habitus* shapes my experience in ways that differ from other people's, and that I am a particularly atypical viewer in that I study television for a living – maybe that unique perspective is useful, as I hope I have more understanding of context and awareness of how television works than most viewers. What I hope you will do with my perspective is to try to reconcile it with your own, sharpe-

ning your own understanding of the series in light of mine. When I read or heard people explain what they loved about the series, I tried to figure out why I did not feel the same – again, not to convince them that they are wrong, but to make sense of the wide variation of ways that people experience and evaluate television, and perhaps nuance my own understanding. I don't see evaluation as an argument that anyone is supposed to win, but rather an ongoing conversation to explore the boundaries of taste.

I'll give a more recent example. I've recently been watching *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, after my daughters both told me how much they loved it. I was late to watching the series, partly out of having too much to watch in general, and partly because one of my favorite critics, Emily Nussbaum, had written a scathing review of the series that made me think that I would not like it. Well, my daughters were right and Emily was wrong – at least for me. I'm not going to claim that my daughters are better television critics than Emily Nussbaum, but in this case, my experience and pleasure better aligns with my family than Nussbaum. After watching much of the series, I reread Nussbaum's review – I understand her critique, but disagree with most of it. Ultimately, what she wants from the series is not what I want, and thus our expectations and experiences are completely different. I'm convinced that I'm reading the series the "right way," and that she is approaching it with unreasonable expectations, but I wouldn't try to convince her of that. And yet I learned something about the series and my own experiences from reading her critique, which I find satisfying.

**VC-FG.:** *During the last century, one may say that academic fields, in Bourdieu's terms, like literary studies, film studies, and so on, were one of the most important institutions in the making of a canon. As a professor of media culture, do you think television studies could have the same role in making a "television canon", or the contemporary television landscape is characterized by too wide a variety of distributed programs and too complex interactions of different actors in the reception phase to ever boil down to a selection of "canonic" titles?*

**JM.:** I think both are true. Realistically, television is so wide-ranging and multifaceted that there can be no singular canon for the entire medium, but certainly there can be specific canons by genre, nation, era, etc. And there have been for decades, reinforced by a combination of popular criticism, commercial availability, and academic practice (especially teaching). I presume that anybody who takes a course in television studies in the United States will learn about and probably watch episodes of *I Love Lucy*, *All in the Family*, and *The Simpsons*. This is not just because they are great sitcoms (which they all are), but because they are important landmarks in the history of the medium and American culture more broadly. There are other series that I love and think should be better known and celebrated – for instance *Soap* and *Taxi*, two of my favorite all-time sitcoms – but I don't tea-

ch either because they don't feel as crucial to be exposed to in an introductory course. So with a medium spanning so many different areas, I think that canon is often tied to "historical importance" much more than taste evaluations.

But I think that the television industry plays a much more direct role in canon formation by structuring access to programs. Some genres, like reality TV or talk shows, simply are not readily available beyond their immediate broadcast, so it's very difficult to construct a canon when most of the texts cannot be seen. Even more widespread genres have gaps in availability due to commercial issues; for instance, *Homicide: Life on the Street* is certainly one of the greatest cop shows in the medium's history, but it is not available on any streaming service, and thus can only be seen by the shrinking few who have access to DVDs. (Thankfully I do, so my students get to watch an episode!) Not to mention that I'm only talking about American television, so global circulation and availability makes things even more complicated. Because of all these factors, I do not see canon formation as particularly central to the work of television studies, especially compared to other disciplines and traditions.

**VC.-FG.:** *For many years television was condemned by critics as a "bad object". Although the times are changing and, in some respect, critical labels as "quality tv" testify a different judgment about this medium, a sort of "suspicious view" about it still remains. So, after talking about the problems of how and what to watch, we would ask you why watch television?*

**JM.:** Like I suggested earlier, television is good for so many functions, and I certainly use it in a range of ways. I will say that, reflecting from the present moment in May 2021 after over a year of isolated living in a pandemic, I actually watch a lot less television than most people would presume. So much time has been spent staring at screens for daily activities that watching television has felt less of a relaxing alternative than just another screen to watch. But the pleasure of watching that still motivates is to get sucked into an ongoing narrative – I love connecting with characters, investing in a storyworld, and thinking about what will happen next. No medium is better at that type of storytelling today, so that's why I keep watching television.