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AESTHETICS OF TELEVISION CRITICISM: MAPPING CRITICS' REVIEWS IN AN ERA OF INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION[☆]

Denise D. Bielby, Molly Moloney and Bob Q. Ngo

ABSTRACT

Television critics play a central role in the interpretation of cultural forms, objects, and productions. In contrast to critics in elite art worlds, the role and status of television critics are less institutionalized and less well understood. One indicator of the degree and status of the institutionalization of critics' roles is the codification of evaluative criteria and critical practices. Our research examines whether critics in television draw upon a recognizable set of evaluation criteria, and if so, whether that repertoire of aesthetic concepts increasingly parallels criteria employed by critics in elite art worlds. Using multidimensional scaling to delineate television criticism over the last two decades, a period of considerable

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transformation in the industry, we find that television criticism attends to a core set of conventional criteria. These include appraisal of formal aesthetic elements, signaling increased attention to television as an art form, while retaining consideration of factors such as entertainment value that are of interest to audiences and business constituencies alike.

INTRODUCTION

Critics play a central role in the interpretation of cultural forms, objects, and productions. According to Griswold (1987), in serving their audiences critics comprehend and explain cultural objects in relation to larger, external systems of meaning. Comprehension takes into consideration the internal structure, patterns, and symbolic carrying capacities of cultural objects. In order to comprehend and explain, critics draw upon the intention or purpose of the artistic creation, taking into account the larger cultural context that shapes or constrains the reproduction of the object. In varying ways, critics' judgments are relevant to audiences as they make choices about and evaluate cultural objects.

The role of critics is institutionalized in elite art worlds (Becker, 1982; Long, 1986, 1987; Gans, 1974). In those realms, critical authority resides in designated experts to which all art world participants orient. In high art, audience members do not make autonomous personal judgments about the quality of an art form but instead are expected to defer to the expert judgment of cultural critics. Within critical public discourse, differences of opinion as well as consensus among art world participants are indicators of critics' status. Another indicator of their institutionalized position is the proliferation of formal training in criticism and interpretation offered by departments of art and film studies, among others, at institutions of higher education (Bordwell, 1989). Those programs not only affirm the role, function, and status of critics, they also define aesthetic criteria for critical analysis in elite art worlds.

In contrast to the accepted role and function of critics in elite art worlds, their status in non-elite art worlds is both less institutionalized and less well understood. To some scholars, critics are viewed as unnecessary in popular art worlds such as television, popular literature, or musicals because the experience of popular art forms is regarded as direct and unmediated by aesthetic valuation (Shrum, 1996). Indeed to those scholars, the very differentiation between elite and non-elite art worlds lies in the extent to which

understanding of cultural objects is mediated by professional critics. While critical discourse is possible within popular culture, in their view it is the absence of the audience's deferral to critical authority that differentiates elite from non-elite art worlds. Consequently, there had until recently been little scholarly attention devoted to the aesthetics of popular culture, and particularly neglected has been the role of critics in shaping these aesthetic systems (Bielby & Bielby, 2004).

Since Becker's (1982) seminal work on art worlds, scholars have noted a tendency toward aesthetic codification as part of the development of elite art worlds generally, and developments pertaining to the television industry suggest a similar evolution may be underway. Aesthetics are systems through which attributions of value are made regarding cultural objects. Although aesthetic systems are integral to the operation of art worlds, sociological analysis has yet to fully engage how consideration of the aesthetic properties of the cultural product itself enters into judgments about the value of cultural objects.¹ Research on audience engagement of melodramatic narratives (Brooks, 1976; Gledhill, 1992), romance novels (Radway, 1984), soap operas (Harrington & Bielby, 1995), and popular music (Dowd, 1993; Frith, 1998) indicates consumers make discernments within these popular cultural forms, and increasingly, scholars have challenged the presumption that there is no aesthetic to popular art forms (Bielby & Bielby, 2004; Bird, 2003; Frith, 1998; Gans, 1974). Such developments underscore the importance of rethinking traditional distinctions between elite and popular culture (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson, 2002; Han, 2003).

Early sociological research on mass media such as television, popular literature, film, and theater suggested that professional critics of these art forms serve as cultural mediators between cultural products and their audiences, not unlike critics in elite art worlds (Lang, 1958).² The research also found that critics in popular media operate within a complex system of cultural production, which is driven by overtly commercial considerations; often these critics must work hand-in-hand with those who oversee venues for display or distribution of products in order to create markets for those works, calling their professional objectivity into question. However, Becker's (1982) research on critics in elite art worlds revealed that they too are engaged, however obliquely, with market concerns. Because art critics provide audiences with reasoning that renders a product acceptable and worth appreciating and actively contribute to the process of bringing an audience to an artist's work, they are potentially no less involved in the commercial viability or success of a cultural product.

Our research is part of a larger project to examine the role, function, and status of critics and criticism in commercial popular art worlds. The objective of the analysis reported here is to ascertain the nature of television criticism and the extent to which evaluative criteria have become conventional. We do so by asking: (1) whether television critics draw on a recognizable set of evaluation criteria that orient to aesthetic considerations; (2) if so, whether that repertoire is oriented to "elite art" criteria; and, (3) whether and how these repertoires may be changing over time. Our interests are motivated by several considerations.

First, the proliferation of cable channels and networks over the last two decades represents one of the most significant shifts in the structure of the industry since the launch of commercial television in the late 1940s. This expansion has, in turn, encouraged more varied and perhaps more adventurous and artistically mature products, not unlike those produced during the so-called "Golden Age" of television in the 1950s. Since then, the medium has evolved from one concerned with a live, theatrical-world focus to filmed and videotaped programming of infinite variety. Television is now a ubiquitous form of popular entertainment domestically as well as globally, and although its presence is often publicly challenged, it is just as widely accepted by scholars and audiences alike as an important social force in everyday life (Gamson, 1998; Lembo, 2000; Grindstaff, 2002).

Second, research on the film industry has shown how efforts by its leaders, in collaboration with public intellectuals, transformed the cultural definition of film from a mass-oriented commercial one to a medium that may now also be regarded as an art form. That transformation occurred largely through the intellectualization of critical discourse (Baumann, 2001) and the emergence of the "scholarly critic" as a profession distinct from that of the journalistic film reviewer and critic. In a similar fashion, coverage of the television industry and review of its programs, which entered public cultural discourse through newspapers and other periodicals, receives more attention through analysis devoted to the medium as general news and as business, as well as arts and entertainment. In addition, television critics are understood to possess specialized knowledge, they have established a non-profit professional organization to advance professional autonomy and status, and "television studies" programs now exist in some universities (Newcomb, 1986; Spigel, 1998). In sum, a number of trends, including the increased "artiness" of television programs and legitimacy of television critics, suggest that the status of critics as knowledgeable experts to which participants in a non-elite art world like television orient is becoming institutionalized. If so, it should be evident in reviewers' critical appraisals of television programs,

but it remains to be determined to what extent and how these developments are reflected in their work.

CRITICISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

Aesthetics and Popular Culture

In defining what popular culture encompasses, Mukerji and Schudson (1991) consider it to be “the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population” (p. 3). Thus, popular culture entails the study of the properties of a cultural form, medium, or product, such as musical styles, film narratives, or television programs, for the cultural significance they embody. Accessibility of a form is central to achieving its status as “popular.” Scholars of cultural production usually conceptualize accessibility as how widely a cultural form is distributed (e.g., DiMaggio, 1977). In contrast, those who study reception among audiences emphasize their agency in creating access or generating novel meaning-making opportunities (see, e.g., Jenkins, 1992; Harrington & Bielby, 1995).

Although the prevailing definition of popular culture emphasizes that popular objects are “shared by entire communities” (Bennett, 1980, p. 3), surprisingly little sociological attention focuses on analysis of the properties or qualities of the popular culture objects that achieve this status of widespread knowledge or attention, or why those properties or qualities resonate broadly. Social critics and sociologists often presume that popular cultural products lack aesthetic quality and achieve popularity by striving for the lowest common denominator (see e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972 [1944]; Shrum, 1996). However, not all scholars subscribe to this view (Lang, 1957). Hall and Whannel (1964) concede that in order to achieve broad appeal the properties or qualities of popular cultural objects necessarily emphasize a sense of the familiar and of cultural knowledge widely shared. But to sustain popularity, those objects must also simultaneously incorporate sufficient novelty to perpetuate interest. In their words, popular art is understood to be “essentially a conventionalized art which restates in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which reassures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition” (p. 66).

Among sociologists, Gans (1974) was the first to argue that aesthetic criteria apply not just to “high” art, but equally to popular art forms. In

discussing aesthetic considerations in popular culture, he says:

I use the term aesthetic broadly, referring not only to standards of beauty and taste but also to a variety of other emotional and intellectual values which people express or satisfy when they choose content from a culture, and I assume, of course, that people apply aesthetic standards in all taste cultures, not just high culture (p. 14).³

Increasingly, work by cultural sociologists on a variety of art worlds points to the validity of Gans' argument that aesthetic standards exist in popular art worlds and to the importance of those aesthetic standards to the organization of and practices within those art worlds (see, for example, Lachmann's (1988) analysis of graffiti artists, where taggers' notions of style influence innovation, Dowd's (1993) work on the contribution of musical attributes to cyclical diversity, and Rosenblum's (1978a, b) work on professional photographers, which demonstrates how variation in photographic styles underlies paths of distribution).

Sociological understanding of the emergence, transformation, and current meaning and cultural significance of television criticism requires the analysis of transformations in a number of different spheres – changes in the television industry broadly and in the structural location of television critics within this culture world, specifically, but also transformations in the form and substance of the objects of the critics' attention: the television programs, and the television medium's changing relationship to other popular and elite forms of culture. These spheres, then, provide the necessary social context in which we must situate our analysis of the primary cultural object produced by professional television critics, the television review. Before turning to analysis of the reviews themselves, then, we elaborate the institutional and social context in which they are embedded, beginning first with the structural location of the critics themselves.

Structural Location of Television Critics

Television critics occupy a complicated structural location. There are no specialized venues for critics to reach "connoisseurs" of the medium; instead, most reviewers of prime-time programming write for mass-circulation newspapers and magazines. The product they write about reaches an audience largely through advertiser-supported network television. Network programmers will choose to air a series only if it seems likely to deliver the large audiences with characteristics preferred by advertisers, and they will avoid series with controversial content or themes that are likely to alienate advertisers. Unlike critics in elite art worlds, there is little opportunity for television critics to write about

“undiscovered” or promising new creators whose work is breaking new ground. Because of the economics of the industry, new ideas do not get produced until they have been evaluated by the business interests who screen out proposed series that appear not to be commercially viable.

However, the television industry is more fragmented today than in the early years, when the only way prime-time programming could reach an audience was through the three advertiser-supported networks. Public television has long been viewed as an industry segment less “tainted” by commercial considerations, and as a result a certain prestige has been attributed to the series it airs (including series that were considered mass entertainment when they originally aired in other countries). Subscriber-supported cable networks such as HBO and Showtime operate on a different business model that is not dependent on advertisers and audience demographics, and the series they air can be commercially successful without reaching a mass audience.

Television critics’ access to a readership is constrained by the business interests of the companies that employ them, and their access (and the audience’s) to the material they write about is constrained by the commercial interests of those who produce and broadcast the series they review. Over 40 years ago, Kurt Lang (1958) observed that the structural location of critics in relationship to audiences and business interests shapes the nature of criticism across a range of entertainment media. In the research reported here, we address how the complex business context of the television industry today affects critics’ view of their role relative to their readership, the creative community, their employers, and the networks and advertisers, and how it is reflected in the criticism they write.

Television Critics’ Status and Legitimacy

The complicated structural location of television critics is a significant factor in their ambiguous status as cultural authorities. One source of ambiguity is the social organization of the industry itself. Multiple constituents comprise the culture world of television⁴ – industry executives and other decision-makers such as advertisers, the “creative” community, which includes writers, directors, and producers, among others, and last but not least, the audience. Because a ratings “hit” cannot be predicted in advance of airing, and not until many thousands of dollars have already been committed to producing a show, these constituencies co-orient to each other in strategic ways. On the one hand, audiences are looking for assurance when selecting entertainment that their investment of (increasingly scarce) leisure time will

be rewarded. On the other, industry participants are most interested in critical assessments that predict the commercial viability of a program; these assessments are a primary kind of feedback upon which the industry relies to evaluate a program's potential performance in the ratings. Although critics' primary role is to evaluate programs for audiences for their potential entertainment value, those evaluations also provide critical feedback to members of the industry, for whom the commercial success of a program is all but impossible to predict. Critics are, to some extent, dependent upon business constituencies for access to advance screenings and to interviews with writers, producers, and actors. As in any cultural realm, providing critical and insightful analysis for audiences has the danger of alienating those upon whom the critics depend for access, and given the structure of the industry, the consequences for a critic's career may be considerable. Thus, the kind of criticism that gives a critic status among business constituencies may compromise her or his status among audience members, and vice versa.

Historical Evolution of Television Criticism

Focused newspaper coverage of television began when it was launched in the late 1940s, and reviewing became widespread in mass circulation dailies by the mid-1950s.⁵ Between 1953 and 1955, newspaper space devoted to television rose 500 percent, according to an NBC survey (reported in Boddy, 1990, p. 191). According to Himmelstein (1981), by 1958 nearly 80 percent of US daily newspapers with a circulation over 50,000 had television editors. In its early years, television criticism was written primarily by journalists who were experienced at theater criticism. Until the late 1950s, most national programming originated live from New York, and the centerpiece of primetime was dramatic anthologies written by playwrights. Thus, evaluation of the early form of the new medium of television could be readily accommodated by drama critics already familiar with the aesthetics and practices of the stage.

The status of critics within this culture world may reflect change in the television industry, its products, and their relationship to other cultural spheres and media forms. By 1960, live dramas were no longer produced for television, the center for production had shifted to Hollywood, and the dominant form of programming had become the filmed series (referred to as the "television"). In place of live dramatic anthologies, the primetime television schedule filled with program genres that predominate to this day – hour-long dramas, situation comedies, and detective shows, among others. Not only did the shift to filmed programming represent a significant

change in content and technology of production, it represented the emergence of the series concept that was organized according to a particular format. That format, now a well-established convention of television writing, is structured around the concept of the continuing character, with themes and plot ideas for the entire series established in the pilot episode (Boddy, 1990, p. 192). Although the shift in program production and format in the mid-1950s elicited discontent among television critics, which in turn elicited a hostile reaction toward the critics from network executives, the importance of television critics at the newspapers only increased, largely because the networks needed the newspapers as a venue for publishing and promoting their schedules (Spigel, 1998). A mutually beneficial relationship developed between the television and newspaper industries; the press depended on critics' access to the networks and local television stations for news, which in turn provided a steady stream of news for the papers.

Early research on television criticism found that reviews in daily mass circulation papers oriented differently to the audience when compared to reviews that appeared in more elite periodicals or even mass circulation outlets published on a weekly basis (Lang, 1958). According to this early work, reviews in mass readership outlets were largely framed in terms of "Will the viewer like the program?" rather than the more "public conscience" approach of elite publications, written from the perspective of "Should the viewer like a program?" (Lang, 1958, p. 15). Since the mid-1950s, general circulation newspapers have become the primary venue for access to information about television programs.

The nature and scope of the television critic's work has expanded considerably since the late 1940s. In television's earliest days, many newspapers marginalized coverage of the new medium because they saw it as a competitor for advertising revenue (Watson, 1985). Despite the expendable status of early television critics, many had experience in writing theater criticism for newspapers and were accustomed to the demands of writing on deadline and conforming to prescribed column length, among other journalistic constraints. Although the status of television critics has improved since then, and their importance is now widely recognized by newspapers, a newer set of job conditions have emerged to complicate the critic's ability to do their task effectively. Contemporary television critics describe the job as overwhelming, due in large measure to the sheer volume of television programming that needs to be reviewed. In addition, the scope of television reviewing now encompasses more than just the review of programs, it also includes coverage of industry news that affects what is broadcast. This added responsibility includes topics such as the Federal Communications Commission's oversight

of the industry, broadcast legislation in Congress, developments in the business of the industry, celebrity interviews, and general news items (Watson, 1985, p. 68). Observing how the definition of the critic's role has expanded in scope since its early days, one reviewer stated at a 1985 symposium on television that, "it is now a legitimate news beat." Recognizing the additional demands placed upon reviewers, some newspapers (e.g., the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*) have expanded their staffs to allow for more complete coverage of the medium and the industry.

Despite critics' increased status and expanded staffs at key newspapers, the now dual role of television critic and television reporter that many television critics must carry places them in what appears to be a more complicated relationship relative to the industry. As one critic put it, "... being a critic and a reporter puts a strain on you and your sources because they are never quite sure what hat you're wearing when you walk in the door" (Williams, quoted in Watson, 1985, p. 68). While early scholarship raised questions about critic's independence from the pressure of industry publicity (Lang, 1958), since then contemporary television critics have taken steps to distance themselves from it. In 1978, the Television Critics Association was established by television critics in an effort to professionalize their standing relative to the industry. This association, which meets during the television industry's semiannual preview of new programs, provides critics with a perspective on the industry they cover. An associated shift in coverage of the medium since its onset stems from the rise of the cult of the celebrity (Gamson, 1994). Although there has always been the opportunity, and pressure, to report on celebrities and other industry personalities, the expectation to incorporate softer news and gossip has increased since the launching of venues such as *Entertainment Tonight* in the 1980s or cable channel E! (Entertainment Television) in the 1990s, which are devoted to turning personal matters into public affairs. In short, the role of television critics has expanded in several ways. In addition to increased volume of programs to be reviewed, coverage of the television industry now includes two seemingly distinct categories, "hard news," which reports the business of the industry, and "soft news," which encompasses the culture of celebrity and gossip.

Elements of Popular Criticism

This issue of the structural location of television critics and the decisions they face regarding competing priorities and demands around which their criticism should be oriented or organized provides an important context for and represent potentially significant constraints upon the ultimate product

of the critics, their reviews. But it is also important to look at the nature of the cultural objects themselves as providing a crucial social context for the shaping of these reviews; this requires attention to specificities of the aesthetics of the television medium and its relationship to other aesthetic systems, art worlds, and media cultures.

Critics evaluate cultural objects relative to aesthetic systems. Aesthetic criteria for classifying works of arts as “beautiful,” “good,” “not art,” “bad,” and other expressive categories are formulated by those expert with the art form and applied by critics and consumers to arrive at judgments of value or worth. An aesthetic criterion does not exist in a vacuum. To provide understanding, those criteria must relate to each other and to the cultural object itself within an overall system that establishes the kinds of relations that are possible (Prall, 1967 [1936], p. 41).

The formulaic, genre-bound nature of primetime television constrains the degree to which critics engage in aesthetic analysis of its artistic properties. Genre delineates the similarities and differences among cultural objects, and as one of the central organizing conventions of television production, it provides “standards for evaluating and appreciating cultural objects” (Crane, 1992, p. 112). Because of the industry’s aversion to the risks that accompany innovation, and partly because of the audience’s preference for familiarity when seeking popular entertainment, the television industry has recognized two basic genres of primetime entertainment programming – situation comedies and dramas – with reality shows increasingly treated as a separate, third genre (Bielby & Bielby, 1994). When reviewing programs, “the television critic is on the lookout for novelty, quality, controversy, the new and different (as, to a degree, is the Broadway playgoer or art gallery habitué)” (Littlejohn, 1976, p. 152). Occasionally, such elements do manifest themselves in the aesthetic properties of the narrative, cinematography, acting, or other artistic features of production, but not often. While the conventions of primetime television may constrain the degree to which critics make aesthetic judgments based on artistic criteria, social analysis and commentary is not the only alternative. As television studies scholar Horace Newcomb (1974) emphasizes, television is entertainment. Consequently, television critics can also approach the medium from what might be called a “popular aesthetic,” a standard based on the degree to which a given production resonates affectively and achieves a level of emotional authenticity among viewers. The appreciation and evaluation of popular art forms like television is highly mediated, but by an aesthetic that is fully accessible to engaged audiences (see Bielby & Bielby, 2004).

Transformation in the Television Industry

The three major television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, dominated the television industry from the 1950s. However, the 1980s and 1990s gave rise to the proliferation of cable television and the emergence of new broadcast networks such as Fox, UPN, and WB, which brought to an end the era of television controlled by the three corporations instrumental to its establishment. The emergence of these newer "weblets" was a key trigger in the shift from mass programming and broadcasting to niche-marketing and narrowcasting strategies through emphasis (initially) on urban and African American audiences, with programs such as *In Living Color* (1990), teen and youth audiences drawn by series that included *Twenty-One Jump Street* and *90210*, and more generally, the 18–34 demographic, who found appeal in shows like *Married with Children* and *The Simpsons*. While Fox, by the early 1990s, tried to move toward a broader mass/mainstream audience, its early programming strategies were copied by UPN and WB, which were launched in 1995. Coinciding with this transformation in the over-the-air segment of the television industry was the rise of the cable industry. By 1985, almost 50% of US homes had cable distribution and the network share of viewers dropped to 70% from a 1960s high of over 90%. By 2002, the cable industry's audience had increased to nearly 70% of the public, while the combined over-the-air network share had fallen to less than 40% of overall audiences. The mid- to late-1990s brought the expansion of original programming on basic pay-cable networks such as Lifetime, HGTV, and Discovery, and premium subscriber networks such as HBO (with series such as *The Larry Sanders Show*, *Sex and The City*, *The Sopranos*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*) and Showtime (*Beggars and Choosers* and *The L Word*).

This transformation in the industry was facilitated by the deregulation of television and radio, starting in 1980 with Reagan appointee Mark Fowler, chair of the Federal Communications Commission from 1981 to 1987. The FCC's steady loosening of regulations culminated in late 1995 with the elimination of the Financial Interest and Syndication (or "Fin-Syn") Rules and in 1996 with the passage of the Telecommunications Act. The Fin-Syn Rules, implemented in 1971, had been designed explicitly to intervene in the market in order to promote diversity and competition in the supply of primetime entertainment programming and to forestall the kind of vertical integration that dominated the film industry during the studio era (Matelski, 2002; Rosenbaum & Williams, 1990; see also Bielby & Bielby, 2003). The Telecommunications Act, which was the first major revision of telecommunications law in nearly 62 years, raised existing caps on ownership of

broadcast stations and reduced prohibition against cross-ownership of cable and broadcast stations. The results of these series of deregulatory moves were massive media mergers in the 1980s and 1990s, including thousands of small ones, with the most prominent mergers being the 1985 acquisition of ABC by Capital Cities, the 1989 purchase of NBC/RCA by General Electric, the merger of Time Inc. with Warner, and Time/Warner Communications' subsequent acquisition in 1995 of Turner Broadcasting. That year also brought the subsequent merger of Disney with ABC, while Viacom merged with Paramount and CBS in 1999, and AOL with Time/Warner in 2000.

These shifts in the industry's regulatory environment, the first of real import since the early 1970s, mark the last two decades of television history as a period of significant structural transformation. The disaggregation of the mass audience into its constituent elements and the search for undeveloped ones alongside the rise of niche networks and specialized programming have opened up opportunities for television series that in some instances may be considered outright innovative and in others at least engaging unexplored terrain. We anticipate that these structural transformations are also consequential to the reception and appraisal of programs by television critics as well, which may be observed in the reviews they write of television series.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We analyzed newspaper reviews of all US television series debuting in the fall seasons of 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000, an era in which the culture industry of television underwent a significant transformation in modes of transmission, industry consolidation, and regulatory environment (Hilmes, 2003). The effect of these industry developments that began in the early 1980s on viewing options and critics' evaluative system could take time, consequently we collected reviews at five year intervals to allow for lags in outcome. Most television shows premiere in the fall and the majority of television critics' reviews are of new, rather than returning, series, and while reviews of returning shows tend to be highly selective (reviewing just a few shows) reviewers tend to be more systematic in their coverage of new shows (reviewing the majority, if not all, of the new series). Thus we chose to focus particularly on new fall series reviews, which represent the most coherent

subgroup of reviews. Articles were collected from the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Seattle Times* (1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000 seasons), and *USA Today* (1990, 1995, and 2000 seasons). These papers were selected to reflect a diverse range of publication sources. The *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* are all national or nationally prominent, with their reviewers read beyond the specific cities of publication (including through the syndication of their columns). The reviews at the *Boston Globe* and *Seattle Times* help round out this picture of television criticism, however, by introducing the reviews of critics more oriented toward specific, local markets.

The dataset consists of 540 reviews of television shows from 15 different writers in six different newspapers. While the *Boston Globe* and the *Los Angeles Times* made up a large portion of the sample (21.1% and 20.9%, respectively), each of the other individual papers made up at least 10% of the total sample. Fewer of the reviews were taken from 1985 (13.5%) than the other time periods, which ranged from 22% to 32%; however, in 1985 there were still only three national television networks and thus fewer new shows to review. For each review we recorded the author and source of the article, the subject of the review, the genre of the series (broadly categorized as drama, comedy, or non-fiction), whether or not the reviewer's evaluation of the television show was positive, negative, or mixed, and evaluative criteria pertaining to television as a medium and industry. The average length of a review was 334 words per review, with an average of seven different criteria used per review.⁶

Methods

One goal of our research is to identify the criteria and aesthetic qualities critics rely upon to pass judgment on series that are firmly grounded within specific genres and those that seem to transcend genres. Relying on descriptive techniques, we assess how they engage criteria such as innovation, novelty, or originality, usually attributed to valued objects from elite art worlds, and if they do, how they balance these considerations with those of highly conventionalized notions of format and formula. We are especially interested in how critics attempt to speak authoritatively about what is "good television" and "bad television" in contexts where there is no obvious base of critical expertise from which to draw. We also assess the extent to which the content of television criticism has become intellectualized as a result of critics' strategic efforts to elevate the prestige of the medium and

their own claims to specialized knowledge, but we also look for indications of uses of a "popular aesthetic" in critics' evaluations of television shows. In short, we are interested both in mapping critics' aesthetic practices and evaluative patterns overall and charting how these may be changing over time. To that end, we rely upon the exploratory, inductive approach of multidimensional scaling to elaborate descriptively the structural interrelationship of aesthetic criteria utilized to appraise television series and the creative contribution of those involved in its production.

FINDINGS

Mapping Television Criticism: Descriptive Statistics

The reviewers slightly favored reviewing sitcoms (56.5%) over dramas (41.9%), with non-fiction/news programming filling out the rest of the sample (1.9%). In their subjective assessments of television series, critics overall were most likely to give a program an unfavorable evaluation. Specifically, nearly half of all shows (48.9%, $n = 264$) received a negative review. Only slightly more than one-third (38.5%, $n = 209$) received a positive assessment. However, almost 15% (14.8%, $n = 80$) of the shows reviewed were given a mixed appraisal from the reviewer. Analysis of variance was used to determine whether there were differences between time periods in the proportion of shows given favorable or unfavorable assessments. These tests yielded non-significant F -values, indicating there was no change over time in the percentage of positive and negative reviews (Table 1).

Our content analysis of the reviews examined the evaluative criteria used by television critics in their appraisals of series. With the aim of charting the deployment of high art and popular aesthetic criteria and other considerations in the critics' assessment of the shows, binary variables were created, measuring the presence or absence of review criteria. We examine the results of these descriptive statistics because before we can understand how television criticism may be changing its institutionalization, or its function within the culture world of television, it is necessary to get beyond surface impressions of television criticism and develop a systematic picture or mapping of what exactly television criticism is, what it looks like, what critics attend to, and how evaluative criteria are organized and deployed in producing this aesthetic system.

A first, basic question is: What cultural agents or producers do the critics focus on in their analysis? The production of a television series depends

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample of Newspaper Television Reviews, 1985–2000.

1. Frequencies and percentages of reviews by year published, newspaper, genre, and evaluation		
	Frequency	Percent
Year published		
1985	73	13.5
1990	152	28.1
1995	195	36.1
2000	120	22.2
	<i>N</i> = 540	100.0
Newspaper		
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	113	20.9
<i>New York Times</i>	55	10.2
<i>USA Today</i>	95	17.6
<i>Washington Post</i>	92	17.0
<i>Boston Globe</i>	114	21.1
<i>Seattle Times</i>	71	13.1
	<i>N</i> = 540	100.0
Genre		
Situation comedy	305	56.5
Drama	226	41.9
Non-fiction	9	1.7
	<i>N</i> = 540	100.0
Evaluation		
Negative	264	48.9
Positive	209	38.5
Mixed	80	14.8
	<i>N</i> = 540	100.0
2. Means and medians for word count and number of evaluative criteria used		
	Mean	Median
Article word count	828.0	334.0
Review word count	780.0	297.0
Number of evaluative criteria	7.5	7.0

upon the project-based collaboration of numerous creative personnel, including writers (who are pivotal because they produce a script to provide the narrative and dialog), producers, actors, directors, musicians and skilled craft workers, and network executives who mediate conflict between commercial and creative interests (Bielby & Bielby, 1994, 2002, 1999). Moreover, the art world of television production relies upon creative knowledge, skill,

and experience that is specific to the medium, and this art world yields a cultural product that is recognized as aesthetically distinct from film. Consequently, we were interested in the extent to which critics' appraisals attend to the expertise and reputation of a series' contributors, and to the quality of a series relative to others as the outcome of a particular collaboration. We looked for whether or not the evaluation attended to the role of (a) writers and writing; (b) the director or direction; (c) the acting or the cast; or (d) the creators/producers of the series. Over half of the reviews (56.9%) evaluated the quality of the writers or the writing of the show, while only 14.3% made the directing or director a part of the evaluation. Actors or acting was the most commonly used factor and were evaluated in a majority of the reviews (77%), and producers were a focus of evaluation 36.3% of the time. The dominance of evaluations of writing and acting – featured in a majority of the television reviews – is somewhat striking. Of all the evaluative criteria that were coded for, only one other – comparison to other television shows (68.1%) – is used in over half of the reviews. These, then, represent the core issues around which critics organize their reviews and their analyses of television shows overall. Television critics' attention to a show's writers and producers demonstrates a distinct departure from film criticism, which historically has drawn upon auteur theory for crediting or faulting directors for the artistic merit of a production. Our findings are consistent with the conventions of television production in which writers and producers, rather than directors, play the dominant role in the creative process (Cantor, 1971).

We were interested in the degree of attention given to formal, aesthetic elements, and "production values" – such as camera, lighting, sounds, special effects, costumes, sound tracks, editing – in the critics' assessment of the shows. These evaluative criteria may correspond with an emphasis on the filmic qualities of television or on what has conventionally been associated with a "high(er) art" aesthetic. Reference to at least one of these formal elements can be found in 16.3% of the reviews. Films were explicit reference points in the critics' assessment 22.6% of the time (most commonly when television shows are remakes of films or feature actors or producers from the film industry). Other criteria that may be associated with a series' accomplishment of a creative aesthetic include evaluation of the show's subtlety or heavy-handedness (11.5%), its realism, credibility, or plausibility (19.8%), or its complexity or ambiguity (5%). When discussing aesthetic elements, approximately a tenth of the time (9.3%) critics included commentary on the constraints of the television medium to achieving quality on these dimensions.

Also important to us, though, were those dimensions that may be associated with a more "popular aesthetic" necessary to achieving television's

goal of providing entertainment (Newcomb, 1974; Hall & Whannel, 1964). Humor or funniness was the most commonly used of the popular aesthetic factors we coded for – appearing nearly 40% (39.6%) of the time. Over a quarter of the reviews focused on richness of characters or character development (28.1%). The question of simply whether or not the show is fun or entertaining was a feature of evaluation in almost one-fifth of the reviews (17.6%) while the scariness or eeriness of a program is present in 5%, campiness even less, and analysis of the show's emotional authenticity in 12%. Lastly, a prediction of the audience's response to a program was an explicit factor in nearly one quarter of the articles (22.4%).

A question that interested us was how some of the distinct qualities of television programs as a cultural form shape the contours of aesthetic evaluation. One feature that sets televisual texts apart from many other cultural objects – such as a book, or a painting, or a film – is the ongoing, open-ended nature of the texts. Television's open-endedness is a consequence of the need to fill a viewing season, and formats such as the episodic series and the ongoing serial are conventions designed to sustain an audience from one installment to the next. Television formats, which are “the units in which television programs are constructed and their continuity through time,” constrain the possibilities of narrative closure in storytelling formulas – the melodrama of a love story, for example (Swidler, Rapp, & Soysal, 1986, p. 325). Though open-endedness is most visible in television serials – in which the story continues from one installment to the next – even for television series composed of relatively autonomous episodes there is an open-endedness due to the fact that until the series is cancelled or concluded there is always the possibility for change and reevaluation. While for a film or a novel there is the possibility of a sequel, and certainly critics often situate evaluations of one text within the context of a creator's broader oeuvre, the boundaries of the text to be evaluated – a particular film, book, etc., – are fairly easy to establish. This may be less true for television series (though not for one-time programs or television movies, of course). Is the critic to evaluate an individual episode? Or, are they attempting to evaluate the longer-term trajectory of a series?

The reviews we examined correspond to new, debuting television series; in most cases the critics have only seen one or two episodes of a series at the time of their review. But does the fact that more episodes are forthcoming (unless the show is prematurely canceled) surface as a factor in their analysis, thus creating a type of evaluation not generally found in many other forms of

artistic criticism? We found that slightly over a quarter (25.7%) of all reviews reflected this on-going nature of the television series as a factor in their evaluation. Close to one-fifth (19.4%) of the reviews couched their evaluations somewhat tentatively – due to the possibilities for the series to improve or decline in quality in future episodes. Only 5.7% of the reviews were explicitly prescriptive in making recommendations for improving shows (though most negative criticisms could be read as connected to indirect prescriptions).

Many of the dimensions of reviews we were particularly interested in are connected to the degree to which critics orient their evaluations around the organization of television genres and the assessment of programs as novel, clichéd, or derivative. Overall, genre provided an explicit reference point for evaluation in over a third of the reviews (37.4%), although it could be deployed in a number of ways. For instance, shows could be praised for transcending or escaping genre boundaries (9.6%) or for being firmly established within but quality representatives of a given genre (10.2%). Similarly the novelty or originality of a program was the focus of evaluation in 11.5% of reviews. In over a quarter (26.7%) of reviews evaluation focused on the presence or absence of television clichés or formula and another quarter discussed shows as specifically derivative of a particular earlier television series. Less than one-tenth (8.9%) of the reviews addressed a show's predictability.

Finally, we examined the use of social relevance or the "message" of a program as a factor of evaluation (16.5%), its offensiveness or tastelessness (13.3%), and frequency of references to "smart," "quality," "artistic" television (15.7%), or "mindless," "trashy," or "dumb" programming (12.4%). These appraisals pertain to a series' ability, as entertainment, to reflect prevailing social concerns – such as gender relations or conspiracy theories – through popular formulas (Swidler, Rapp, & Soysal, 1986; Newcomb, 1974). As anticipated, ratings predictions and inclusion of industry news were also featured, although not universally, indicating reviewers' attention to industry interests and not just aesthetic considerations. The importance of many of these factors becomes clearer when we move from the simple descriptive statistics of the criteria separately into looking at patterns of change over time and patterns of how the evaluative dimensions are associated with one another in reviews. In sum, while these descriptive statistics provide a rather general, rudimentary picture of the primary categories used in the reviews overall, they provide important details about the terrain of television criticism (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequencies of Evaluative Criteria, All Reviews (N = 540).

Evaluative Criteria	Frequency	Percent
Acting/Cast	416	77.0
Script/Writers/Writing	307	56.9
Production/Producers	196	36.3
Direction/Directors	77	14.3
Comparison to other television shows	368	68.1
Comparison to film	122	22.6
Plausibility/Realism/Credibility	107	19.8
Production values/Formal elements	88	16.3
Subtlety/Heavy handedness	62	11.5
Constraints of television medium	50	9.3
Complexity/Ambiguity	27	5.0
Funniness	214	39.6
Character development	152	28.1
Prediction of audience response	121	22.4
Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice	95	17.6
Emotional authenticity	65	12.0
Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	27	5.0
Campiness	21	3.9
On-goingness of show/Episodicity	139	25.7
Tentative/Speculative about future	105	19.4
Prescriptive about future	31	5.7
Genre comments	202	37.4
Clichéd/Formulaic	144	26.7
Derivative or rip off of another show	135	25.0
Novelty/Originality	62	11.5
Quality representative of genre	55	10.2
Transcending genre conventions	52	9.6
Predictability	48	8.9
Social relevance of show	89	16.5
Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart	85	15.7
Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/Tasteless	72	13.3
Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/Dumb	67	12.4
Prediction of ratings	129	23.9
Use of news as part of review	95	17.6

Change in Use of Evaluative Criteria: Analysis of Variance

We were interested in determining how the aesthetic evaluations provided in the reviews have changed over time as well as how and whether they

coalesce in different types of reviews. The way in which critics invoked these evaluative criteria over the period of our study varied for about half of the variables (22 out of 42) but few outright trends were detected using analysis of variance. Evaluation of directors/direction of a show and evaluation of a prediction of a show's ratings declined steadily between 1985 and 2000 (from 36% to 5%, and from 38% to 15%, respectively), while an evaluation of a show's funniness and comments on whether or not a show was offensive increased steadily over the time period (from 19% to 48%, and from 5% to 18%, respectively).

Several of the criteria, however, did exhibit sharp increases between 1995 and 2000. These included: discussion of whether or not a show was mindless; a show's emotional authenticity; the use of genre comments; reference to subtlety or character development; the episodic nature of shows; whether a show was entertaining; comparison to other television programs; and the use of news as part of the review. Also, the review word count and the number of criteria invoked per article showed an increase over time. Other criteria that showed variation over time, but not a consistent trend, were reference to producers/production and transcendence of genre. All of the other variables yielded non-significant *F*-values indicating no significant change over the time period (Table 3).

To better understand how critics employ evaluative criteria, variables were assigned to one of seven conceptual categories that reflect the substantive focus of television reviews as discussed earlier: cultural agents or producers; comparisons to film or television; popular aesthetic criteria; episodocity; genre-related comments; novelty; and boundaries of television quality. Two types of analysis of variance tests were conducted on the conceptual categories to assess shifts in their use over time. First, we tested for change in the use of any of the criteria within a given category. This procedure was conducted by creating a variable that measured for the presence of any of the criteria comprising a category within an individual review. Second, we tested for change in the intensity of use within individual reviews over time. This, too, was done by creating a variable that measured the total number of criteria from a conceptual category used within an individual review (Table 4).

Nearly all conceptual categories were found to differ significantly in both use and intensity from one time period to the next. The only categories that did not show significant change over time were the frequency of evaluations referencing cultural agents (i.e., producers, writers, directors, and actors) and the intensity of the use of popular aesthetic criteria. The finding of no significant change over time in deployment of these evaluative categories

Table 3. Analysis of Variance over Time by Selected Variables.

Variable	1985 (N = 73)	1990 (N = 152)	1995 (N = 195)	2000 (N = 120)	F(df = 3)
<i>Article characteristics</i>					
Article word count	939	725	898	774	8.946**
Review word count	323	315	262	492	36.391**
Number of evaluative criteria used	8	8	7	9	9.214**
<i>Criteria</i>					
Dramas	64%	33%	36%	49%	8.935**
Situation comedies	36%	61%	64%	50%	7.037**
Negative review	45%	45%	53%	49%	0.781
Positive review	38%	41%	36%	40%	0.265
Mixed review	16%	16%	12%	18%	0.785
Acting/Cast	75%	74%	78%	81%	0.715
Script/Writers/Writing	66%	43%	54%	73%	9.04**
Direction/Directors	36%	15%	11%	5%	13.203**
Production/Producers	25%	40%	30%	49%	5.970**
Comparison to other television shows	71%	70%	57%	81%	6.828**
Comparison to film	23%	26%	20%	22%	0.675
Plausibility/Realism/Credible	18%	20%	19%	21%	0.102
Production values/Formal elements	19%	20%	13%	14%	1.323
Subtlety/Heavy handedness	15%	8%	7%	22%	6.710**
Constraints of TV medium	8%	12%	8%	8%	0.558
Complexity/Ambiguity	1%	3%	7%	6%	1.699
Funniness	19%	39%	43%	48%	5.765**
Character development	27%	26%	24%	38%	2.834*
Prediction of audience response	27%	20%	21%	24%	0.607
Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice	25%	20%	12%	20%	2.685*
Emotional authenticity	12%	13%	8%	18%	2.689*
Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	4%	3%	7%	4%	1.060
Campiness	5%	2%	5%	4%	0.760
On-goingness of show/Episodicity	29%	18%	22%	40%	6.578**
Tentative/Speculative about future	25%	15%	17%	25%	1.927
Prescriptive about future	5%	5%	4%	10%	1.928
Genre comments	36%	36%	32%	49%	3.339*
Clichéd/Formulaic	32%	32%	21%	27%	1.982
Derivative or rip off of another show	26%	32%	19%	26%	2.472
Novelty/Originality	14%	33%	16%	29%	6.497**
Quality representative of genre	7%	13%	9%	11%	0.955
Transcending genre conventions	5%	13%	5%	16%	4.314*
Predictability	14%	7%	9%	8%	0.881
Social relevance of show	15%	21%	15%	14%	1.081
Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart	18%	15%	11%	23%	2.460
Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/Tasteless	5%	10%	16%	18%	2.986*
Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/Dumb	16%	90%	90%	19%	3.157*
Prediction of ratings	38%	24%	24%	15%	4.625*
Use of news as part of review	26%	16%	12%	24%	4.068*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Conceptual Categories for Evaluative Criteria.

Conceptual Category	Evaluative Criteria
Cultural agents or producers	Acting/Cast, Script/Writers/Writing, Production/Producers, Direction/Directors
Comparisons to film or television	Comparison to other television shows, Comparison to film(s)
Popular aesthetic criteria	Funniness, Prediction of audience response, Fun/Entertaining, Emotional authenticity, Scary
Episodicity	Reference to ongoing nature of show, Tentativeness or speculative about show's future, Prescriptive about show's future
Genre-related comments	Genre comments, Quality representation of genre, Transcending genre conventions
Novelty	Clichéd/Formulaic, Novelty/Originality, Derivativeness, Predictability, Plausibility/Realism/Credibility
Boundaries of television quality	"Quality/Art," "Mindless/Dumb," Constraints of television medium

points to them as established conventions. Like the individual variables, most of the conceptual categories did not exhibit any linear trend up or down over time. The only category that manifested a steady trend was the use of popular aesthetic criteria, which increased steadily over the time period. While all of the other categories fluctuated over the period of our study, it is notable that all of them were higher in 2000 than in 1985 (Table 5).

Evaluative Criteria Used in Reviews

To further elaborate our mapping of the aesthetic systems of television reviews, we were interested in potential differences in how critics orient their comments about those programs they deem praiseworthy versus those they dismiss. To determine whether critics use different kinds of evaluative criteria when writing either a positive or a negative review, cross tabulations were conducted to assess their relationship to such appraisals. With nearly all the same variables associated with both types of reviews, we report results for positive reviews as the dependent variable.⁷ Nearly two-thirds of

Table 5. Analysis of Variance over Time by Conceptual Category.

Conceptual Category		1985 (N = 73)	1990 (N = 152)	1995 (N = 195)	2000 (N = 120)	F(df = 3)
Cultural agents or producers	Use	88%	89%	91%	93%	0.688
	Intensity	2.00	1.70	1.70	2.10	4.419*
Comparisons to film or television	Use	75%	79%	66%	85%	5.412**
	Intensity	0.95	0.97	0.77	1.00	4.955*
Popular aesthetic criteria	Use	56%	64%	66%	76%	2.858*
	Intensity	0.88	0.95	0.91	1.10	2.066
Episodicity	Use	30%	19%	23%	41%	6.487**
	Intensity	0.59	0.39	0.43	0.75	4.576*
Genre-related comments	Use	36%	38%	33%	49%	2.941*
	Intensity	0.48	0.62	0.46	0.76	3.647*
Novelty	Use	51%	65%	47%	58%	4.134*
	Intensity	0.85	1.00	0.65	0.90	5.279**
Boundaries of television quality	Use	34%	30%	26%	44%	3.884*
	Intensity	0.42	0.36	0.29	0.50	3.581*

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$

the 34 evaluative criteria were found to be associated with positive reviews (23 out of 34), and three were less likely to be. When the evaluative criteria are grouped into the seven conceptual categories described earlier, five of the seven were more likely to be associated with a positive review – cultural agents or producers, genre-related comments, episodicity, boundaries of television quality, and popular aesthetic criteria. By consistently applying more evaluative criteria more often in positive reviews critics seem to be providing a more elaborate and detailed analysis of those shows they most value or seek to promote – a practice that could be interpreted as contributing to a project of highlighting the strengths of television programming, thus contributing to an elevation of the status of the medium, and hence an elevation of the status of its critics as well (Table 6).

*Analyzing the Repertoire of the Television Critic: Multidimensional Scaling
Overall Cluster Analysis*

To understand the practice of aesthetic judgment by television critics, we analyzed the ways in which discrete, separate evaluative criteria interrelate

Table 6. Cross Tabulations of Positive Reviews with Evaluative Criteria and Genre.

More likely to be associated with a positive review	Drama, Acting/Cast, Script/Writers/Writing, Production/Producers, Direction/Directors, Comparison to other TV shows, Comparison to film, Plausibility/Realism/Credible, Production values/Formal elements, Constraints of television medium, Complexity/Ambiguity, Character development, Prediction of audience response, Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice, Emotional authenticity, On-goingness of show/Episodicity, Genre comments, Novelty/Originality, Quality representative of genre, Transcending genre conventions, Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart, Prediction of ratings, Use of news as part of review
Less likely to be associated with a positive review	Situation comedy, Clichéd/Formulaic, Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/Tasteless, Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/Dumb, Tentative/Speculative about future
Equally as likely to be associated with a positive or non-positive review	Non-fiction, Derivative or rip off of another show, Subtlety/Heavy handedness, Funniness, Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful, Campiness, Prescriptive about future, Predictability, Social relevance of show

to form coherent evaluative repertoires. In recent years cultural sociologists have increasingly utilized multidimensional scaling (MDS) to get at precisely this kind of project – to generate descriptive mappings of meaning structures by measuring the relations between the cultural elements that comprise these meaning structures (see, e.g., Mohr, 1998). Our use of this technique was to create a taxonomy that classified criteria into structurally equivalent blocks, each of which plays a role in the discourse of television critics. Thus, we employed this analytical approach to inductively generate a more systematic map of the television criticism landscape and how it has changed over time, with particular attention focused on the ways that the evaluative criteria and other characteristics of reviews may interrelate to form distinct repertoires of evaluative practices.

With over 40 different dimensions of evaluation to account for, multi-dimensional analysis guided the mapping of conceptual clusters of independent variables and insight into collapsing and analyzing how evaluative

criteria are deployed by critics (see Bourgeois & Sutton, 2004, for more use of this method, in a different context). We proceeded in the following manner. First, a cluster analysis of critics' evaluative criteria was conducted to see which ones were more likely to be used with each other. An affiliation matrix was created with 39 of the attributes by transposing the data matrix, moving reviews to the columns and the variables to the rows. Using the Jaccard method, a distance matrix was derived that indicated how close any two of the attributes are in an N -dimensional space. The Jaccard method takes into account the co-occurrence of individual attributes to determine proximity. A higher proximity value represents a greater likelihood of criteria appearing in the same review. Using multidimensional scaling, the variables were then plotted into a five dimensional space. The Kruskal stress test yielded a value of 0.1 for the distance matrix, indicating a fairly good fit.

Only two clusters formed from the data when evaluated at 0.23, which is the average of all the distances between individual variables in the distance matrix. The first cluster consisted of the evaluation of writers/writing/script clustered with actors/acting, producers/production, and comparison to other television shows. The second cluster was composed of reference to the episodic nature of a television series clustered with critics being tentative about the future of a show. When the analysis was disaggregated into the years in which reviews were collected, a similar pattern occurred in each (when evaluated at the average distance of 0.23 for the respective distance matrix). In short, no more than two clusters were found in any year at this standard. The only notable difference across years was the addition of a third cluster in 1990 that contained genre comments and novelty.

Evaluation of clusters at the average distance between variables is, however, the strictest standard of evaluation of their existence. This standard was relaxed to allow for a more flexible interpretation of how the attributes clustered; the evaluation point ranged from 0.72 to 0.99.⁸ At this standard, a core set of evaluative criteria clustered consistently over time for all of the reviews, accompanied by four to five peripheral clusters that varied in distance from the central cluster in different time periods. These isolated clusters may be indicative of idiosyncratic use of an attribute by a certain critic or the effect of a particular show that debuted that season. More important, however, is that the central cluster of attributes can be considered a repertoire of concepts consistently invoked by critics in their reviews. While there is slight variation over time, this central cluster remained remarkably consistent – despite the significant transformations in the structure and terrain of the television industry between 1985 and 2000. Attributes included in this cluster for all four of the time periods

include: writers/writing, acting/cast, comparison to other television shows, prediction of audience response, genre comments, prediction of ratings, news, comparison to film, producer/production, the ongoing/episodic nature of a show, tentativeness/speculation about the future of a show, and funniness. The only notable deviation from this structure of attributes occurred in 2000, when a secondary cluster emerged that included several of the attributes associated with genre and a filmic or "higher art" aesthetic. This second cluster was composed of the following: direction/directors, complexity/ambiguity, production values/formal elements, constraints of the television medium, transcendence of genre conventions, and quality representative of genre. In short, while most of the evaluative criteria were accounted for in the central cluster or parsed out in more isolated clusters, genre and high art aesthetic concerns seem to have become a more central focus for critics in 2000.

This recent emergence of genre as a focus of critical appraisals is noteworthy. Television, like some other cultural forms, is a medium whose aesthetic elements are organized by genre, which in turn frames expectations in both the production and reception of television programs. Genres within television are readily recognizable, highly formulaic, and have changed very little over the past several decades, in contrast to film, where genre is arguably less important to prescribing narrative (Caughie, 1984, p. 115). As a result, television creators, critics, and audiences are knowledgeable about the defining characteristics of a thirty-minute sitcom, a one-hour drama, a reality show, or a daytime soap opera, and thus it would seem appropriate for reviews to attend to the attributes of a genre as an aspect of a show's appraisal. Moreover, primetime television schedules are organized to engage audiences and move them relatively seamlessly into the next scheduled program in order to retain the largest possible viewership from one hour to the next. Genre (or formula, see Newcomb, 1974) is central to the progression of evening entertainment "phases" that unfold sequentially and contribute to the "flow" of television (Williams, 1974). In short, the longstanding function of genre to the creation of new series and scheduling is increasingly acknowledged by critics in their evaluation of television.

In both analyses, the composition and persistence of the central cluster across the period of study reveals that critics share understandings of the conventions of television as a medium that are codified to a degree. These understandings, which were fully in place by 1985, are organized around a recognition of writers as the creative force that underlies a series and its narrative vision, the relevance of a show's predecessors – its canon – to its appraisal, and an assessment of its entertainment value, which is important

to creating interest among viewers for a new series and, in turn, its possible future popularity. The last is of particular importance to those with a commercial interest in the industry. The emergence of a secondary cluster by 2000 that focused on genre and criteria connected to a high art, filmic aesthetic is noteworthy, given our interest in the existence and transformation of the aesthetics of television criticism (Table 7).

Cluster Analysis of Genre and Evaluative Criteria

To determine whether and how evaluative criteria aligned with genre, a second cluster analysis of evaluative criteria was conducted by dividing the dataset according to whether the show reviewed was a drama or situation comedy. The few non-fiction shows were omitted from this part of the analysis. A central cluster of core attributes emerged between 1985 and 2000 for each genre that was similar to the aggregated analysis presented above. However, there are some important differences in the content and timing of the emergence of a secondary cluster for each individual genre. For dramas, the secondary cluster appeared earlier, in 1995, than in the aggregate cluster analysis, which emerged in 2000. Similar to the aggregate analysis, the secondary cluster for dramas contained the same attributes: transcendence of genre, constraints of the medium, and being a representative of a genre. The other attributes located in this secondary cluster were direction/directors, complexity/ambiguity, and production values/formal elements – all of which can be associated with a more filmic and/or artistic aesthetic.⁹

One of the questions driving our interest in the practices of television critics has to do with their possibly changing status and legitimacy. The status of television critics is affected by the medium's assignment to a relatively low status on the cultural hierarchy. That is, the television critic for a newspaper or national magazine is likely to have lower status than those who write about film, theater, architecture, and art. And, as in any professional realm, television critics have a stake in improving their status and claims to legitimacy. So, we are interested in any evidence that television critics act strategically to improve their status through criticism that seeks to elevate television as an art form, as film critics have done, with some success, as documented in research by Baumann (2001).¹⁰ While not at all conclusive, the emergence of this newer artistic/filmic aesthetic cluster in television critics' reviews is suggestive of a possible shift in the orientation to television dramas as art form.

Table 7. Cluster Analysis for all Reviews, by Year.

Central cluster	Year		
	1985	1990	2000
Acting/Cast.	Acting/Cast.	Acting/Cast.	Acting/Cast.
Character development.	Clichéd/Formulaic.	Character development.	Character development.
Comparison to film.	Comparison to other television shows.	Clichéd/Formulaic.	Comparison to film.
Comparison to other television shows.	Comparison to other television shows.	Comparison to film.	Comparison to other television shows.
Direction/Directors.	Derivative or rip off of another show.	Comparison to other television shows.	Emotional Authenticity.
Emotional authenticity.	Derivative or rip off of another show.	Complexity/Ambiguity.	Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/
Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/	Direction/Directors.	Constraints of TV medium.	Funniness.
Pleasant/Nice.	Funniness.	Derivative or rip off of another show.	Genre comments.
Funniness.	Genre comments.	Derivative or rip off of another show.	Novelty/Originality.
Genre comments.	Novelty/Originality.	Direction/Directors.	On-goingness of show/
On-goingness of show/Episodicity.	On-goingness of show/	Emotional Authenticity.	Episodicity.
Prediction of audience response.	Episodicity.	Fun/Entertaining/Amusing.	Pleasant/ Nice.
Prediction of ratings.	Plausibility/Realism/Credibility.	Funniness.	Prediction of audience response.
Production/Producers.	Prediction of audience response.	Genre comments.	Prediction of ratings.
Quality representative of genre.	Prediction of ratings.	Novelty/Originality.	Prescriptive about future.
Script/Writers/Writing	Production/Producers.	On-goingness of show/	Production/Producers.
Tentative/Speculative about future of show.	Production values/Formal elements.	Episodicity.	Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart.
Use of news as part of review	Quality representative of genre.	Plausibility/Realism/Credible.	Script/Writers/Writing.
	Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart.	Pleasant/Nice,	Tentative/Speculative about future.
	Script/Writers/Writing.	Prediction of audience response.	Use of news as part of review
	Social relevance of show.	Prediction of ratings.	
	Tentative/Speculative about future of show.	Production values/Formal elements.	
	Transcending genre conventions.	Production/Producers.	
	Use of news as part of review	Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart.	
		Script/Writers/Writing.	
		Tentative/Speculative about future.	
		Use of news as part of review	

Table 7. (Continued)

Secondary cluster	Year			
	1985	1990	1995	2000
Cluster 3	Clichéd/Formulaic. Derivative or rip off of another show. Novelty/Originality. Predictability. Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart. Social relevance of show	Character development. Emotional authenticity. Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/ Pleasant/Nice	Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless. Social relevance of show. Subtlety/Heavy handedness	Complexity/Ambiguity. Constraints of television medium. Direction/Directors. Production values/Formal elements. Quality representative of genre. Transcending genre conventions
Cluster 4	Prescriptive about future. Production values/Formal elements. Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Complexity/Ambiguity. Constraints of television medium. Predictability. Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Predictability. Prescriptive about future. Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Campiness. Derivative or rip off of another show. Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless
Cluster 5	Campiness. Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless	Subtlety/Heavy handedness	Quality representative of genre. Transcending genre conventions	Plausibility/Realism/Credible. Social relevance of show. Subtlety/Heavy handedness
Cluster 6	Constraints of TV medium. Plausibility/Realism/Credible. Subtlety/Heavy handedness	Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless	Campiness. Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb	Clichéd/Formulaic. Predictability
Cluster 7	Complexity/Ambiguity. Transcending Genre Conventions	Prescriptive about future	Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful
Distance evaluated at:	0.8151	0.8876	0.9795	0.9182
Number of dimensions:	5	5	5	5
Kruskal stress value:	0.1159	0.1072	0.1123	0.1022

For situation comedies, two principle clusters were present in each of the time periods. From 1985 to 1995, the secondary cluster always contained comments about the social relevance of a show in combination with a variety of other attributes. More so than in most other realms of art and culture, the discourse of the television critic engages social commentary as well as aesthetic analysis. When asked to define what the audience expects of them, one critic stated:

I think that when people look to television critics they look for a means to get a handle on this experience, to be able to place it in some kind of context...to get a sense of what messages they're being delivered by what they're watching. The center of what you're doing (as a TV critic) is understanding what the more sophisticated of your audience understands about what's going on in the world and being able to recognize how that is reflected metaphorically.

(Henry, quoted in Watson, 1985, p. 71)

In 1985, reviews of sitcoms revealed three major clusters of evaluative criteria. In addition to the central cluster, which contained many of the same attributes as the central cluster for the aggregated cluster analysis of all of the reviews and for the drama reviews, the second cluster also contained social relevance, comparison to films, character development, plausibility, and comments about the constraints of the TV medium. The third cluster contained production values, complexity, subtlety, prescriptions about the show's future, and scariness. For 1990 and 1995, this third cluster was incorporated into the central cluster. The second cluster organized itself somewhat differently in that in both 1990 and 1995, the second cluster contained social relevance, offensiveness, subtlety, and mindlessness. News, episodic evaluations, and prescriptions about the show's future were also included in the second cluster. In 2000, most of these attributes were incorporated into the central cluster. Also, a new second cluster emerged that contained many of the attributes related to genre. In addition, this cluster also encompassed some attributes that could be considered as relating to the artistic (or non-popular) aesthetic criteria, such as directors/direction, comparison to films, subtlety, and complexity. This shows that the critics' emerging artistic repertoire of evaluations is not limited to dramatic television, but includes comedic programs, which have traditionally been particularly culturally devalued.

At the same time, however, we do not see an abandonment of the more popular aesthetic criteria as privileged categories of analysis in the television reviews of situation comedies. Indeed, while there may be an emerging subgroup of critical practices around an artistic repertoire of evaluative criteria, in the side-by-side ANOVAs of the evaluative criteria discussed earlier, we

found an upsurge in the deployment of popular aesthetic categories of analysis over time. Within television reviews – in the continuing core cluster we found overall and in the secondary emergent clusters in drama and situation comedy reviews – we find critics engaged in a balancing act, continually orienting to both popular and artistic aesthetic qualities. This could suggest the multiple constituencies and projects to which television critics must attend – on the one hand an interest in legitimizing the medium and their relation to it but on the other not wanting to alienate their core audience or to neglect the importance of the popular as a feature of television (Table 8 and 9).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research describes the patterns of aesthetic and evaluative practices of television critics. We examined the ways in which the distinctive features of the commercial, popular medium of television in an era of considerable industry transformation are consequential to critics' evaluation of debuting television series. Television critics occupy an overdetermined structural location within this industry, which necessarily complicates how they render critical judgment for their constituencies. Although television as a cultural product is generally assigned a relatively low cultural standing by scholars and non-scholars alike, analysis of television critics and criticism during the 1950s indicates that the then new medium possessed considerable potential as a form of artistically rooted entertainment and that aesthetic considerations were central to its evaluation. Subsequent inattention by cultural sociologists left unanswered fundamental questions about the aesthetic properties of television as a cultural form. Since then, of course, the medium has shifted from theatrical to film or film-like modes of production and has developed its own conventionalized formats and formulas, its creative origination has become more hierarchical, its means of distribution have evolved technologically in unforeseen ways, and its regulatory environment has swung from minimal bureaucratic oversight to relatively tight governmental control and back again to lesser federal regulation that facilitates market forces. In the midst of all this change relatively few cultural sociologists dedicated their attention to understanding television as a cultural product. Analysis of the work of television critics is one part of a larger project seeking to address this research lacunae.

Table 8. Cluster Analysis for Reviews of Dramas, by Year.

Central cluster	Year		
	1985	1990	1995
Central cluster	Acting/Cast. Clichéd/Formulaic. Comparison to film. Comparison to other TV shows. Constraints of TV medium. Derivative or rip off of another show. Direction/Directors. Genre comments. On-goingness of show/ Episodicity. Plausibility/Realism/Credible. Prediction of audience response. Prescriptive about future. Production values/Formal elements. Production/Producers. Script/Writers/Writing. Subtlety/Heavy handedness. Tentative/Speculative about future. Use of news as part of review	Acting/Cast. Character Development. Clichéd/Formulaic. Comparison to film. Comparison to other TV shows. Constraints of TV medium. Derivative or rip off of another show. Genre Comments. Novelty/Originality. On-goingness of show/Episodicity. Plausibility/Realism/Credible. Predictability. Prediction of audience response. Production values/Formal elements. Production/Producers. Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart. Script/Writers/Writing. Social relevance of show. Tentative/Speculative about future. Transcending genre conventions. Use of news as part of review	Acting/Cast. Character development. Constraints of TV medium. Comparison to film. Comparison to other TV shows. Complexity/Ambiguity. Genre Comments. Predictability. Prediction of audience response. Prediction of ratings. Production values/Formal elements Production/Producers. Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart. Script/Writers/Writing. Social relevance of show. Transcending genre conventions. Use of news as part of review
	1995	2000	
Secondary cluster	Character Development. Complexity/Ambiguity. Emotional authenticity. Transcending genre conventions	Acting/Cast. Character Development. Comparison to film. Comparison to other TV shows. Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/ Pleasant/Nice. Genre Comments. Novelty/ Originality. On-goingness of show/ Episodicity. Plausibility/Realism/Credible. Prediction of audience response. Prescriptive about future. Production/Producers. Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart. Script/Writers/Writing. Subtlety/Heavy handedness. Tentative/Speculative about future	Constraints of TV medium. Direction/Directors. Production values/Formal elements. Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart.

Table 8. (Continued)

	Year			
	1985	1990	1995	2000
Cluster 3	Predictability, Novelty/ Originality. Quality/Art/Intelligent, Smart. Social relevance of show	Complexity/Ambiguity Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless	Production values/Formal elements. Quality representative of genre. Tentative/Speculative about future. Transcending genre conventions Campiness. Derivative or rip off of another show. Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless	Transcending genre conventions. Use of news as part of review Campiness. Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless. Social relevance of show
Cluster 4	Mindlessness: Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Fun/Entertaining. Campiness	Mindlessness: Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb. Prescriptive about future	Clichéd/Formulaic	Clichéd/Formulaic. Derivative or rip off of another show. Predictability
Cluster 5	Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless. Funniness	Subtlety/Heavy handedness. Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Emotional Authenticity. Funniness
Cluster 6	Quality representative of genre. Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Campiness		Prediction of ratings
Cluster 7				Complexity/Ambiguity
Cluster 8				Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful
Distance evaluated at:	0.8151	0.9122	0.9124	0.9653
Number of dimensions:	5	5	5	5
Kruskal stress value:	0.1159	0.1146	0.1104	0.1116

Table 9. Cluster Analysis for Reviews of Sitcoms, by Year.

Central cluster	Year		
	1985	1990	1995
	Acting/Cast, Comparison to other TV shows, Direction/Directors, Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice, Funniness, Genre Comments, Novelty/Originality, On-goingness of show/Episodicity, Prediction of audience response, Production/Producers, Quality representative of genre, Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart, Script/Writers/Writing, Tentative/Speculative about future, Use of news as part of review	Acting/Cast, Character Development, Clichéd/Formulaic, Comparison to film, Comparison to other TV shows, Derivative or rip off of another show, Emotional Authenticity, Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice, Funniness, Genre Comments, Novelty/Originality, Prediction of ratings, Production/Producers, Quality representative of genre, Script/Writers/Writing, Transcending genre conventions	Acting/Cast, Character Development, Clichéd/Formulaic, Comparison to film, Comparison to other TV shows, Complexity/Ambiguity, Constraints of TV medium, Derivative or rip off of another show, Emotional authenticity, Fun/Entertaining/Amusing/Pleasant/Nice, Funniness, Genre comments, Novelty/Originality, On-goingness of show/Episodicity, Plausibility/Realism/Credible, Prediction of ratings, Production/Producers, Quality representative of genre, Quality/Art/Intelligent/Smart, Script/Writers/Writing, Tentative/Speculative about future, Use of news as part of review
			Acting/Cast, Character Development, Clichéd/Formulaic, Comparison to other TV shows, Derivative or rip off of another show, Funniness, Genre comments, On-goingness of show/Episodicity, Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/Dumb, Novelty/Originality, Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/Tasteless, Prediction of audience response, Prediction of ratings, Production/Producers, Script/Writers/Writing, Social relevance of show, Tentative/Speculative about future, Use of news as part of review

Table 9. (Continued)

Secondary cluster	Year		
	1985	1990	1995
Secondary cluster	Character development, Comparison to film, Constraints of TV medium, Emotional authenticity, Plausibility/Realism/ Credible, Social relevance of show	Mindlessness/Trashy/ Stupid/Dumb, Offensive/Decency/ Vulgarity/Tasteless, On-goingness of show/ Episodicity, Prescriptive about future, Social relevance of show, Subtlety/Heavy handedness, Tentative/Speculative about future, Use of news as part of review	Campiness, Direction/Directors, Mindlessness/Trashy/Stupid/ Dumb, Offensive/Decency/Vulgarity/ Tasteless, Prediction of audience response, Social relevance of show, Subtlety/Heavy handedness
			2000
Cluster 3	Complexity/Ambiguity, Prescriptive about future, Production values/ Formal elements, Scary/Eerie/ Suspenseful, Subtlety/Heavy handedness	Direction/Directors, Production values/Formal elements, Quality/Art/Intelligent/ Smart, Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Comparison to film, Complexity/Ambiguity, Constraints of TV medium, Direction/Directors, Fun/Entertaining/ Amusing/Pleasant/ Nice, Quality representative of genre, Quality/Art/Intelligent/ Smart, Production values/ Formal elements, Subtlety/Heavy handedness, Transcending genre conventions
		Transcending genre conventions	Emotional authenticity, Prescriptive about future, Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful

	Clichéd/Formulaic, Derivative or rip off of another show	Constraints of TV medium, Plausibility/Realism/ Credible, Predictability	Predictability, Production values/Formal elements	Campiness, Predictability
Cluster 4	Campiness, Mindlessness/Trashy/ Stupid/Dumb	Campiness, Complexity/Ambiguity	Scary/Eerie/Suspenseful	Plausibility/Realism/ Credible
Cluster 5	Offensive/Decency/ Vulgarity/Tasteless			
Cluster 6	Transcending genre conventions			
Cluster 7				
Distance evaluated at:	0.741	0.9146	0.9403	0.9443
Number of dimensions:	5	5	0	5
Kruskal stress value:	0.0795	0.1144	0.1221	0.1067

Our mapping of television criticism between 1985 and 2000 using the technique of multidimensional scaling reveals that television critics attended to a core set of evaluative criteria that are remarkably consistent during this period of considerable transformation in the industry. The attributes of series that commanded central and ongoing critical attention were a composite of production-related factors, assessments of entertainment value and related considerations of interest to viewers and the business community alike, and characteristics of the medium as a source of popular entertainment. Our expectation that television critics spoke to multiple constituencies was born out, as was the overall complexity of their charge, as indicated by their simultaneous attention to a popular aesthetic and factors predictive of commercial success (and thus of importance to business interests). Our interest in uncovering aesthetic elements of television criticism yielded intriguing new insights as well about the evolution of television as a medium. Of particular interest is the emergence in the last decade of the cluster of attributes that map critics' attention to genre and related attributes associated with a more filmic and/or artistic aesthetic. This shift toward more formal aesthetic elements signals a new focused attention to television as an art form in its own right that, interestingly, co-occurs with ongoing critical attention to the elements of a popular aesthetic that foregrounds entertainment value. We view this development as evidence of critics' more complicated role in non-elite art worlds, which comprises, at least in this medium, a balancing act between elevating television to an art form in its own right while not abandoning a popular aesthetic. Their co-occurrence in the secondary cluster associated with situation comedies is especially noteworthy, as it is a much derided genre. The difference in timing of the emergence of the genre cluster for dramas and situation comedies may reflect cyclical changes in the types of programming offered by the television networks, and suggests the importance of more sustained analysis along these lines.¹¹

Our search for greater insight into the role and status of television critics and criticism is a direct outgrowth of the considerable transformation television has undergone as an industry and a medium. Whether the role and status of critics has improved because of changes in the television shows themselves or because of other, external pressures – including critics' desire for greater legitimacy, their development of a professional organization, the emergence of academic television studies, an elevation of the position of television coverage in journalism, and transformations in the structure of the media industries of which television is a part – cannot yet be fully known. Likewise, we cannot yet answer the question of how much influence,

if any, the critics' reviews have on the development of programming itself. Only with further research that examines which shifts are driving change in critics' status and role, and whether, and the extent to which, those mechanisms are internal or external to criticism itself will we be able to disentangle cause and effect. Our findings are a necessary first step in that direction.

By minimizing the relevance of aesthetics as worthy of investigation, especially in popular art worlds, sociologists leave no role for critics and criticism in popular culture. "Bringing aesthetics back in" provides a foundation for developing a sociology of critics and criticism in popular culture. Such a field would need to provide an understanding of: (1) the structural location of critics in relation to audiences, and to creators/producers, distributors, and other business interests; (2) the status and legitimacy of critics as perceived by audiences and business constituencies; (3) how the medium's conventions and genres shape the interpretation and reception of the cultural object; and, (4) the relationship between criticism, social commentary, and a "popular aesthetic" in the realms of popular culture. The research reported here is a necessary first step in this undertaking by providing a clearer picture of what it is that critics in popular art worlds are actually doing in their reviews.

Our research allows us to develop more concrete ideas that can be tested with more elaborate inductive models and more explanatory analytical approaches. Future research should extend the analysis we began in this article by expanding the time frame of reviews analyzed (including earlier television criticism as well as continuing to update the research in light of the ever-changing nature of the television industry), broadening the scope of reviews analyzed by including additional newspapers as well as non-newspaper sources of television criticism, and further attending to differences between papers and reviewers in the emergence and transformation of the aesthetic system and evaluative repertoires of television criticism. In addition, further research that allows for more direct comparisons of the work of and relationship between television and other types of cultural criticism (e.g., art critics or film critics) will be necessary in order to more fully understand the nature and status of the role of television critics vis-à-vis critics operating in other culture worlds. We intend to see how this bears out in future explanatory analyses on more extensive datasets, since we are interested in the structure of television criticism as a profession more generally. We plan to examine the trends we found in finer detail in future investigations, and take guidance from remarks made by former *Los Angeles Times* television critic Brian Lowry (2003) while commenting on how the "possibilities" of

television influence his practices as a critic: "Critics are prone to evaluate television based on how well the medium delivers upon – or falls short of – its noblest aspirations and potential."

NOTES

1. Sociological analysis of aesthetic systems has been largely limited to exploring how aesthetic conventions shape the social organization of cultural production, or how distinctions between types of art articulate with class differences or other social groupings (see Bielby & Bielby, 2004, for a fuller discussion).

2. Beyond this important early work on the role of critics within culture industries, little sociological research has been directed at this issue in the ensuing decades, particularly with regard to the television medium, a research lacuna that this article is intended to begin to fill.

3. In subsequent work, Gans (1992) observed that the conceptual distinction between elite and popular culture is due in large measure to a bias among scholars, primarily in the humanities, between "'our' intellectual-aesthetic culture and 'their' entertainment" (p. x). Gans writes: "Sociologists have been touched by this bias, and as a result they have not paid enough empirical attention to how highbrows entertain themselves or where lower-income groups get their intellectual-aesthetic culture. Nor have the similarities and differences between entertainment and intellectual-aesthetic experience, for all classes, been explored sufficiently."

4. For a discussion of the culture world of television see Bielby and Harrington (2004).

5. Two leading figures in television criticism whose careers began when television was launched were Jack Gould of the *New York Times*, who wrote between 1947 and 1972, and Dwight Newton of the *San Francisco Examiner*, whose coverage of the medium spanned the years 1949–1976. (Source: Gould information was retrieved on January 21, 2003 from the University of Texas Press website: <http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/books/gouwat.html> and the Newton information was retrieved on January 21, 2003 from the Broadcast Legends website: <http://www.broadcastlegends.com/newton.html>).

6. Some reviews were embedded in articles that evaluated more than one series or provided additional information such as program schedules, celebrity news, etc. In these instances, article word count, which refers to the total number of words when multiple shows were evaluated or other items of information were included, was also recorded.

7. Cross tabulations for negative reviews found that all criteria but plausibility and script/writing/writers were statistically significant.

8. There are several methods to determine the distance at which to evaluate clustering using multi-dimensional analysis. The skree test determines the level of evaluation by finding the distance at which several of the peripheral clusters that were composed of one or two variables joined a large central cluster. The clusters were then evaluated at the immediately smaller distance (see Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984).

9. The attribute of complexity, which appeared in the secondary cluster for drama in 1995, dropped out in 2000 and was replaced by "use of news."

10. Baumann (2001, p. 407) notes that the rising popularity of television in the 1950s was part of the rationale used by film critics and scholars to argue that their medium was a true art form, unlike the mass entertainment that appeared on television.

11. For example, there were five situation comedies in the 1985 season's top 10 series, six in 1990, five in 1995, and only two in 2000.

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