

The Joy of Text?: Television and Textual Analysis

Glen Creeber

This piece will start with a confession: when I look at TV critically I can't help thinking about matters of a *textual* nature. What interests me the most about television studies are questions of aesthetics, ideology, discourse, narrative, genre, representation, camera work, music, casting, editing, the script, authorship and so on. In short, I can't get enough of the text.

Where did it all begin?

I guess semiotics was originally to blame for my current predilection towards the text. John Fiske and John Hartley's *Reading Television*¹ was one of the first academic books on television I ever read. The way it looked at TV was suggested in its title, 'reading' television almost like a literary text, but how refreshing it was to find a book that took television (and the study of it) seriously. The semi scientific discourse that semiotics initially brought to the study of television (and popular culture in general) was crucial to its gradual acceptance into the academy, slowly giving the whole enterprise some greatly needed academic credibility. Just as importantly, it also allowed television studies to skilfully dodge the inevitable question about whether television was actually worthy of critical attention at all. As *Mythologies*² – Roland Barthes' 1957 seminal account of popular culture – made so clear, semiotics could be applied to any cultural form (from wrestling matches to washing powder), so that the question of whether TV merited critical attention suddenly seemed unimportant and even irrelevant. The 'decoding' of every cultural form was suddenly allowed; you were not necessarily saying it was 'Great Art,' you were simply exposing the mechanics by which your chosen text operated. (At least that was our story and we were sticking to it).

Important textbooks like Robert C. Allen's edited *Channels of Discourse*³ in 1987 followed, expanding the study of television further by introducing primarily textual methodologies such as semiotics, ideology, genre, narrative theory, post-modernism and psychoanalysis more forcefully into the field. However, the book

that most famously brought these varied approaches to the television text together was probably Fiske's *Television Culture*.⁴ This book became the bible of television studies for more than a decade, introducing students to the textuality of television through a combination of critical approaches.

However, Fiske's textbook was also significant because it addressed the notion of the 'active audience.' Following on from work like Stuart Hall's groundbreaking 1973 article, 'Encoding/Decoding in Television Discourse,'⁵ Fiske demonstrated how various audiences could interpret television programmes in a number of different ways. Even a programme like *Charlie's Angels* (Spelling-Goldberg Productions/ABC, 1976–1981), which was 'deeply inscribed' in 'patriarchy,' could almost become a feminist text in the minds of certain viewers; particularly those who chose to ignore how scantily dressed its female detectives were and preferred to focus on their 'success' and 'aggressiveness.'⁶

Although Fiske is careful to keep the heart of his discussion around actual television programmes, the 'audience revolution' had a huge impact on the perception of textual analysis in television studies. Charlotte Brunson and David Morley's 1978 semiotic analysis of a television programme in *Everyday Television* 'Nation-wide'⁷ was quickly followed in 1980 by Morley's 'Nationwide' Audience,⁸ a book that implicitly aimed to reveal what was lacking in his and Brunson's original (textually orientated) account.

The main criticism that audience researchers made about textual analysis is well known, but it might be worth briefly restating it here, as it is important to keep in mind how textual analysts reacted to these arguments. If audiences can read a text in a number of ways, then what is the validity and relevance of one textual interpretation? A textual analyst may give their reading intellectual credibility through the application of a dense theoretical discourse (like semiotics or psychoanalysis), but it is still only one interpretation among many. If they offer this interpretation as conclusive and definitive, they are also in danger of falling into the trap of prescribing a 'universal reader': i.e. implying that readers, regardless of age, gender, social class and race, will read a text in *exactly* the same way. Even when they might not suggest that a reading is universal, they could unknowingly imply that a certain section of the audience (an 'implied' or 'ideal' reader) would read it in this way. However, without any audience research or empirical evidence to back up these assumptions, textual analysis is simply a matter of guesswork – offering unfounded and possibly misleading interpretations on behalf of an audience who is not allowed to speak for itself.

Despite Hall's crucial insight that there are various ways in which a TV programme can be interpreted, his concept of a 'preferred meaning' (read: that of the 'dominant ideology') still betrays a dangerous assumption about readership: i.e. the belief that we can ever be sure of what meaning is 'preferred' or how a TV programme was originally 'encoded' (echoing aspects of the 'Intentional Fallacy'). Reception studies also called into question the limits of traditional textual analysis. Knowing where a 'text' starts and ends seems increasingly difficult to ascertain, a problem clearly heightened in the multi-media age. Extra-textual material, such as

product merchandising, DVD extras, fanzines, and Internet sites, made textual analysis frustratingly unsure of its object of study.

Such criticisms inevitably took their toll on a method of research that was clearly finding it difficult to keep pace with the changes that characterised cultural criticism in the late-twentieth century. As a consequence of these arguments, television studies gradually started to shun its textual origins. Books like Justin Lewis' *The Ideological Octopus* criticised the 'tyranny of the text' and particularly the 'textual determinism' that it identified with an approach like semiotics.⁹ As Lewis put it:

A friend of mind [sic] asked if he had any idea what "semiology" meant, replied ingeniously that it might mean "half an ology." This is precisely what this kind of textual analysis amounts to: it interrogates the sign from the point of view of the signifier and ignores the realities of the signified.¹⁰

To be fair, Lewis had a point. Perhaps the readings offered by some textual analysts were a little too rigid and deterministic at times. While splitting the 'signifier' from the 'signified' was a crucial step in interpreting the production of meaning in a text, the connection between the two was in danger of becoming a little too confidently prescribed.

However, what took place over the years that followed was that all forms of textual analysis were seen as increasingly untenable. For many, textual analysis became the remnant of an embarrassing (literary and even Leavisite) tradition that was now despised and ridiculed, and was regarded by some as intellectually simplistic and passé. I even questioned the validity of my own research, wondering if I had simply chosen the wrong field or career pathway. Empirical history, audience and reception studies, institutional policy, politics and society took the central ground as colleagues around me talked in a language I recognised as coming from the Social Sciences rather than the Arts and the Humanities. Textual analysis may not have been completely outlawed by the television academy, but I did increasingly feel I now harboured a love that dare not speak its name.

So where are we now?

My personal feeling is that textual analysis in television studies is currently undergoing a resurgence. Initially wounded by the criticisms against it, textual researchers now seem to have re-examined its methods and procedures, and are gradually helping it to regain some of its pride and integrity. By accepting its limitations and becoming less prescriptive, they have introduced a self-reflexivity and transparency that all healthy methodologies must have if they are to gain critical respect. So much pride has returned that now even the questions that textual analysis shied away from in the past (such as issues surrounding quality) have slowly begun to emerge (see, for example, Geoff Mulgan,¹¹ Charlotte Brunsdon¹² and Jason Jacobs¹³). The conference from which this very journal was born was entitled 'American Quality Television' (Trinity College, Dublin, 1–3 April, 2004), a

statement that would have been unthinkable less than a decade before because of its implicit judgment of the text.

The influence of post-structuralism has clearly helped textual analysis re-examine its methods and procedures, a cultural movement that explicitly embraced the plurality of the text, and the many, complex ways in which meaning is produced. As Ellen Seiter puts it:

Post-structuralism emphasizes the slippage between signifier and signified – between one sign and the next, between one context and the next – while emphasizing that meaning is always situated, specific to a given context. . . . Theories of psychoanalysis and of ideology, under the influence of post-structuralism, focus on the gaps and fissures, the structuring absences and the incoherencies, in a text . . .¹⁴

Textbooks like Alan McKee's *Textual Analysis*¹⁵ and Karen Lury's *Interpreting Television*¹⁶ now offer students clear and contemporary introductions to the field of textual research. Similarly, the recent series of television books from the British Film Institute (see Creeber,¹⁷ Toby Miller,¹⁸ Michele Hilmes,¹⁹ and John Sinclair and Graeme Turner²⁰) have included a number of different approaches to television, not least work of a deeply textual nature. In a section unashamedly entitled 'Textual Analysis' in Miller's anthology, Hartley acknowledges both the method's strengths and weaknesses, but also stresses the 'disparate disciplinary and discursive strands' that have become 'characteristic of contemporary television studies.'²¹

Reflected in John Corner's recent article, 'Television Studies: Plural Contexts, Singular Ambitions?'²² is this gradual acceptance of the interdisciplinary nature of television studies that now seems prevalent. Earlier books such as Robert Hodge and David Tripp's *Children and Television*²³ helped to pave the way for this interdisciplinarity, explicitly combining textual analysis with other methodologies (in this case, audience research), so that they were able to produce a greater insight into how meaning might be generated by television. There are certainly a growing number of historical accounts of television that bring together empirical historical research with textual analysis. Recent studies such as Jacobs' *The Intimate Screen*²⁴ combine textual analysis with detailed archival research, to produce a compelling and illuminating account of television's past.

David Lavery's edited collection, *This Thing of Ours*,²⁵ is a good example of a new interdisciplinary approach to television programmes. While many articles are textually informed (including psychoanalytic, feminist, postmodern, genre and linguistic analysis), the anthology also includes chapters based on audience and reception research. What has become increasingly clear from such work is that one methodology is probably not enough to do justice to the complex array of themes, issues, debates, contexts and concerns that are involved in a discussion of any single piece of television. Textual analysis on its own is rarely enough, but when it combines with the wider contextual or 'extra-textual' nature of the subject, it can still offer insight and inspiration.

The implicit critical philosophy of Lavery's edited collections on single television programmes, such as *Twin Peaks* (Lynch/Frost Productions/ABC,

1990–1991),²⁶ *The X Files* (20th Century Fox Television/Ten Thirteen Productions, 1993–2002)²⁷ and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy Inc./20th Century Fox Television, 1997–2003),²⁸ is that any text can be viewed from an almost endless number of different ‘reading positions.’ These positions, while clearly contestable, can still offer interesting explorations of the programmes, and continue to inform and generate wider debate. Within the pages of one book students can instantly recognise the contradictory nature of the subject. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s *Reading Sex and the City*²⁹ is another example of this recent trend, revealing the disparate views by which a rich and complex programme like *Sex and the City* (Sex and the City Productions/HBO, 1998–2004) can be interpreted. We might call it ‘dialogism’ and ‘heteroglossia’ in action, but, whatever term we use to describe it, these edited books explicitly recognise the textual plurality and post-structuralist ambiguities of meaning, as well as acknowledging and exploring wider matters of a contextual and extra-textual nature. Incidentally, I.B. Tauris recently commissioned a new series on contemporary television, with several titles explicitly focusing on a single-text.³⁰

And the future?

If textual analysis is to survive into the future, then it (like all methodologies) must learn from past mistakes. To question the notion of ‘quality television’ is clearly an important contribution to the field of cultural analysis. However, we must never allow the ‘quality debate’ to take us back to a time when unchallengeable and unchangeable canons were allowed to be subjectively and arbitrarily constructed. Nor can we let it allow us to imagine that we can ever be sure where ‘quality’ actually lies (other than when referring to it as a specific genre that both audiences and the industry might recognise). While I welcomed Mark Jancovich and James Lyons’ *Quality Popular Television*³¹ for its interesting collection of articles, I was a little surprised that the introduction paid so little attention to the use of the word ‘quality’ in the book’s title (except for the briefest mention of Pierre Bourdieu on page 3). Not only might this lack of investigation of the term suggest to media students that ‘quality’ is something that they can un-problematically define and categorise, it also seemed like a missed opportunity to address and explore a significant issue of debate within television studies as a whole. If textual analysis is to regain its credibility in academia, then it must continue to self-reflexively examine the procedures and methods by which its own judgements are made. Whether consciously or not, edited books such as these do produce canons of sorts and we must be acutely aware of the choices and judgements by which they are inevitably assembled.

Perhaps part of the problem with some textual analysis has been a reluctance to examine its methods and practices too closely. While the ‘social science’ origins of audience research meant that methodology was already a central component of its historical development, the literary origins of textual analysis meant that forms of methodology seemed less pressing or important to its scholars. As a result, textual analysis has sometimes been shockingly poor at explaining and accounting for

itself. What it could learn from audience and reception studies is a clearer set of procedures, a self-reflexive sense of its own methodological development and a more self-conscious understanding of its limitations and critical assumptions. As I frequently tell students, simply stating that 'I will carry out textual analysis' is rarely enough. What type of textual analysis are you intending to carry out? How will it be done? What problems do you expect to encounter, and how will you attempt to deal with these? What will be the validity of your conclusions, and what do you hope to achieve through this approach that other methodologies could not produce? These are just some of the questions that any section on methodology should address. For it is now crucial to see textual analysis as a methodology in its own right, one that needs to be as critically evaluated and routinely assessed like any other.

However, I do have a great deal of hope for textual work in television studies in the future. At a recent symposium I attended at Warwick University ('From the National to the Trans-National: European Television and Film in Transition, 7 May 2005), I was struck by the confidence of the younger academics present to look at television textually. The MA and PhD students I met there seemed to be free of the sort of anxieties that I once associated with textual research. As they were not at least concerned with whether television was worthy of study or not (they simply accepted that it was), so they seemed more than happy to talk about and discuss television from a number of critical angles. This was strikingly different from my own PhD experience, when I felt like I had to constantly justify and explain my own textual approach to television. Similarly, I recently attended the 'Cultures of British Television Drama' conference (University of Reading, 13–15 September 2005) where Christine Geraghty's inspiring paper ('Television Drama – Viewing, Writing, Teaching') spoke about returning to the text, particularly in relation to issues of quality and canonisation (she even dared to suggest that a TV canon was desirable!). While once such a talk may have been heavily contested and criticised, here it was met with a warm sense of approval and critical understanding.

At the time of writing I've just finished editing a book called *Tele-Visions: an Introduction to the Study of Television* to be published by the BFI in 2006 (where some of these arguments are explored further). The main title of the book was an attempt to suggest that television can still be a 'visionary' medium, but it was also a deliberate nod towards television's interdisciplinary nature (offering various 'visions' of television). Although such an introductory textbook can never expect to be comprehensive, I hope that each chapter offers students a different way of approaching and assessing that thing we call 'television.' Of course, audience analysis is represented, as is history, industry, institutions, technology, globalisation and so on. But textual analysis is strongly fore-grounded. This is because I believe it still has an important and crucial contribution to make to the field as a whole. Not only is it where contemporary television studies began (so to understand it is to partly understand the subject's complex historical development), but it is also the place where many students begin their work. So let us encourage a new generation of students to explore and examine the joy of the television text if that

is what they choose to do. But let us also make sure that they do not repeat the problems and mistakes of the past.

Notes

- 1 John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, Methuen, 1978.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Hill & Wang, 1987.
- 3 Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
- 4 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Routledge, 1987.
- 5 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding,' in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, eds, *Culture, Media, Language*, Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128–138.
- 6 Fiske, *Television Culture*, p. 189.
- 7 Charlotte Brunson and David Morley, *Everyday Television 'Nationwide'*, bfi Publishing, 1978.
- 8 David Morley, *'Nationwide' Audience*, bfi Publishing, 1980.
- 9 Justin Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus: Exploration of Television and Its Audience*, Routledge, 1992.
- 10 Lewis, *The Ideological Octopus*, p. 34.
- 11 Geoff Mulgan, ed., *The Question of Quality*, bfi Publishing, 1990.
- 12 Charlotte Brunson, 'Problems of Quality,' in Brunson, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*, Routledge, 1997, pp. 124–147.
- 13 Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4, December 2001, pp. 427–447.
- 14 Ellen Seiter, 'Semiotics, Structuralism and Television,' in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, Routledge, 1992, p. 61
- 15 Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*, Sage Publications Ltd, 2003.
- 16 Karen Lury, *Interpreting Television*, Hodder Arnold, 2005.
- 17 Glen Creeber, ed., *The Television Genre Book*, bfi Publishing, 2001.
- 18 Toby Miller, ed., *Television Studies*, bfi Publishing, 2002.
- 19 Michele Hilmes, ed., *The Television History Book*, bfi Publishing, 2003.
- 20 John Sinclair and Graeme Turner, eds, *Contemporary World Television*, bfi Publishing, 2004.
- 21 John Hartley, 'Textual Analysis' in Miller, ed., *Television Studies*, bfi Publishing, 2002, p. 33.
- 22 John Corner, 'Television Studies: Plural Contexts, Singular Ambitions?' *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:1, 2004, 6–13.
- 23 Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach*, Stanford University Press, 1986.
- 24 Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*, Clarendon Press, 2000.
- 25 David Lavery, ed., *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, Wallflower Press, 2002; Lavery has extended his textual investigations of *The Sopranos* with another edited anthology, *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV From HBO*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.
- 26 David Lavery, ed., *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, Wayne State University Press, 1995.
- 27 David Lavery, Angela Hague and Maria Cartwright, eds, *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files*, Syracuse University Press, 1996.

- 28 Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, eds, *Fighting The Forces: What's At Stake in Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.
- 29 Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds, *Reading Sex and the City: Critical Approaches*, I.B. Tauris, 2004.
- 30 I.B. Tauris' new television series, 'Reading Contemporary Television' includes Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds, *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, David Lavery, ed., *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV From HBO* (2006), Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds, *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*, David Lavery, ed., *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By* (forthcoming), Steven Peacock, ed., *Reading 24: TV Against The Clock* (forthcoming) and Michael Allen, ed., *Reading C.S.I.: Crime Television Under the Microscope* (forthcoming).
- 31 Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, eds, *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*, bfi Publishing, 2003.