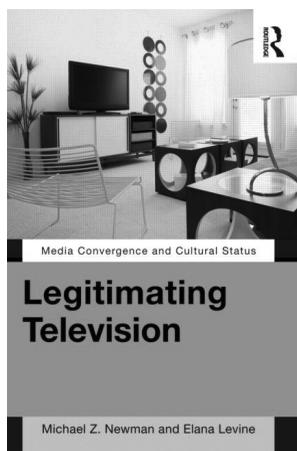


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Book Review: Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*



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Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status is a warning, a timely critique against problematic discourses surrounding the legitimation of television. As scholars and critics, we often fall into traps: we are so eager to praise that which we believe to be art that we regurgitate clichés and, if we are not careful, perpetuate hierarchies of value judgments founded in categories of race, class, and gender. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's belief that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,"¹ Newman and Levine expose current scholarly assessments of "Quality Television" to be detrimental to the field of television studies and potentially to society itself.

Newman and Levine's quarrel is not with television, nor is it with the celebration of exceptional television programming, an exercise in which they wholeheartedly participate themselves. Rather, it is with an increasingly prevalent mode of discourse that applauds these shows by actively separating them from the medium itself, its history, its industrial norms, and its reputation. From Robert Thompson's *Television's Second*

Golden Age, to David Lavery's collected essays on *Twin Peaks*, to Peter Kramer's famous claim that "American television is now better than the movies,"² scholarly works on quality television often attempt to elevate shows to a sphere reserved for more legitimated art forms, like literature and now cinema. This approach suggests that television was something to be fixed, that it has evolved to the point of transcending the medium itself to emerge as true art.

Challenging discourses of quality television is not necessarily a new pursuit. When the British government's 1988 White Paper, *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice, and Quality*, "opened the British skies" to satellite television, Charlotte Brunson responded with one of the first scholarly interrogations of common quality discourses.³ By dissecting various methods of value determination (e.g., star systems in a local paper), Brunson exposed the inherent problems of defining quality in a process so informed by subjectivity. Yet, the landscape of television has changed drastically in light of deregulation, technological advancements,

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and shifting producer-fan relationships—all transformations that require further academic attention and a critical eye toward the programs we deem “quality” and why.

Newman and Levine draw from a range of critical essays that question the terms and experiences used to define quality. In 2003, Mark Jankovich and James Lyons sought to conquer a “vaguely auteurist appraisal” of shows and their creators, instead crediting the wealth of economic strategies enabled by a free market and declining network control. Niche targeting and the hunt for valuable viewer demographics with disposable income invited programs that did not need mass appeal or ratings to survive, especially on subscription channels like HBO and Showtime.⁴ Scholars like Robin Nelson have updated this sentiment, citing digitalization and improved production values as further reasons for television’s newfound legitimation. The more programs look like cinema, according to Nelson, the more suited they appear to critical attention and analysis.⁵

Applauding some television, however, inevitably leads to the denigration of an “other.” Quality is often portrayed as a significant improvement on that which has come before or a welcome escape from “lesser” genres like reality and soap opera. Newman and Levine convincingly aver that these distinctions have considerable repercussions, creating an elite class of television viewers with the income to afford premium channels, tools of education to critically “read” programs, and cultural capital to determine and define superior programming. In short, discourses of legitimation establish a class hierarchy that reclaims television from the masses and gives the upper class another art form in which to articulate and maintain superiority. Equally troubling is legitimation’s inherent reinforcement of gendered hierarchies. When scholars and critics distance the objects of their affection from the traditional television experience, they denigrate the feminized connotations that surround the medium, such as domestic, passive, and superficial. As is often the case with the humanities and the academy’s attempt to establish a medium-specific canon, those in power dictate and institutionalize that which keeps them in power.

Newman and Levine set out to expose the power structures behind television’s legitimation, systematically introducing and challenging the discourses that currently surround the concept of quality. The authors explore every angle of the industry, from production to reception, genre to format, fandom to scholarship, clarifying complex arguments and revealing their impact on quality discourse and society at large. The book’s impressive scope never muddles its concise delivery and its comprehensive, clearly demarcated structure leaves no stone unturned.

In the chapter “Another Golden Age,” Newman and Levine find the “claims of television’s present-day value” to be ahistorical and problematic, often ignoring several efforts to legitimate television in the past.⁶ Furthermore, these claims situate this new Golden Age’s quality as a natural progression, rather than a result of longstanding economic practices and industrial strategies. For example, CBS’s lineup upgrade in the 1970s (including programming like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* [1970-77]) marked a deliberate attempt to appeal to a more “valuable demographic,” one with considerable disposable income.⁷ Yet, a fundamental technique in legitimating certain television lies in delegitimizing others. When critics hailed *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) in the 1980s, they did so largely in terms that separated and elevated it from the rest of television—encouraging a focused, intent, and engaged television viewer as a break from the feminized norm, as well as granting superior cultural capital through sophisticated taste. Accordingly, “Golden Age” rhetoric in the 1980s applauded the tastes of viewers who sought out more intellectually demanding, and supposedly rewarding, programs, allowing them to dictate and occupy a hierarchy that distanced them from the masses and the negative connotations of mindless mass consumption historically associated with the medium.

The concurrent trend of exalting “The Showrunner as Auteur,” discussed in the third chapter, assigns programs an “author” whose creative vision permeates every frame, aligning quality TV with more respectable art forms.⁸ In doing so, scholars equate the contributions of a showrunner to more respected artistic positions, such as director, composer, or painter. Hailing the singular impact of showrunners (i.e., David Simon

of *The Wire* [2002-2008] and Matthew Weiner of *Mad Men* [2007-]) denies the collaborative space of television production and rejects another quintessential element of the medium.

In their most illuminating chapter, “Upgrading the Situation Comedy,” Newman and Levine point out the class associations tied to the two different styles of sitcom. The single-cam series is hailed for its capacity to experiment both visually and aurally, specifically in its ability to mimic cinema with the deliberate construction of shots. Meanwhile, the multi-cam sitcom is denigrated specifically for its televisual features, typically determined by its live recording in front of a studio audience: flat lighting, proscenium-style sets, entrances and exits. Multi-cam shows like *Two and a Half Men* (2003-) are more popular with the masses, but maligned by quality viewers for their unnatural laugh tracks and reliance on obvious punch lines. Thus, discourses of legitimation that contrast the two styles allow the “sophisticated” elite to express taste in a manner that maintains and extends class-based hierarchies.

Newman and Levine move from insightful genre analysis to a thorough exploration of shifting formal elements linked to technological advancement. In “The Television Image and the Image of Television,” Newman and Levine trace changes in the television image as fundamental to legitimation discourse. Aspect ratio and widescreen formats, for example, were enlisted in order to make movies look better on television, effectively allowing the television image to evolve for the primary purpose of showcasing another, more respected medium. Furthermore, the move to high definition has largely emphasized the picture quality of sports, action movies, and similar masculine fare as a way for men to regain control of a medium historically tied to femininity.

With their final chapter, “Television Scholarship and/as Legitimation,” Newman and Levine prove admirably self-reflexive about their position as television scholars, retroactively framing their argument in terms of cultural capital that they acquired through years of media education. What is especially hard to digest about their argument, and they aptly address this concern, is how one can praise a television program at all without participating in detrimental discourses of legitimation. As television archives become less ephemeral, evolving from video to DVD to the internet, the pressure to establish a canon of great television programs has only increased. In such an exciting time for television and fan communities, the desire to compile a list of supreme texts should not necessarily be ignored. However, this desire should be recognized as subjective and eternally open to change.

Newman and Levine offer a threefold solution. First, one must be wary of declaring something “fresh” or “new” without exhibiting a firm grip of television history, especially the cyclical and constant presence of legitimation in not just TV, but all humanities. Secondly, one must always remember that television is a business, that a program is a combination of several economic conditions and industrial practices, of technology and style, and of individual voices within collaborations. Lastly, one must recognize that everyone brings their own background and experiences to a television program, inevitably leading to varying levels and degrees of reception. This does not mean we should stop searching for and determining what is quality. It only means that the practice of legitimating television should continue to be opened up and questioned, rather than institutionalized. This exercise will prove crucial to the future of television studies.

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End Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6.
- 2 Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996); David Lavery, ed. *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996); Quoted in Mark Jankovich and James Lyons, "Introduction," in *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*, ed. Jankovich and Lyons (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 1.
- 3 Charlotte Brunson, "Problems with Quality," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 67-90.
- 4 Mark Jankovich and James Lyons, "Introduction," in *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*, ed. Mark Jankovich and James Lyons, (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 2.
- 5 Robin Nelson, "Quality TV Drama," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American TV & Beyond*, ed. James McCabe and Kim Akass, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 43.
- 6 Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 15.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 22.