Finding words

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Finding words: Aesthetic criticism and television

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Abstract
Those endorsing or opposing the development of television aesthetics scholarship have exhibited an admirable willingness to reflect upon the rationales and motivations for formulating value judgements. However, very little equivalent attention has been afforded to processes that occur within this area: how scholars conduct analysis and develop claims for achievement in television. In addressing this lack, the following article surveys some of the meanings that 'criticism' has encompassed in Television Studies, offering 'aesthetic criticism' as a useful term to describe the work of analysis and evaluation, before moving to a series of close readings of aesthetic criticism in practice.

Keywords
television aesthetics, aesthetic criticism, close analysis, evaluation, television criticism, metacriticism

Television aesthetics, evaluation and reflexivity

Since the turn of the century, television aesthetics has established itself as a significant focus within the field of Television Studies. In many respects, Jason Jacobs' article 'Issues of judgement and value in television studies' can be regarded as a pivotal contribution (arguably, *the* pivotal contribution) within this development. His arguments are wide-ranging, but Jacobs' central claims that we should attend closely to television and take it seriously, as an art form capable of particular achievements, can be read as a definitive endorsement of the turn towards television aesthetics (Jacobs, 2001: 427–431). Given that the very title of his article is focussed explicitly on value and judgement, it is appropriate to locate Jacobs' arguments within the area of aesthetics, which is intrinsically concerned

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with evaluation. Looking further back, it is important to note that Charlotte Brunsdon's article, 'Problems with quality' is often cited within discussions of television aesthetics and, indeed, her contention that Television Studies should address evaluation more directly (finishing her argument with the crucial proposal: 'Judgements are being made – let's talk about them') can be seen as foundational to the development of this critical interest, even though Brunsdon's position is complex and does not, in fact, advocate a move to television aesthetics as a central concern (Brunsdon, 1990: 89–90).

The emphasis on questions of judgement and value has been a consistent underlying focus in the debates surrounding the place and pursuit of television aesthetics within the field of Television Studies. Christine Geraghty's influential article 'Aesthetics and quality in popular drama' complements and extends the thrust of Jacobs' piece by focussing a discussion around two key questions: 'how can we articulate judgements about the aesthetics of television drama?' and 'how debates about evaluation of television content might be generated in order to have an effect on what audiences demand of television drama' (Geraghty, 2003: 26–27). Elsewhere, John Corner uses Jacobs' article partially as a starting point for debating a range of issues pertaining to the critical study of television and, within that discussion, concludes that: 'If wholesale revision of criticisms' procedures is unlikely, an increase in its self-awareness is not. Further reflexivity in its acts of claims-making and the contingency of their grounding are urgently necessary' (Corner, 1997: 369). Geraghty and Corner each express an interest in how judgements and claims for quality are formulated and disseminated, with the former adopting a reflexive position in an effort to both focus and expand the potential for aesthetics-led debate, and the latter arguing for precisely this kind of reflexivity to become a consistent and conscious activity within the field at a fundamental level.

This characteristic reflexivity can often be found within the development of television aesthetics. Jacobs' later essay, 'Television Aesthetics: an Infantile Disorder' offers a concise but comprehensive evaluation of 'the problems that await us if the debate about aesthetics is closed down to doctrinal posturing' (Jacobs, 2006: 22). Jacobs revisits and re-emphasises an assertion from his earlier article that work in television aesthetics should be flexible and adaptable in order to best accommodate the particularity of texts, rather than enacting 'ossification into theoretical correctness' that he perceives to be unproductively restrictive (Jacobs, 2006: 32). Elsewhere, Sarah Cardwell engages directly with, and provides a far-reaching evaluation of, the definitions and priorities of television aesthetics in two key contributions: her article 'Television Aesthetics' (Cardwell, 2006) and her chapter 'Television aesthetics: stylistic analysis and beyond' (Cardwell, 2013). This work offers a number of reflections and contentions that augment the development of television aesthetics as a scholarly concern. Cardwell notes, for example, that 'Without overt collaboration, an increasing number of voices have contributed to the proliferation of work that fits broadly within television aesthetics. Unsurprisingly, these voices do not sing in unison; they offer very different arguments in response to key questions' and uses this to expand upon some of the key critical and conceptual concerns that run through television aesthetics (Cardwell, 2006: 72). Similarly, she 'takes seriously the notion that there are pressing challenges that arise from the alliance of television with aesthetics, whether raised by

'aesthetics sceptics' or our own conceptual interrogations' and proceeds to map out in detail the various manifestations of that alliance, moving towards a more precise appreciation of what television aesthetics might actually be (Cardwell, 2013: 24).

If reflexivity is a feature of those endorsing television aesthetics as a scholarly concern, it equally constitutes a dominant aspect within accounts that voice reservations, or are sceptical, about its place and development. In a response to Corner's article, for example, Karen Lury asserts that: 'The first challenge is, I think, to resist the concept of 'value' or 'more awkwardly' the championing of 'good-ness' as the primary ambition of television studies' and that 'terms like 'value' or 'excellence' and 'quality' seem to me ways of smuggling in taste hierarchies established via criteria related to other art forms.' (Lury, 2007: 371–372). In rejecting a focus on value, Lury proceeds to argue for a greater appreciation of television's relationship to the everyday and its topological qualities (Lury, 2007: 373), which constitutes a reaction to Corner but also a clear resistance to the positions articulated by Cardwell, Geraghty and Jacobs. On a similar theme, Matt Hills responds to Jacobs' 'Television Aesthetics: an Infantile Disorder' within his article, 'Television Aesthetics: A Pre-structuralist Danger?' (Hills, 2011). Having characterised Jacobs' position (and, indeed, much of television aesthetics work) as 'pre-structuralist,' Hills suggests that: 'an alternative position could involve not setting out scholarly judgements of value, however provisional these may be, but rather investigating how aesthetic judgements are made by all sorts of non-academic audiences' (Hills, 2011: 113). Helen Piper builds upon some of Hills' reservations in her article 'Broadcast drama and the problem of television aesthetics,' arguing, for example, that: 'aesthetic judgement may be problematic not simply because professional criticism is an act of cultural power, but because any judgement (by whomsoever it is made) will lack ethical authority unless underpinned by consensual ideals' (Piper, 2016: 167).[1]

Forms of television criticism

My point, in alluding very briefly to some of the debates that have taken place within, outside and in opposition to television aesthetics, is that there is an admirable readiness among scholars to reflect upon the rationale underpinning claims for value and the motivations involved in arriving at critical judgements. Indeed, there is even an appetite among those sitting outside of television aesthetics to debate what form value judgements should take or whether they have a place within the study of television at all. It would be difficult, I think, to regard this kind of reflexivity as anything other than positive for the development of television aesthetics as an area of focus within Television Studies. The work of television aesthetics scholars can only be enriched by their own evaluation and appraisal of the methods and principles involved. Likewise, as Cardwell has noted, examining the problems and challenges of television aesthetics by considering objections raised by 'aesthetics sceptics' can help to strengthen approaches (Cardwell, 2013: 27–28).

Missing from these debates, however, is any sustained reflection on the processes and techniques of detailed analysis and evaluation, which underpins work in television aesthetics, and the manner in which scholars advance claims and judgements.[2] This may be linked, in part, to a general lack of attention to the forms and styles of written television

criticism in Television Studies more broadly. I am locating this as a concern within the still-burgeoning area of television aesthetics because, to my mind, there is an important and intrinsic relationship between the aims and ambitions of television aesthetics scholarship and the practice of television criticism.[3] Broadly, work in television aesthetics is committed to analysing television texts in detail to articulate claims for value and achievement. These activities of analysis and articulation are self-evidently reliant upon written expression: the language utilised and the style employed. The act of weaving together analysis and evaluation within accounts of television can be a precarious undertaking, requiring strategic skill and methodical care on the part of the writer to attain balance and precision. Work in television aesthetics is often committed to finding ways of describing moments from individual television shows in a manner that can, for example, fluently evoke the experience of viewing, accurately convey features and qualities of the text, or attend closely to creative choices, so that claims rest upon robust evidence and, importantly, can be measured against the show itself. The ability to meet or even respond to these challenges does not reside innately within television scholars. It is an act of criticism that demands time, practice and patience, yet very little attention has thus far been paid to its written forms.

Although I take this absence to be a pertinent concern within Television Studies, and for television aesthetics specifically, it should be noted that the issue is not particular to the discipline. In Film Studies, for example, the seminal work that does attend closely to criticism as practice is Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan's edited collection, *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (Clayton and Klevan, 2011). Within their discussions, however, the editors acknowledge that their book is necessitated by a blind spot that exists within Film Studies regarding criticism, and they provide some reasons for this:

> Although film criticism exists within the academy, it has never quite cemented itself within the discipline (unlike literary criticism). As Film Studies became institutionalised, criticism was thought lacking in analytic and scholarly rigour; socially, politically, culturally or historically blind; purposeless in its failure to address 'important' issues; theoretically unsophisticated and not suitably self-reflexive; and linguistically naïve in its attachment to ordinary language. (Clayton and Klevan, 2011: 2)

Clayton and Klevan's account makes clear that, traditionally within Film Studies, a focussed consideration of criticism might have struggled to even get underway against a context of disciplinary hostility. Their book is a significant counter to such attitudes but it is perhaps worth observing that, in the years since its publication, it remains a rather solitary beacon of endeavour. Therefore, we probably shouldn't assume that Film Studies scholars regularly and comfortably reflect on the style and form of criticism (and that, implicitly, Television Studies is lagging behind drastically). Indeed, it might equally be worth considering whether some of the scepticism that Clayton and Klevan identify remains in place.

In Television Studies, the specific hostilities towards criticism that Clayton and Klevan identify in Film Studies may not have taken shape in quite the same way, but it is certainly the case that the fields share a tendency for the term 'criticism' often to

encompass different meanings across different areas of the disciplines. In *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*, Corner proposes three different meanings for the term 'critical' that he will draw upon:

> It points to the long-established tradition of criticism as the practice of arts appraisal. It also indicates the calling attention to shortcomings, weaknesses and limitations. Finally, it can signal what is regarded as of most importance in the development and direction of enquiry and debate. (Corner, 1999: 2).

As Corner's work moves through eight key areas in Television Studies ('Institution,' 'Image,' 'Talk,' 'Narrative,' 'Flow,' 'Production,' 'Reception' and 'Pleasure'), the first and second of his definitions of 'criticism' do not significantly inform debate, whereas the final definition becomes dominant. This is not necessarily an issue and, indeed, we might recognise that Corner adopts the methodological perspective that best suits the themes he wishes to explore in a series of discussions that take place at strategic distance to television texts (a distance that would be incongruous with a tradition of arts appraisal, for example).

In contrast, Robert C. Allen's landmark collection, *Channels of Discourse*, attempts a more audacious enterprise as he reframes criticism as 'contemporary criticism,' and, crucially, sets this in opposition to what he perceives as 'traditional criticism' in the following ways:

> Whereas traditional criticism emphasises the autonomy of the artwork, contemporary criticism foregrounds the relationships between texts and the conventions underlying specific textual practices. Traditional criticism is artist centred; contemporary criticism stresses the contexts within which the production of cultural products occurs and the forces that act upon and channel that production. Traditional criticism conceives of meaning as the property of an artwork; contemporary criticism views meaning as the product of the engagement of a text by a reader or groups of readers. Traditional criticism frequently sees as its function not only the establishment of what a work means but also the separation of "literature" from "nonliterature" and the erection of a hierarchy of greatness among works. Contemporary criticism examines the criteria by which those in a position to define literature make such determinations and would expand the scope of literary studies to include both "nonliterature" and critical discourse about texts. (Allen, 1992: 11).

The distinctions that Allen makes, whilst reliant upon broad generalisations, are important as a means of defining a specific approach, and the aims contained within it. If the tone is somewhat polemical, it is designed to firmly mark out a new direction and, essentially, signal a break with the old (here, the 'traditional'). We can recognise in Allen's words at least some of the characteristic assumptions about criticism that Clayton and Klevan note within those hostile attitudes they identify in Film Studies. The mention of 'literature' and 'nonliterature' might appear curious in a book devoted to television but makes sense as an allusion to a reaction against a Leavisite literary tradition, which had been a feature of Film Studies' theoretical development in the 1970s and was subsequently taken up within Television Studies (Caughie, 1984: 112). Allen's fairly radical

move is to not only reject those traits he perceives in 'traditional' criticism but to furthermore revise and claim the term 'criticism' for his own purposes.

Alongside this kind of academic redefinition, it is important to note that 'criticism' can also refer to the practice of journalistic television criticism, which has its own status and characteristics. As Paul Rixon observes, television journalism has received relatively sparse scholarly attention (Rixon, 2012: 389), with Mike Poole's article 'The Cult of the Generalist: British Television Criticism 1936–83' the seminal work (Poole, 1984). As well as sketching out a history of journalistic television criticism, Poole details some of its shortcomings – its literariness, non-specialism, lack of rigour – within an extended evaluation of Clive James' output, which he takes to be representative of British television criticism (Poole, 1984: 54–57). Although Poole's account of James' work does not aspire to detailed metacriticism, it nevertheless constitutes a perceptive analysis of the style and form of journalistic television criticism, thus representing an activity that is rarely, if ever, undertaken in relation to academic television criticism. It is something Rixon continues when he is reflecting on Poole's work (briefly analysing the criticism of writers such as Alan Coren and Charlie Brooker), which might lead us to contemplate whether criticism is more readily regarded as a legitimate object of study when it occurs outside of the academy, hence receiving relatively close textual scrutiny in these accounts (Rixon, 2012: 395–397).

In a partial response to Poole's article, John Caughie moves from the topic of journalistic criticism to crystallise his thoughts on academic criticism:

> Essentially, my argument is that 'academic' work on television (and I mean as wide range of discourses by that formulation as I can get away with), while it has begun to develop a material sense of certain aspects of television, has not yet established a theoretical or methodological base from which to approach television as an articulation of institution, signifying system and culture' (Caughie, 1984: 109).

In Caughie's entreaty, criticism spreads across a range of major concerns within Television Studies and becomes rooted in theory. In many respects, that precise course has been pursued within the field, as 'criticism' becomes an umbrella term under which it is possible to group a number of theoretical investments. Allen's 'contemporary criticism,' for example, encompasses a whole 'family of critical approaches: semiotics, narrative theory, genre theory, reader- or audience-oriented criticism, ideological analysis, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism and British cultural studies' (Allen, 1992: 5). Similarly, in their edited collection, *Television and Criticism*, Solange Davin and Rhona Jackson observe that:

> television criticism has become an important focus for a variety of critical applications […] This book points to the number of different disciplines which Television Studies has been influenced by and can draw on in order to explain its centrality to Cultural Studies in general, research into media influence, and ways in which the television audience can be approached which do not rely solely on the effects or Uses and Gratifications traditions. (Davin and Jackson, 2008: 8).

A key notion in this passage is that criticism should function as a focal point for other interests, rather than attaining a status as an academic pursuit in its own right (and, indeed, criticism very quickly gives way to Cultural Studies in Davin and Jackson's thoughts). We might return to Allen's categories within 'contemporary criticism' and note the ways in which 'criticism' routinely accompanies very specific academic concerns like psychoanalysis, audience research, and feminism. A picture emerges of criticism being something that stretches widely across Television Studies, encompassing a range of academic investments that, often, have an underlying theoretical basis. This is not necessarily a problem, although 'criticism' does lose specificity of meaning in this formulation as it merges with theoretical approaches or even functions straightforwardly as a synonym for 'writing.' In turn, however, this can present opportunities to reflect upon and define more precisely what kind of criticism we are engaging in or with at any time.

Aesthetic criticism and its challenges

There seems little chance of reigning in the multiple applications of the term 'criticism' within Television Studies and I can think of no sensible reasons for wishing to do so. We would not, I presume, welcome the unedifying and fruitless spectacle of any area within the discipline attempting to lay claim to a term that has been adopted productively by a wide range of researchers already. In relation to critical work in television aesthetics specifically, however, I would propose that there is potential merit in adopting 'aesthetic criticism' as a term that describes the analytical and evaluative activity that is being undertaken and, furthermore, to scrutinise these qualities in closer detail within that framing terminology. Aesthetic criticism, it should be noted, is not a new concept by any means (and Klevan, for example, provides an especially detailed and rigorous exploration of its principles and practices in the second part of his book, *Aesthetic Evaluation and Film* (Klevan, 2018: 57–116)). However, the application of the term within the field of Television Studies, and the area of television aesthetics particularly, might offer certain advantages. Firstly, there is the potential to add definition to the work of television aesthetics scholars, where currently there is not a specific phrase that describes their activities succinctly. Secondly, and relatedly, there is the opportunity to bring together analysis and evaluation under one title, emphasising their distinctiveness but also their interrelationship and co-reliance within the practice of aesthetic criticism.[4] Thirdly, the use of aesthetic criticism may help to distinguish more directly and efficiently this branch of criticism from other important forms within Television Studies, given that the word 'criticism' enjoys such a broad application and set of associations. Fourthly, the term may lend further definition to the burgeoning area of television aesthetics itself by identifying a key practice that takes place within it. Fifth and finally, placing an emphasis upon aesthetic criticism through the employment of terminology retains a focus upon analysis and evaluation as critical acts requiring critical skills, which could also lead to an appreciation of the value certain written accounts within the discipline possess, the qualities they exhibit in pursuit of their aims, and the contributions they make to knowledge and understanding.

With this final point in mind, we can turn to a selection of writing that we might characterise as aesthetic criticism, and consider how the qualities of individual contributions can help to shape our understanding of this specific critical endeavour. To begin with, Victoria O'Donnell's *Television Criticism* is designed specifically to provide insight into the practices of television criticism (O'Donnell, 2007). The back cover description tells us that the book is intended for undergraduate and graduate courses, and it is evident that the author attempts to cover a range of different areas, such as the business of television, genres, representation and postmodernism, as plainly and accessibly as possible (which is often a hallmark of textbooks targeted at a broad student market). The volume concludes with a 'Sample Criticism of a Television Programme,' in this case an episode of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (2000–2015)*, which we might reasonably anticipate to be a showcasing of the methods that readers have been guided through thus far and, therefore, necessarily more sophisticated and complex in terms of content and form than other sections of the book. This sample criticism is divided into sections, 'Introduction,' 'Thesis,' 'Purpose,' 'Description of CSI,' 'Description of the Episode,' 'Production Information,' 'Questions for Analysis' and, finally, 'Analysis and Interpretation,' of which 'Visual Style' is a subsection containing the following paragraph:

> The overall look of *CSI* is dark. The characters tend to be in dark spaces; subdued lighting creates shadows over parts of their faces. For example, as Gil and Warrick examine the dark room where a man named Adanto Adams lies dead from stab wounds, their faces in close-up shots are half-lit as they photograph the body. When Sara and Nick go to the women's prison during the day, the cell that they examine is quite dark. Nick uses a blue light to look for blood under the cot. Presumably, it needs to be dark to use a blue light. Using flashlights, Nick and Sara examine the back of the prison bus – it is dark in the bus even though it is daylight outside. Their faces are also half-lit in close-up. In the autopsy room where Gil and Dr. Robbins examine Adanto's body, the lighting is blue to suggest objectivity; Gil and Robbins have dark shadows on their faces. The darkness and the shadows on their faces, however, do not suggest that the characters are sinister. Rather the mood is very serious and the characters appear to be very intensely focussed on the evidence. The camera lingers in close-ups on the evidence – body parts, stab wounds, the dead woman's skull. When Warrick and a lab technician examine handwriting samples, the camera moves in for extreme close-ups of the written letters as the technician explains what they mean. Catherine picks up each one, putting a number card beside it as she photographs them. One brightly lit close-up shot is of one of the victim's feet. It suggests a sense of sadness rather than gore or repulsiveness. (O'Donnell, 2007: 221)

In this passage, O'Donnell identifies darkness to be a key feature in the show's visual composition. The opening observation that 'The overall look of *CSI* is dark' is returned to again and again in description, encompassing 'dark spaces,' a 'dark room,' a cell that is 'quite dark,' a 'dark' prison bus, and 'dark shadows.' Having recognised this as a re-current characteristic, however, O'Donnell struggles to articulate what the significance of this abundant darkness might be. In one instance, we are told that it does not suggest that

the characters are sinister, but this thought is concluded with the assertion that the mood is simply 'serious' and these characters appear to be intensely focussed. We are left to question whether it is the darkness that has contributed to or created this serious mood and, if that is the case, how seriousness might be conveyed through darkness particularly, as opposed to a brightly-lit setting (or any other lighting state). O'Donnell is alert to the connections that can exist between lighting choices and mood when, elsewhere, she proposes that 'the lighting is blue to suggest objectivity.' This statement holds intriguing possibilities, given that objectivity is a very specific quality for a lighting tone to suggest, yet it is left as an unfinished thought, with no explanation of how such an effect is achieved through the use of blue light, or even why objectivity might be a pertinent concern within the scene.

A similar lack of completion can be found, ironically, at the end of the paragraph, when a shot of a victim's feet is taken to suggest 'sadness rather than gore or repulsiveness.' Again, this comment has attractive potential, referencing perhaps the ways in which crime series like *CSI* often balance contrasting or conflicting moods within aesthetic composition, so that even a shot of feet can prospectively evoke either sadness or repulsiveness, depending upon the creative choices made. The assertion, however, goes no further and, although there is a marginal hint that the sadness might have something to do with the shot being 'brightly lit,' the precise inducement of that emotion is left unexplored and un-explained. The shot of the feet is one of three uses of close-up that O'Donnell mentions. As the first reference to close-ups follows the sentence noting that 'the characters appear to be very intensely focussed on the evidence,' we might intuitively wish to make a connection between their intense focus and the intense focus that a recurring pattern of close-ups can provide. Yet, this would be to impose a relationship that is not explored within the writing itself: O'Donnell does not propose that the selection of certain shot types is designed to complement or reflect character behaviour and attitudes, and so the link is never made.

One value of O'Donnell's writing, we might say, is that it references a series of aesthetics qualities without exploring their significance or explaining the effects ascribed to them, so that the reader might be compelled to revisit the episode of *CSI* in order to make sense of the account and fill in some missing details. Critical writing can be enigmatic and can certainly make demands of its reader. However, it is admittedly unusual for anything described as 'analysis and interpretation' to offer claims that are only partially articulated or rendered opaque to this degree. Rather, O'Donnell's criticism might be viewed as representing the early stages of a process that, through further re-flection and elaboration, could move the writing towards lucidity and rigour. This reveals a further, important, merit of the account as published: it reminds us of the challenges inherent in the work of aesthetic criticism. Qualities like clarity, precision and fluency do not occur naturally in critical writing and, as I have suggested already, their development requires time, practice and patience. None of O'Donnell's points are wrong, necessarily, but the work of critical articulation is unfinished in her account, meaning that we can only evaluate them in terms of their potential. This has consequences for the relationship between analysis and evaluation, which is crucial within aesthetic criticism. O'Donnell's ultimate value judgement of her selected show is sparse:

> I think that *CSI* fulfils the criteria for a good television show in Chapter 9.[5] It accomplishes what it sets out to do. It provides entertainment and information. It is generally well written, engages and respects its audience, and certainly allows for audience involvement. It is professionally produced in such a way that the audience can accept what it sees and hears. (O'Donnell, 2007: 231).

While these thin assertions may represent an accurate summary of *CSI*'s merits, nothing in the analysis prepares the ground for them and, as a consequence, none of the points can be measured against that analysis. Indeed, whatever their shortcomings, analysis and evaluation are dislocated from each other in O'Donnell's account, rather than combining to provide evidence for claims.

Objectives and approach

One facet that perhaps hampers O'Donnell's efforts is the lack of a compelling set of critical objectives that might help to shape the course of both analysis and evaluation. O'Donnell is in fact responding to a set of questions, but these are characterised by, arguably, somewhat limited ambition: 'Is the lighting bright or dark?', 'What elements provide an authentic look to outdoor scenes?' or 'Do the actors express their feelings through facial expressions?' for example (O'Donnell, 2007: 220). Weaving objectives into aesthetic criticism can present challenges, requiring the setting up of analytical and evaluative positions as part of an unfolding engagement with a text, whilst risking the construction of a formulaic list of points and interests that can be ticked off figuratively through analysis and evaluation. Moving to another example, Lucy Fife Donaldson begins a consideration of space in *Cracker* (1993–1996; 2007) by focussing on crime scene investigation sequences, which she characterises as opportunities to showcase the skills of writers and directors. She continues:

> A striking example of this kind of investigational flourish occurs during the investigation of a murder scene in 'To Say I Love You' (1993) the three-part episode story arc that comes in the middle of the first series of *Cracker* […] Psychologist Edward 'Fitz' Fitzgerald's (Robbie Coltrane) attention to the space in this instance serves to position him emphatically as a good detective, the moment designed to articulate the professional brilliance of *Cracker*'s central character. The scene also reveals and confirms Fitz's less flattering characteristics: his addiction to gambling, his arrogance and pride. I am interested in how this moment from *Cracker* operates structurally, how it is placed within the series' texture, taken more broadly as an expression of nature and constitution, and how the textures within it – details of space built through *mise-en-scène*, framing – contribute to its construction. The moment I have chosen from *Cracker* is at once prominent and compelling, while also procedural and generic, and therefore to some extent representative of the series' interests in balancing the extraordinary with the everyday. (Fife Donaldson, 2015: 40).

The selection of the word 'striking' to begin this passage is pivotal, swiftly and vigorously assigning a particular weight of importance to this deployment of a convention

that is acknowledged already to be a 'flourish' in other shows. Two following sentences share a resemblance in terms of structure: the phrase 'good detective' given further clarity with 'professional brilliance' and, likewise, 'less flattering characteristics' provided definition in the description of 'his addiction to gambling, his arrogance and pride.' At this stage in the account, this strategy of elaborating briefly upon broader assertions – 'good' or 'less flattering' – by providing further contextual detail equips the reader with a fuller appreciation of what is at stake in the show's characterisation of Fitz. Additionally, it acquaints us with Fife Donaldson's critical approach, which will favour detail and specificity rather than leaving overarching claims to function as broad, definitive judgements. Indeed, she proceeds to focus her interests more closely, formalising critical language with terms like 'structurally,' 'texture' and 'construction' whilst, at the same time, stressing the subjectivity inherent in analytical interpretation by beginning the sentence with 'I am interested…' This sentence also prepares the reader for an approach that will use small fragments of the television text – the 'moment' – to plot wider relationships within the series overall, linking the particular to the general, and will place a particular emphasis upon the significance of visual composition ('details of space built through *mise-en-scène*, framing'). The final sentence is bold in stressing the fact of critical discrimination – 'The moment I have chosen' – and succeeds in creating a set of weighted tensions within its evaluative statements: that the moment is 'prominent and compelling, while also procedural and generic,' and that the series more generally exhibits 'interests in balancing the extraordinary with the everyday.' These points anticipate a reading that will not rely upon linear connections between content and meaning but, rather, will keep certain ambiguities and complexities in play. Indeed, it is made clear that Fife Donaldson will invest in these qualities and use them to shape critical responses.

These preliminary statements within Fife Donaldson's account are effective in promoting a set of interests and approaches, whilst preparing the reader for the nature of the critical endeavour that will be undertaken. At the same time, however, the passage is a work of criticism in itself, intertwining a series of tentative evaluative claims and initiating analytical processes. Fife Donaldson's critical objectives, therefore, are not articulated in isolation from the work of aesthetic criticism but, instead, form an intrinsic relationship with that work: becoming part of it.

Style and evocation

A further challenge facing writers invested in the aesthetic criticism of television is to keep the form and tone of a show in place whilst necessarily altering its arrangement through the act of analysis and evaluation. We may want to linger on an aspect, slow it down or extract details from it in order to accentuate something that we take to be significant, and the significance of which we wish to share in writing. V.F. Perkins has articulated succinctly the risks of such acts in relation to film: 'Distortion threatens when an aspect is isolated from its context to take on perhaps disproportionate weight or significance' (Perkins, 2017: 492). These hazards must be navigated in equivalent work on television. Keeping a show intact whilst simultaneously attempting to develop points of emphasis in relation to it can constitute a particular challenge in aesthetic criticism.

Evocation, however, is not simply a question of attending to a show's original temporal shape. Rather, it also involves fitting the style of critical description to a show's characteristic tenor and attitude. These considerations of form and tone are present in Steven Peacock's account of a scene from Marion and Geoff (2000–2003) in which Keith (Rob Brydon) misguidedly journeys to France by Eurotunnel to gate-crash the holiday of his ex-wife, Marion, their two children, and her new husband, Geoff:

> The scene opens with the camera set still, slanting up towards Keith sitting in the front seat of his car, and the steering wheel jutting into the frame. The car is cooped in a train carriage, shuttling towards France. As the journey passes, small changes indicate progression. The box window of the carriage, seen from the camera's set angle, glows with hazy light as the train moves forward on *terra firma*. As the shuttle dips underground, the light snaps to a reflection of the carriage's shutters. The car is locked in, below the ground, between England and France. A series of dissolves and ellipses move us through the journey, as Keith recounts his last holiday with Marion. He prepares for the forthcoming meeting, jiggling in his seat with excitement, tidying and spraying his hair, arranging a bouquet of flowers. A musical crescendo heralds the car's movement from the carriage into France ('Hello France; no, bonjour Francois'). A quick cut returns us to the car, now back in the carriage, heading home. Rejected and prevented from meeting with his children, Keith smooths down his anxiety (as he did his hair): 'I'm alright. I'm alright. I'm alright.' His extended legs stick out of the car's open side window. Further solace is found in hugging a pair of rejected and returned soft toys to his chest, and in seeking 'familiar sounds' on the car radio. The trip (in screen-time) has lasted no more than five minutes, though Keith assures us that he has had a 'lovely time, come on.' (Peacock, 2006: 116–117).

The final line of Peacock's account reinforces the fact that Keith's trip is defined by its brevity. Peacock responds to this quality in his writing, adopting a particularly economical mode of expression that is characterised by a series of relatively short, slight sentences. We might extend this to suggest that Peacock's chosen style matches the look and feel of *Marion and Geoff* more generally, which he describes elsewhere as 'stripped down' in its 'isolation of one character; the attention to one voice; the spare camera work; the minimalist rhythms of editing; the sparse nature of the soundtrack' (Peacock, 2006: 116). The show is also restrictive in its consistent depiction of one man sitting in his car, and Peacock alludes to this quality as his choice of descriptive phrases conveys a sense of enclosure and discomfort: a 'steering wheel jutting into the frame,' the 'car cooped in a train carriage,' the 'box window of the carriage,' a 'reflection of the carriage's shutters,' and the car 'locked in, below the ground, between England and France.' Crucially, Peacock does not directly state that the show's *mise-en-scène* constructs a feeling of almost claustrophobic constraint but, instead, uses his description of objects and their relationship to setting as a means of embedding that feature at an almost subconscious level within his critical account. Likewise, he resists making the explicit point that these objects and spaces provide a symbolic representation of Keith's predicament – the extent to which *he* is both physically and psychologically hemmed in and awkward within the situation. Instead, Peacock allows the reader to make this kind of connection through their

reading of a passage containing descriptions of objects and spaces alongside those of Keith's words and behaviour. Similarly, he later describes the soft toys as 'rejected and returned' but refrains from finishing with the obvious conclusion: 'as Keith is rejected and returned.' Instead, Peacock trusts the reader to appreciate the connection that is being made through his choice of descriptive language. In this way, he extends the process of interpretation: Peacock interpreting aspects of the television show's aesthetic composition and the reader interpreting his written prose.

This subtle, nuanced writing style continues in Peacock's brief evocation of the scene's humour, as he fleetingly but potently mentions Keith 'jiggling in his seat with excitement,' where 'jiggling' arguably conjures a funnier image than equivalent available phrases like 'shifting' or 'fidgeting,' and includes, in parenthesis, Keith's comically inaccurate use of French: 'Hello France; no, bonjour Francois.' Again, Peacock avoids direct statements about the comic qualities inherent in Brydon's skilful physical performance or his delivery of a fine script. Instead, we might find ourselves smiling at the thought of these actions and words when they drop into the critical description as apparently incidental points that nevertheless carry weight in capturing the scene's comedic tone.

The understated rhythm of the sequence is conveyed through the economy and brevity that has been a hallmark of Peacock's prose. Furthermore, the placing together of 'a musical crescendo heralds the car's movement…' with, in the next sentence, 'A quick cut returns us to the car…' delicately captures not only the way in which the show enacts a subtle change of pace and tone from gentle and soft to sudden and sharp, but also the way in which Geoff's thoughts and emotions are depicted as transforming very quickly from the hope of expectation to the disappointment of reality: the elegant flourish of 'a musical crescendo heralds the car's movement' coming up against the stark bluntness of 'A quick cut returns us to the car.' Without labouring the point or even making explicit mention of it, Peacock efficiently tells us that the trip has gone wrong. He attends to Keith's transition in mood with the assertion that he 'smooths down his anxiety (as he did his hair).' Because his account is not littered with this kind of poetic language, the play on 'smooths' stands out from the surrounding sentences, marking not only a pivotal change in the show's narrative but also allowing for an appreciation of Keith's anxiety to subsequently be expressed purely through a description of his actions: repeating 'I'm alright,' sticking his legs out of the window, hugging the soft toys and seeking those 'familiar sounds on the radio.' Again, in keeping with Peacock's style throughout the passage, we are not reminded in a formulaic way that these are manifestations of an anxious state and, instead, the writing discloses a respectful expectation that the reader is equipped to complete the association.

Analysis, evaluation and integration

Peacock's analysis demonstrates the extent to which aesthetic criticism can involve a close and intricate relationship to the television text. An obstacle facing writers, therefore, is how to move from this intimate engagement to articulate wider evaluative claims without creating an awkward or arbitrary divide between the two activities. In a chapter on television aesthetics and close analysis, Sarah Cardwell conducts a series of especially

close readings of moments from Stephen Poliakoff's *Perfect Strangers* (2001). Within this, she identifies repetition as a key facet that impacts upon the show's aesthetic arrangement in a number of ways (Cardwell, 2005: 190–192). She concludes her consideration of this theme in the following paragraph:

> It becomes clear, then, that the use of repetition and near-repetition in *Perfect Strangers*, present in music, in images and in dialogue, is the primary way in which themes and ideas are developed (and left open). Repetition is a formal quality that permeates the work, delivering a sense of coherence and unity. Music and dialogue, intricate and expressive in themselves, become part of a coherent whole through the way in which they are intimately connected with other elements of narrative, theme and style. Yet through its constant revisiting and rearticulation, the programme also retains a sense of 'open-endedness,' of the perpetual possibilities for developments, amendments, and revisions, while the use of montage, mixed media and ambiguous subjectivities resist homogenisation and simple uniformity. Even the three central images of the sequence (the photograph of Daniel as the Little Prince, the portrait and the photograph of Raymond's father dancing) are themselves less clearly delineated and more mutable than one might expect; in this sequence these images are fragmented and multiplied. An alternative shot of Daniel on the staircase, peering through the banisters, is included alongside the 'original' photograph with which we are familiar, and new photographs are introduced into the sequence, with no explanation as to their origin. For example, we see a photograph of Raymond as a child, watching his father dance, yet this image has not been previously displayed, nor is it referred to by any of the characters. It is almost as if the concrete existence of these alternative and multiple images in the diegetic world is questionable; the montage sequence thus moves outside the bounds of the narrative and into an alternative space, in which fragmented images suggest something of the breadth and variety of human stories and experiences. (Cardwell, 2005: 192).

The opening sentences of this passage contain not only an appreciation of repetition as a central structuring theme in Poliakoff's work, but also an evaluation of *Perfect Strangers*' quality and achievement. The emphasis upon the concept of coherence – repetition 'delivering a sense of coherence and unity' and music and dialogue becoming 'part of a coherent whole' through their intimate connection with other elements within the show – provides a firm indication of the ways in which Poliakoff intertwines aesthetic components to carefully and skilfully create a unified, cohesive work. 'Coherence' therefore becomes a key evaluative term, indicating a particular level of achievement within artistic endeavour.[6] There is a relationship between Poliakoff's structural arrangement of features like music, dialogue, narrative, theme and style and Cardwell's drawing together of these elements to form a critical argument about the centrality of repetition within *Perfect Strangers*. We might say that she is attempting an equivalent coherence in her own discussion, so that criticism complements subject. Crucially, claims for achievement are embedded within a continuing exploration of the show's style and form, rather than being delivered as blunt or even unsubstantiated statements.

This integration of evaluation and critical scrutiny continues when Cardwell moves on to discuss the ways in which the 'constant revisiting and rearticulation' results in an

'open-endedness' and that 'the use of montage, mixed media and ambiguous sub-jectivities resist homogenisation and simple uniformity' (points that are anticipated by the first sentence of the paragraph, which describes 'themes and ideas' being both 'developed' and 'left open'). Again, we can appreciate the ways in which statements of this kind provide an assertion of the show's value and achievement: that it is equipped to resist homogenisation and simple uniformity, for example. Given the intricacy and precision of Cardwell's analysis throughout the chapter and up to this point, it might be enough for these assertions to stand by themselves as a summing up of the discussion of repetition and its creative deployment within *Perfect Strangers*: we might trust the validity and accuracy of such claims by now. Yet, Cardwell is not prepared to allow the proposition to exist without further justification and, instead, she proceeds to offer a further closely observed account of the way in which three central images become integrated within a pattern of proliferated, ambiguous images, to the extent that concrete depictions are made questionable. From here, she opens out the discussion to contend that these fragmented images possess a further significance as they pertain to breadth and variety of human stories and experiences. Again, these sentences constitute an articulation of the programme's quality and its achievements: that it can shape aesthetic details to develop new areas of narrative detail and explore wider resonances.

We can see, in Cardwell's writing, the ways in which evaluations of a show can be incorporated within a close, analytical account. There is no firm dividing line between evaluation and analysis in the passage and, instead, the writing strikes a lightly-tilting balance between the two as Cardwell integrates them fluently. As a result, analysis is given purpose and direction, whilst evaluation is provided with context and evidence. This is the work of aesthetic criticism. It is useful to consider these qualities briefly against the background of the 'aesthetic sceptic' positions that emerge in Television Studies from time to time. Admittedly, I have heard misgivings regarding the area of television aesthetics voiced more frequently in conversation but, reading the few written versions mentioned at the beginning of this article, I am struck by some of the assumptions and characterisations of television aesthetics scholars that circulate within them. Indeed, a caricature emerges of the television aesthetics scholar as unduly biased towards US drama (Piper, 2016: 182), contributing unwittingly to the creation of a dubious television canon (Hills, 2011: 110–112), or passing off personal taste as value judgements (Lury, 2007: 372), for instance. Perhaps this person genuinely exists, but I struggle to find the resemblance across work in television aesthetics. If certain mis-perceptions are in play, I wonder whether part of the issue might be that those adopting sceptical positions have tended to engage mostly with work that is *about* television aesthetics, rather than work that *performs* analysis and evaluation.[7] Cardwell's account of *Perfect Strangers*, for example, offers evidence for an approach that does not readily fit the caricature and, furthermore, reveals a preoccupation with ensuring that evaluative claims are supported by precise textual evidence. It might be that sceptics of television aesthetics would find reason to disagree (or even find fresh cause for scepticism), but I would nevertheless urge a shift in the debate towards the actual practices found in scholarly work of this kind.

Conclusion: Coming to terms

My intention with this article is not to suggest that those engaged with television aesthetics should immediately devote themselves to writing detailed metacriticism of each other's work, or that a proliferation of metacriticism should sweep across Television Studies. Although I have sought to provide closely-focussed accounts of writing excerpts to highlight some key points about aesthetic criticism, I would hope that these might encourage a broader appreciation of the work involved and perhaps provoke further reflection. Equally, I am not offering the contributions of Fife Donaldson, Peacock or Cardwell as exemplars that other writers should follow in order to produce 'good' aesthetic criticism. Each have their own style and, whilst I think their writing can certainly influence future work for the reasons touched upon in this article, I would doubt the merits of any direct replication.

I have arrived at the term aesthetic criticism to describe work that performs analysis and evaluation in the area of television aesthetics, and I have suggested already that its application is useful to distinguish the work of analysis and evaluation, which television aesthetics scholars engage in, from other forms of criticism. But it also has the potential to differentiate this from work within television aesthetics that is not necessarily aesthetic criticism. Television aesthetics is still growing as an area of interest in Television Studies and, as it grows, a greater variety of approaches are incorporated. As a consequence, the definition of television aesthetics expands. I suspect that now, for some scholars, a focus on television aesthetics may involve analysing the way that a text is put together – the relationships between its aesthetic components – without necessarily making value judgements a key companion focus. Although this refashions the established meaning of aesthetics somewhat through its diminishment of evaluation, it does not necessarily threaten the stability of television aesthetics as a focus within Television Studies. I would propose, however, that greater attention to and understanding of aesthetic criticism, which maintains the close relationship between analysis and evaluation, can provide a valuable distinction between types of scholarship within television aesthetics. Terminology is not guaranteed to enrich practice, but it has the potential to provide clarity, security, unity and purpose for those working within a particular field or area of interest. As it stands, that ambition may be worth pursuing, and I would propose the embracing of 'aesthetic criticism' to be instrumental in that pursuit.

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Notes

1. Admittedly, it is difficult to ascertain precisely what Piper means here. In some respects, the statements could be read simply as an echoing of the sentiment, expressed already by Hills, to consider how different groups form aesthetic judgements. But there is no guarantee that this would bring us any closer to a critical consensus, given that any grouping may contain productive discrepancies in judgement. Neither is it clear why this might represent a more ethically authoritative strategy. Indeed, the tacit proposal to discount critical viewpoints that fall outside of an agreed consensus could conversely be seen as somewhat unethical. If the weight of meaning in 'consensual ideals' were to be placed upon a notion of consent being given, it is hard to see where the issues currently exist in the articulation of aesthetic judgement in professional criticism (which I assume might include academic criticism). At a basic level, each time I read a value judgement in criticism I am giving a form of implicit consent to the articulation of that judgement but, equally, I reserve the right to respond in any way I choose. I might agree or disagree; my agreement or disagreement might be partial or conditional. Hypothetically, it is possible that a critic could elect to express value judgements in a manner that explicitly discourages any further engagement on the part of the reader, but such an enterprise would plainly be self-defeating and I can think of no examples that take this line. Instead, I am more likely to consider that aesthetic judgements in criticism are already fundamentally 'underpinned by consensual ideals' insomuch as they invite claims to be evaluated and tested by the reader and share the evidence for those claims democratically through a common focus that can be revisited and reviewed (a television text, for example).

2. Detailed analysis is, of course, not exclusive to a television aesthetics-led approach and can be found across many areas of Television Studies. For example, although possessing distinct vocabulary, theoretical foundations and objectives, semiotic analysis of television texts can feature tightly-focussed scrutiny of specific sections. In their influential book, *Reading Television*, John Fiske and John Hartley introduce semiotics (at the time a still-burgeoning concern) by contrasting it with the established methods of content analysis: '…content analysis does not help us to respond to the individual programme, nor, more importantly, the viewing session; it does not help us with matters of interpretation nor with how we respond to the complex significance and subtleties of the television text. That sort of reading of television requires that we move beyond the strictly objective and quantitative methods of content analysis and into the newer and less well explored discipline of semiotics' (Fiske and Hartley, 1978: 36). These distinctions are useful in setting out the emphasis semiotics can place upon the close analysis of texts, with Fiske and Hartley proceeding to apply these principles to a five-shot, twenty-two second sequence from Cathy Come Home. Additionally, we might observe certain similarities between those interests they envisage semiotics addressing ('the individual programme'; 'matters of interpretation'; 'complex significance'; 'subtleties of the television text') and those of television aesthetics scholars, even though there are clear distinctions between the aims and approaches of each.

3. This article necessarily restricts itself to a consideration of terms like 'aesthetics' and 'criticism' as they are applied within Television Studies. It is important to acknowledge this as a restriction, however, because such terms clearly possess a much broader legacy beyond the field, in disciplines such as philosophical aesthetics or literary theory for example.

4. A potential third activity that might fall under the banner of aesthetic criticism is 'interpretation.' I have resisted its inclusion here in part because I tend to regard interpretation as a more fundamental activity than analysis and evaluation: we interpret features of the world around us all the time, instinctively, but we are not, I would say, constantly analysing or evaluating those features.

5. This refers to a list of 'critical standards' in an earlier chapter of the book, which O'Donnell's later evaluation repeats back word for word. These standards are: '1. A Television programme should accomplish what it sets out to do and do it well. 2. A television programme should provide entertainment or information. 3. A television programme should be well written, engage and respect its audience, and allow for audience involvement and identification. 4. A television programme should be professionally produced in such a way that the audience can accept what it sees and hears.' (O'Donnell, 2007: 212).

6. It is important to note, here, that Cardwell's strategy in her essay is to work outwards from a close appreciation of the particular television text to explore broader conceptual issues. As she states, 'This is to be distinguished from the more usual approach that begins by making assumptions about which theories might be 'applied' to the text in question' (Cardwell, 2005: 193, fn 1). We can see aspects of Cardwell's alternative approach in the passage quoted and, in relation the concerns of this argument, the extent to which critical language can be integral to this process of working outwards from the television text.

7. One notable exception is Karen Lury's careful consideration of Jason Jacobs' reading of a moment from *ER* (Lury, 2007: 374). More generally, we can hardly take issue with those who occupy sceptical positions responding to what television aesthetics scholars are actually saying. As television aesthetics sought to establish itself within the discipline, it is the case that some scholars asserted their position strongly and their defence of the approach could be somewhat polemical in tone (see for example Jacobs and Peacock, 2013: 1–20). It is fitting that this work should have attracted responses from within the discipline, and that a dialogue was built up around television aesthetics. My concern is that this dialogue has occurred almost exclusively at a distance to the practice of analysis and evaluation that television aesthetics scholars engage in.

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