Robert Dunks


I used *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* with its unofficial predecessor, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER…* by Robert J. Thompson, for an upper-division television class (composed of junior and senior undergraduates) at a major American university. The two texts worked well together: Thompson’s book provides a full introduction to American Quality TV with definitions and a history from its roots with anthology dramas of the fifties to an in-depth look at American Quality between the years of 1981 and 1991; *Quality Television* picks up where *Television's Second Golden Age* ends, focusing on recent network and cable Quality Television. With few supplemental texts, this pairing worked well for my plan of spending the first half of the quarter term introducing some key concepts of Quality TV and the history of Quality on US TV and of focusing on some of the most prominent Quality shows from HBO in the second half of the quarter.

Published following the “American Quality TV” conference at Trinity College, Dublin, in 2004, *Quality Television* is organized in three major parts, each with a specific focus: “Part 1: Defining Quality: Critical Judgements and Debate”; “Part 2: Defining Quality: Industry, Policy and Competitive Markets”; “Part 3: Defining Quality: Aesthetics, Form, Content.” The book also contains a preface by Thompson, an introduction by McCabe and Akass, a review of the conference by Karen Fricker in *The Irish Times* and a concluding section “Afterthoughts: Defining Quality: Into the Future” by Robert Pearson. The major parts of the text provide appropriately focused groups—for undergraduates and academic professionals—of articles dealing with Quality TV’s history, industry and aesthetics. Thompson’s preface, McCabe and Akass’s introduction and Fricker’s review provide a full, historical and critical context for understanding the foci of the subsequent major parts, particularly for advanced undergraduates. Pearson’s “Afterthought” uses an apt close reading of ABC’s *Lost* as a conclusion, which summarizes the book’s themes and definitions very well.

“Part 1: Defining Quality: Critical Judgements and Debate,” as the title suggests, focuses on expanding definitions of Quality in recent TV. The section starts with two articles that build on Thompson’s definitions of quality and ends strongly with three, especially valuable articles. Robin Nelson updates the definition of Quality to account for the last ten years particularly well in terms of industrial influences in the US and
the UK. Ashley Sayeau discusses the history of “relevant television”—in terms of women’s rights—as formative of the development of Quality in American TV. Finally, McCabe and Akass expand the definition of Quality TV by arguing that HBO has made the morally illicit an integral part of the channel’s version of Quality. Part 1 smoothly updates Thompson’s definitions and provides a nice transition to more recent historical, industrial and aesthetic scholarship about Quality TV.

“Part 2: Defining Quality: Industry, Policy and Competitive Markets” starts with an article that discusses the industrial history of Comedy Central leading up to and including its “tent-pole programme” The Daily Show. The highlight of the section is producer/writer Peter Dunne’s inside look at the American Television industry and his struggles to produce Quality dramas. Dermot Horan discusses the practices of importing American Quality TV to the UK. Part 2 ends with two articles that discuss the use UK and New Zealand television make of American Quality TV, the first of which, by Ian Goode, is in part an interesting close reading of CBS’s CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. Despite its focus on “Competitive Markets,” Part 2 is valuable for American students as an introduction to the industry side of Television.

“Part 3: Defining Quality: Aesthetics, Form, Content” is, perhaps, the strongest of the three major sections. It starts with Jane Feuer’s article on HBO, which complicates the notion of “quality” through an insightful reading of Six Feet Under. Jonathan Bignell continues to complicate the term in his discussion of aesthetics in American crime dramas: particularly those of the CSI franchise. Máire Messenger Davies discusses authorship and writing in Quality TV from a Marxist standpoint using the Star Trek franchise as a case study. Mark Lawson and Peter Kaye submit two interviews, with David Chase of The Sopranos and theme music scorer W.G. “Snuffy” Walden, respectively. While both interviews are hugely valuable to the student of American Quality Television, Lawson’s is all the more important for its comprehensiveness. The section ends with a summary-heavy essay on Television companion books.

Quality Television is, for the overwhelming part, a valuable centerpiece for any advanced undergraduate class focusing on American Quality TV. If there is a weakness in Quality Television at all, it is that the book, at times, focuses on factors foreign to American students—which I think begs the question “why do American universities largely fail to provide students with adequate coverage of Television and criticism from outside the US?”—which the book readily “admits” with the “and Beyond” portion of its title. Another potential weakness is that the book’s articles, as responses to the same call for papers, sometimes significantly overlap in terms of their definitions of “Quality TV,” a concern which an instructor can easily address with judicious assignment of articles for her/his class to read. Despite these two minor concerns about the text, Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond was a welcome addition, for the students and me, to our Quality TV class. Any instructor wishing to teach or to address significantly American Quality TV in a college-level classroom would do well to consider seriously adding this book to her or his reading list.

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Notes
2 Robert J. Thompson, Television’s Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER: Hill Street Blues, St. Elsewhere, Cagney & Lacey, Moonlighting, L.A. Law, Thirtysomething, China Beach, Twin Peaks, Northern Exposure, Picket Fences, with Brief Reflections on Homicide, NYPD Blue, Chicago Hope, and Other Quality Dramas (Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 1997).