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Cultural class analysis and audience reception in American television's 'third golden age'

ABSTRACT

This article applies the concept of cultural class to an analysis of contemporary television viewing. The proliferation of original programming on cable networks and the emergence of digital technologies have led many observers to claim that American TV is in the midst of its third 'golden age' (the first two are associated with the 1950s and 1980s, respectively). Based on qualitative interviews with 50 middle-class young adults (aged 18–34 years), this article claims that the significance of this 'golden age' varies with, but is not determined by, social location. For some middle-class young adults, engagement with post-network television includes the creation of symbolic boundaries in relation to the perceived quality of a given show's 'writing', the use of culturally legitimated content as bonding capital, and the use of low-status content as bridging capital. For other middle-class young adults, engagement with post-network television is characterized by the irrelevance of emerging status hierarchies and the continuing significance of personal identification. In the theoretical context of cultural class analysis, the author argues that attitudes towards legitimated content in the post-network era are meaningful precisely because significant differences in reception practices are identified within the American middle class.

INTRODUCTION

For much of its history, American television has been a low-status cultural form. During the network era (from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s), television was experienced as a domestic, non-portable medium used to bring the outside world into the home. Programme options for viewers were limited to the offerings of the three national networks (NBC, CBS and ABC), which delivered content on a linear through-the-day schedule – shows were available only at appointed times in a routinized daily sequence of programming. Responding to the realities of the market, network era producers created content that conformed to the least objectionable programming theory of audience behaviour. This approach was largely based on the belief that the absence of objectionable material was more important to the success of a given programme than the presence of any other textual features. As a consequence of production guided by this logic, television became 'an extremely bland medium, emphatically devoid of social, intellectual, or artistic issues or contexts' (Marc and Thompson 2005: 70). Even when producers began moving away from the least objectionable content model and 'quality' shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) led some television scholars to declare the emergence of a 'second golden age' (Thompson 1996), members of the cultural elite continued to blame television for a variety of social ills, including the absence of meaningful public discourse (Postman 1985) and declining levels of civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

In the post-network era, however, time-shifting capabilities, online streaming services and mobile viewing devices provide audiences with unprecedented levels of choice and control. In addition, content is increasingly diverse as producers, like advertiser-supported cable networks, can afford to create shows that will only be watched by very small portions of the available audience. In this context, television's cultural legitimation emerges with the support of cultural elites including critics, television producers and media scholars who invest the medium with cultural capital by aligning it with film, literature, theatre and other legitimate cultural forms (Newman and Levine 2012). Yet, audience research in the post-network era has largely shied away from addressing such status hierarchies. Instead, inspired by Jenkins' (1992) conception of fans as 'textual poachers' and his notion of 'participatory culture', scholars explore the construction of fan identities and the creation of content based on television texts within fan communities. Given that fan behaviour reflects a level of emotional investment and knowledge acquisition/performance that is highly untypical of general audiences (Couldry 2011), this literature cannot speak to the broader issues of class, status and power that have historically animated much audience reception scholarship.

Reincorporating class into audience research, however, presents a distinct problem as cultural fragmentation has led some scholars to claim that there is no longer any direct association between class and culture (Giddens 1990). Rather than abandoning class, I use the theoretical perspective associated with 'cultural class analysis' (Savage 2000) that seeks to shift attention from the structural definitions of class and instead focus on how cultural processes are embedded within specific kinds of socio-economic practices. Following Skeggs and Wood (2012), I argue that post-network reception practices cannot be reduced to economic systems. Rather, classed inequalities are generated in every sphere of social life (not just in production or workplace relations) and are transmitted through people's uneven access to economic, cultural and social resources.

To examine viewer responses to television's rising status, this qualitative research is based on semi-structured interviews with 50 middle-class young

adults (aged 18–34 years). Considering not only what these young adults watch, but also how they choose to engage with some programmes and not with others, I argue that post-network attitudes have not entirely replaced those of traditional TV audiences but rather exist alongside them. By reintegrating structural factors like social class into audience analysis, this research adds to the growing body of television studies scholarship that understands watching TV as behaviour situated within the new media environment created by digital technology (Sienkiewicz and Marx 2014; Tryon and Dawson 2014). Moving away from notions of the audience defined by fan productivity, this work opens a new direction for empirical study within television's increasingly fragmented landscape.

In the next section, I briefly describe cultural class analysis and discuss Skeggs and Wood's (2012) research addressing reality television audiences to highlight the ways in which class inequality is reproduced through everyday behaviour including media engagement. After a brief description of the methods employed, I present data regarding the differing modes of post-network audience reception among middle-class viewers. Among young adults with postgraduate degrees or high-status white-collar occupations, post-network television is frequently conceptualized as a form of cultural capital. Young adults with less educational attainment and lower occupational status have much more ambiguous relationships with television. Yet, in the context of cultural class analysis, differing tendencies to embrace or reject culturally legitimated television reflect how young adults' middle-class identities are constructed through symbolic means and social practices at individual, rather than collective, levels.

TELEVISION AUDIENCES AND CULTURAL CLASS ANALYSIS

As pointed out in previous research on class consciousness among Americans, individuals of all economic backgrounds tend to subjectively identify themselves as middle class (Adair 2001). In addition, the social elites whose taste was once defined by exclusive preferences for 'highbrow' culture (fine art, classical music, etc.) have been replaced by social elites who exhibit diverse taste preferences and the willingness to engage with popular culture (Peterson and Simkus 1992). Responding to the challenges presented by shifting patterns of cultural consumption (Peterson and Kern 1996) and the absence of collective class identification (Bottero 2004), scholars developing 'cultural class analysis' rely on several of Bourdieu's key concepts to address the complicated and interrelated connections between lived experience, social class and identity. As Lawler explains, 'Class, in this context, is conceptualized as a dynamic process which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing' (2005: 430). By incorporating status relations into the concept of class, practices like lifestyle differentiation that were once seen as indicative of the declining significance of class are now understood as being central to class distinction. Furthermore, as a consequence of uneven access to a range of valued social and cultural resources, class relations are also about how some people, behaviours, preferences, cultural texts and modes of engagement come to be judged as less prestigious, worthwhile, valued or esteemed than others.

Using a combination of qualitative methods including textual analysis, interviews, text-in-action and focus groups, Skeggs and Wood (2012) apply cultural class analysis to the reception practices of reality TV audiences. Among 40 South London women of different classes and ethnicities, responses to reality television reflect a process of claiming value. It is through audiences'

affective relationships with reality television that attitudes towards the neo-liberal ethics and late modern notions of self-hood emerge most clearly. As Giddens (1991) argues, the reorganization of time and space during modernity transforms daily life as lifestyle choices become increasingly significant for the construction and maintenance of self-identity. In this context, leisure activities requiring intellectual engagement, like learning a musical instrument or playing chess, and intellectual curiosity, like being a voracious reader or frequenting art galleries, are highly valued as they are understood as an indication of an individual's desire to maximize his or her own potential.

Skeggs and Wood (2012) found that their middle-class respondents aligned themselves with notions of self-actualized person-hood. In contrast, working-class viewers were concerned with relationality whereby the uptake of neo-liberal labour ideologies was dependent upon the presence of a sufficiently valuable reward. The middle-class group invested in neo-liberal work ethics and was able to accrue value temporally, whereas the working-class groups, who were constantly positioned as lacking and unable to accrue value similarly, did not have the same impetus to invest in neo-liberal labour mentalities. Rather, they attempted to attach value through 'just getting on with it' and imparting morality on motherhood; as such, Skeggs and Wood claim that reality television offers morality 'as an episteme divorced from social context, [audiences] instead decide what matters' (2012: 212).

In documenting such differing responses to reality television, Skeggs and Wood (2012) identify the ways in which audience reception is entangled with the available representations. Ambiguous responses coexist with more certain readings in a variable fashion as viewers connect and disconnect themselves to and from others and the social conditions with which they are most familiar. As such, viewer reactions are part of an affective economy where there are continual connections and disconnections of the self to and from the social. Yet, as Mendez (2008) notes, much of the work on identities that employs cultural class analysis emphasizes the tensions between working-class and middle-class identities. In doing so, cultural class analysis largely ignores horizontal differentiation. Following a brief description of methodology, this article uses cultural class analysis to address the relationship between post-network audience television reception and middle-class identities among American young adults.

METHODS

This research is based on data gathered from a sample of 50 middle-class young adults. Respondents were recruited with flyers and through word of mouth from a small, east coast city. Some were compensated with twenty-dollar gift cards. Data collection occurred at a variety of physical locations depending on individual availability and preference. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. All respondents were between 18 and 34 years of age. A total of 28 identified as men, 22 identified as women. Two identified as queer. Two respondents identified as African American, three identified as Asian, and three identified as Hispanic. The remaining 42 respondents identified as white, although several identified themselves as members of specific white ethnic groups. Interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic text analysis method (King 2004; Titscher et al. 2000), combining the use of deductive coding (based on generic television topics covered in the interviews and the researcher's specific interest

in post-network status hierarchies) and inductive coding following a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). All respondents have been given pseudonyms, and, in some cases, details such as occupation have been altered to obscure their identities.

Although theoretical conceptions and empirical definitions of class continue to be the subject of debate, in a practical sense, the implications of structural categories including occupation and education have changed substantially in the last few decades. Given the decline of American manufacturing, the traditional distinction between blue-collar and white-collar labour does little to explain the contemporary social stratification among those born in the last several decades. Regarding educational attainment, the distinction between individuals with college degrees and those with post-college degrees is more useful as applied to contemporary young adults than the traditional distinction between high-school graduates and college graduates. The recent recession has resulted in a polarized labour market where opportunities are increasingly associated with either high skill, high education jobs or low skill, low education jobs; in contrast, opportunities associated with middle-skill, white-collar jobs are decreasing (Autor 2010).

As such, the viewers included in this research come from middle-class socio-economic backgrounds that can be located somewhere along the spectrum between the lower middle class and the upper middle class. In this sample, 44 of the 50 respondents have at least one parent with a college degree. Moreover, among respondents without college degrees of their own, all had the opportunity to further their educations and chose not to for a variety of reasons. Furthermore, when dealing with an age group that, in some cases, has yet to establish class membership through occupation or income for themselves, parental socio-economic status is particularly significant. Any number of interrelated themes emerged from this analysis, of which three are addressed here. They include the following: post-network era content as cultural capital; expressions of embodied cultural capital; and the absence of the 'bad fan'.

POST-NETWORK TV AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Some middle-class young adults understand post-network television as a traditional form of cultural capital. While discussing the quality of writing in a particular context, it is clear that these viewers align TV with high-status cultural forms like cinema and literature. When discussing FOX's *The Simpsons* (1989–), a show watched by her family as a child, Carrie, a married 26-year-old associate at a Washington law firm who also has an undergraduate degree from an Ivy League university, recalls:

> Actually, we did watch that [*The Simpsons*] as a family, quite often, because dad loved it, thought it was funny and would laugh and the siblings all loved it, and even my little brother who was too young to really get most of the jokes, he thought it was fun because there was like slapstick and cartoons […] I mean because my dad would get the sort of more sophisticated jokes and the rest of us would the other jokes you could pick up on, and at the end of the day it was a cartoon but I actually think it's a genius show now. It's just very well-written. There are a lot of sophisticated jokes. They tend to, they try to do things that are, sort of, in the news, or at least like reference them and yeah […] I just think it's well-written.

In addition to *The Simpsons*, Carrie also referenced the quality of writing in discussing several other shows, including HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *The Wire* (2002–2008) and AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–2015). For Dan, a 25-year-old employee at a well-known social networking site who graduated from a prestigious private university, these issues define his television preferences. When discussing Comedy Central's *South Park* (1997–), he explains, 'I think it's intelligent. I love the satire. I love the writing. I think it's incredibly well done […] It's exactly the kind of show I like to watch'. As with traditional forms of cultural capital, the ability to recognize some content as 'better' than others is significant for post-network audiences. As such, the relationship some of the respondents in this sample have with television can be understood as acts of middle-class value accrual in lines with Bourdieu's (1987) arguments regarding the formation of social classes. For Bourdieu, value accrual is a strategic imperative (playing the game), a structuring mechanism organized into a *habitus* generated from birth through access and inclusion to fields for exchange and thus possibilities for accumulating value. In general, the middle class maintains its status by protecting its interest through processes of legitimation, which include symbolic boundary-making as 'the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions' (Bourdieu 1987: 13), limiting access to the mechanisms of symbolic power vis-à-vis the educational system, and obscuring the knowledge (power relations) that underpins the means by which individuals accrue the 'right' combination of social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital.

When using post-network television to display refinement, particular knowledge is often deployed as a form of bonding capital, which strengthens interpersonal relations between similarly located individuals. An example of such knowledge is the conceptualization of the 'showrunner as *auteur*' (Newman and Levine 2012, original emphasis). As an example, one respondent's thoughts about HBO's *Da Ali G Show* (2003–2006) and its creator/star, Sacha Baron Cohen, are instructive:

> I see it, you know its funny, I watch the show and thought the show was smart and funny before I knew that. And then it was almost kind of like, I remember hearing it, and it was almost like a 'dude get this – not only is it this but he is this – *just like us* [emphasis added], you know, how much funnier is it that he is a really smart Jew also' – that is exactly how it was said to me […] somebody was like 'you know what's even funnier, this guy went to Cambridge [University] and he's Jewish'. And I was just like wow – that makes this so much better.

In this context, knowledge about the background of a show's creator serves as an important piece of cultural capital as well as a source of personal identification. Although not Jewish himself, Frank, a well-dressed 25-year-old with a Bachelor's degree from an Ivy League university and a soon to be finished MBA, clearly identifies with Cohen's elite educational status and cultural status as a member of an ethnic minority. It seems the ability to identify with the background of television producers in this way produces a particular kind of status that is necessarily associated with being 'just like us'.

Although the ability to identify with creators is prominent in the above quote, more generally, it seems middle-class young adults reference showrunners in conjunction with the value they associate with a particular text. When discussing FOX's *Family Guy* (1999–2003, 2005–), Frank again makes reference to the showrunner: 'The brilliance of the show is the reason they can

remain critically acclaimed while still making money. Look Seth McFarland [executive producer of *Family Guy*] is one of the richest men in American media now. His show is on ten different channels'. Similarly, when explaining why he enjoys *The Sopranos*, Andrew, a 25-year-old with a degree from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania whose only work experience is a three-month internship with a European financial firm, explains, 'I like the mafia theme […] they're very […] you can relate very easily to them because [David] Chase has done such a good job developing the characters there'. In these instances, middle-class young adults are relying on tropes of authorship familiar from older, already legitimated and aestheticized cultural forms, including Romantic notions of the author, as a guarantee of art.

This study also showed how some middle-class young adults would use post-network content as a form of bridging capital when interacting with individuals believed to be outside their own niche audience. As a result, these respondents value a diverse television diet and report its social value. For example, the need to be informed about a variety of television content often takes Frank into parts of the television landscape far from the crime dramas and animated/live-action comedies he prefers. When asked about the kinds of television shows he often discusses with people outside his immediate social circle, which is primarily populated by similarly privileged young men, he claims to be reactionary:

> I tend to mold myself to their interests because, like I said, I find that I can relate to something on some level or have something to say about most things that I see on television. I don't necessarily get into it. I'm not a fan of everything that I talk about but I have something to say even if it's just a pro or a con. Very rarely is someone like 'I like this' and I don't know what they are talking about […] Worst case scenario, I can make a joke about how I don't watch it […]

Although it seems unlikely that anyone could have seen everything available in the post-network environment, Frank expresses his belief that there are social benefits associated with a diverse television diet. Similarly, Carrie asserts:

> Well yeah, you talk about it with others and I think it's also important to be tuned in to what's going on in the world, like the reality is that, you know, a lot of people watch *American Idol* [2002–] and it's talked about and is a pop culture thing. It's like, you know, any other pop culture thing I think it's good to be informed. You don't have to watch the show necessarily but just to like, know what's going on, you don't have to know what the characters or anything but just like understand what *American Idol* is about or understand what these reality shows are about because that's what a lot of people are watching. So I think it's important in that way because it can create a sense of, like, commonality between people that might have nothing in common otherwise.

For both Carrie and Frank, being aware of television content they claim to find personally unappealing is useful as cultural capital when crossing social boundaries. In these instances, the bridging work of some young adults seems to include and value some popular television content as a form of multicultural capital and this use of such content indicates a form of code-switching.

Brent, a 26-year-old software engineer with a Bachelor's degree who is one of the few respondents in the sample whose parents lack any college

education, provides a useful contrast. Although he has a college degree and a white-collar occupation, he cannot claim similarly high levels of privilege as Carrie and Frank. Interestingly, rather than position his diverse tastes as a function of usefulness, Brent sees preference from some kinds of content rather than others in terms of his mood. After discussing several HBO shows he enjoys, he explains, 'Well, it's not only HBO shows. I love the *NCIS* [2003–] shows on CBS. I think those are really good'. When asked whether he felt the dramas of each channel were similarly enjoyable, he responds,

> No, it's completely different. So those shows […] They are shorter time blocks and the HBO shows are more about character development over a lengthy period. Whereas […] It's not that they don't do it on *NCIS* but is still very […] I start, I have a problem, I solve it – they very rarely carry over between episodes right? You can see them, sort of view them in a very narrow window I guess. They make them that way, that is the intent of them are. I enjoy the shows, I like the characters. I think they do a good job of getting the right mix of characters, they play off of each other but also I enjoy the writing and the sort of simplicity – there is a crime, I am solving it, you know? But it is cool how they arrive at it. Usually, there is some sort of twist that maybe you don't see coming.

Discussing HBO and CBS in the same context is particularly notable given the status differences between the two networks. As Thompson observes, 'No self-respecting TV critic writes about *NCIS: Los Angeles* [2009–], ever – ever – even though the all-time-most-popular-episode of *Game of Thrones* [2011–] (which is, itself, the all-time most-popular HBO show) got fewer viewers than an *NCIS: LA* rerun' (2014). In explaining the times at which he prefers CBS to HBO shows, Brent says:

> I guess it depends on my mood and maybe how much time I have. I mean, the *NCIS* is only 40 min. and I can go to the commercials, and I don't need much time. Like sometimes when I come back from a late soccer game I will watch *NCIS* before I go to bed because there is no way that I'm going to bed right after a soccer game. But usually, like with Boardwalk for instance, I might watch it right when it comes on because there's no commercials but if I don't I am typically not watching that show right after a soccer game at 11 o'clock at night.

When asked why, he continues, 'It requires more for you attention-wise. You have to think about the previous episodes and see where they are going with it but you don't necessarily have to do that with some of the other shows that I record'. In light of Frank and Carrie's claims regarding the usefulness of lower-status television content, Brent's admission that his preferences differ on the basis of his mood indicates the presentation of a different middle-class identity.

TELEVISION TASTE AND EMBODIED CULTURAL CAPITAL

In highlighting the belief that consumption of post-network content requires specific sorts of appreciation, middle-class young adults demonstrate that 'the mode of relating to culture may be more important in the games of distinction

that the precise choice of cultural objects themselves' (Prieur and Savage 2013: 258). Such a mode of relating resembles Bourdieu's (1986) notion of 'embodied' cultural capital, which is activated when high-status individuals utilize the scarce social resources associated with 'legitimate' aesthetic dispositions. Furthermore, following Holt, this kind of elite consumption varies substantially from that of previous eras:

> As popular cultural objects become aestheticized and as elite objects become popularized, the objectified form of cultural capital has in large part been supplanted by the embodied form. Class differences in American consumption have gone underground; no longer easily identified with the goods consumed, distinction is becoming more and more a matter of practice.
>
> (1997: 103)

In such a context, expressing distinction through embodied tastes results in high-status consumption emphasizing the distinctive nature of consumption practices themselves separated from any particular content. Among the middle-class respondents in this sample, claims regarding the distinctiveness of their consumption practices regarding comedy are common. For example, when discussing *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), Dan claims, 'I try not to watch stupid television [and] *Seinfeld* to me, is an intelligent show'. He explains, '*Seinfeld* specifically, is basically a show that everyone can relate to, but you relate to it in an intelligent way. It describes the facts of life, that you know happen, but don't pause to think about out […] I consider it intellectually stimulating'. Like Skeggs and Wood's (2012) middle-class respondents, here Dan is claiming to be an actualized individual for whom television is an act of self-cultivation.

To highlight the significance of embodied cultural capital in relation to post-network era audience reception, respondents' discussions of Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show* (2003–2006) illuminate the centrality of distinctive consumption practices. Created by stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle, *Chappelle's Show* features a series of sketches and a musical performance in each 30-minute episode. The sketches often include recurring characters played by the show's eponymous host. From the beginning, *Chappelle's Show* was a ratings success for Comedy Central. The show's premier was the highest rated debut on Comedy Central since the short-lived *That's My Bush* (2001) (Fitzgerald 2003). Yet, by the end of its second season, it was the highest rated show on any network in the Wednesday 10:30 p.m. time slot among the most coveted demographic group, men aged 18–34 years (Wallenstein 2004). In addition, in 2004, *Chappelle's Show* was the best-selling TV show on DVD (Masurat 2004). Observers note that, in part, the significant jump in popularity is related to one sketch in particular. The fourth episode of the second season, which aired on 11 February 2004, included the debut of a recurring series of sketches titled 'Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories'. Hosted by Charlie Murphy, brother of superstar Eddie Murphy, the two-part sketch includes dramatized re-enactments of several encounters with the musician Rick James during the 1980s, played by Chappelle. Although it included many well-delivered punchlines, the sketch is most closely associated with the phrase, 'I'm Rick James, bitch!'. Almost instantly, it seemed, *Chappelle's Show* became a phenomenon. As one writer describes, '[P]eople shared the sketch any way they could, whether it was

through MySpace, AIM away messages, or just shouting "I'm Rick James, bitch" so often that people had to go home and see what they were talking about' (Fox 2014).

Frank describes the cultural moments before and after the debut of 'Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories' with particular clarity. He describes *Chappelle's Show* as 'probably one of the funniest shows I have ever seen' and claims that his initial reaction was that 'it was one of the smartest shows I have ever seen, I thought it was brilliant, witty social commentary'. Yet, after the show exploded into broader cultural consciousness and, as he recalls, 'people were shouting lines from the show' for no particular reason, his attitude changed. He says, 'it ruined the show for me because I was like wow, this many dumb people like this show, I can't even like it anymore. They like took away from the exclusivity of the humour and it made me upset'. Andrew offers a similar opinion:

> And once its discovered it's just like everything else, it gets fucked up. *Chappelle's Show* was great for a time and then 'I'm Rick James, bitch!' killed some of that. Because that was an hysterical skit, 'Fuck yo' couch!', [...] and Chappelle, I think because of people like that, those posers, went nuts.

Interestingly, the belief that it was those fans shouting catchphrases that ruined *Chappelle's Show* and led to Chappelle's hiatus is common among journalists. According to one *Vulture* writer, 'the sketch, and that line in particular, was the beginning of the end' (Fox 2014). Similarly, Rubin (2014) asserts, the sketch 'began the commodification of *Chappelle's Show* by the people who would be interrupting Dave's comedy act with catcalls of "I'm Rick James, bitch!" for years to come. (And make no mistake: We blame them for the show's ultimate unravelling.)'. Yet, inappropriate forms of audience reception are not limited to *Chappelle's Show*.

THE BAD FAN AND POST-NETWORK DRAMA

In the context of post-network television, condemnations of large segments of a popular show's audience are associated with the label of the 'bad fan'. Coined by Nussbaum (2013) in response to audiences' attitudes towards the final season of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), she claims:

> All shows have them. They're the *Sopranos* buffs who wanted a show made up of nothing but whackings (and who posted eagerly about how they fast-forwarded past anything else). They're the *Girls* [2012–] watchers who were aesthetically outraged by Hannah having sex with Josh(ua). They're the ones who get furious whenever anyone tries to harsh Don Draper's mellow.

Nussbaum goes on to assert that 'some fans are watching wrong' (2013). In a later piece, she explains that 'This sort of audience divide, not between those who love a show and those who hate it but between those who love it in very different ways, has become a familiar schism in the past fifteen years' (Nussbaum 2014). There is little doubt that the 'bad fan' label has class connotations. Referencing Nussbaum's position, Zoller Seitz, an equally highbrow critic, writes:

> If you seek to deny or minimize the parts of art that don't fit your reductive interpretation of Walt as a basically decent man, or a man who moves with a purpose and is somehow 'badass', as opposed to the complex monster the show has actually presented over five seasons, you are in fact, as Nussbaum wrote in her piece on the scene, watching the show wrong. In fact, you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one. And you really should ask yourself why.
>
> (2013)

This comment contains both the legitimating discourses associated with post-network television ('art') as well as more traditional archetypes of class-based distinction, including assumptions regarding the 'bad' fan's lack of intellectual capabilities ('reductive interpretation') and admiration of machismo ('badass'). In addition, Zoller Seitz accuses such audience members of perverting a celebrated text ('you're trying to turn a smart show into a stupid one') and exhorts them to engage in a bout of self-reflexive assessment ('you really should ask yourself why') that is itself class-specific behaviour. Yet, among the middle-class respondents included in this research, the bad fan was conspicuously absent.

In fact, the distance between middle-class audience reception and the behaviours associated with bad fans is best understood in relation to embodied cultural capital. According to Holt (1998), contemporary forms of embodied cultural capital are reflected in the difference between the critical and the referential reception of cultural texts. Of the former, more common among individuals with high levels of cultural capital ('HCCs'), he notes, 'Applying a formal interpretive lens, HCCs read popular entertainment as entertaining fictions that are potentially edifying but that do not reflect directly the empirical world' (Holt 1998: 9). In contrast, it seems the value associated with any and all content is closely related to the less privileged audience member's ability to personally identify with the on-screen content of a programme irrespective of critical discourse. Holt describes this as referential reception that applies a 'classificatory system used in everyday life to cultural texts' (1998: 9).

However, such reception can take varied forms. For Carol, a full-time bartender with a Bachelor's degree, her favourite HBO show is *True Blood* (2008–2014). In explaining the show's appeal, she says, 'It's like vamp[ire] porn, kind of. I mean there is tons of sex, tons of violence […] yeah it's gory and gross and with tons and tons and tons of super nude sex scenes all the time'. However, as she continued, it became clear that her feelings about *True Blood* are based on more than a taste for sex and violence. She asserts,

> I don't want to watch anything to learn. I don't really watch TV all that often well unless I just bought like a box set of something that I'm trying to get into like *True Blood* which I watched all three seasons of in the past probably three weeks or month or something.

When describing the most appealing aspects of his favourite HBO show *Treme* (2010–2013), Kent, a chef who earned an Associate's degree at a technical school for motor-sports engineering, says, 'You don't leave, you just rebuild you know? You just make do and fix it and rebuild and stay there and keep the culture and the music and everything else that's down there'. He adds, 'I mean, that is one of the heartbeats of music and culture that America has way

beyond any other place around, you know?' Here, he uses a moral framework privileging his work ethic to explain the emotional appeal of a particular television programme. In responding to a follow-up question, he elaborates, '*Treme* was just a great expression of what New Orleans means to me and to the rest of America'. As Kent continues, however, it becomes clear that *Treme*'s appeal has little to do with what 'New Orleans means' for "the rest of America"'. He explains, 'The story of New Orleans is a wonderful story and I pride myself on being a Southern man and that story just kind of speaks to me'. Despite the invocation of a collective identity, preference remains primarily at the level of the individual.

In the context of referential reception, post-network era status hierarchies have little meaning. When asked whether he ever watches anything of HBO, John, the chef and kitchen manager at a highly regarded restaurant, replies, 'I watched *The Wire* because it has Steve Earle on it'. He explains,

> He is one of my favourite singers. He is ornery well maybe not that … What is a better word for being an asshole? […] I like what I like and if I don't like it I don't watch it. I like things because people I like are in it.

Discussing *The Sopranos*, Kent offers his disapproval, 'To be honest with you I wasn't a real big *Sopranos* fan. I didn't even watch them'. When asked follow-up questions about *The Sopranos*, it becomes apparent that, like Holt's 'LCCs', Kent's referential interpretation leads him 'to dislike programs, movies, and music whose characters, plots, and lyrics conflict with their world-view or remind them of disturbing past experiences' (1998: 10). He explains:

> I was a rebel when I was a kid, a teenager and my younger 20s, and I got into a lot of trouble and ran from flashing lights a lot. I don't like reliving that, you know? I don't want to put up with any problems like that, you know like negativity so I guess when I am picking what I want to watch on TV, I kind of steer clear of anything that is negative or trouble causing. It's just that I don't like it.

When asked about *Breaking Bad* later in the interview, similar issues emerged: 'It was interesting but it was like the same kind of thing where it's just like illegal, you know, the illegal activity – the running from cops kind of thing just makes me uneasy and I don't enjoy it'.

More commonly, however, the inability to form referential interpretations of culturally legitimated post-network dramas is explained in terms of boredom. When asked whether she ever watches anything on HBO, Ruby, a 23-year-old bartender who spent two years in college before dropping out to work full-time, recalls, 'I did start to watch *The Wire* more so because I'm from Baltimore and I felt like, obligated. [But] I couldn't get past the sixth episode. I thought it was so boring to start off with'. Answering a similar question, Carol says,

> I tried to get into *The Sopranos* or into *The Wire* but I didn't really like it […] I guess I had somebody's box set and I was like trying to watch episodes, like the first three episodes or something, and I think I fell asleep every time I try to watch it. So I don't know, I just remember like it was city kids and burglars and cops. There were too many characters, I don't know, and I just fell asleep.

When asked whether she watches anything on HBO other than *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), Sara, who at the time of her interview was nearly finished earning her law degree, similarly claims,

> Actually, I tried watching *The Wire* once and […] This is going to sound so silly but after like twenty minutes of it, there was so much dialogue and I wasn't following it and I was like I can't watch this now and I never picked it up again.

Given the level of prestige associated with *The Wire*, particularly since it ended its five-season run in 2007, these attitudes are surprising. As Klosterman notes, 'There's never been a more obstinate fan base than that of *The Wire*; it's a secular cult that refuses to accept any argument that doesn't classify *The Wire* as the greatest artistic endeavor in television history' (2011). Yet, it is particularly significant that Ruby, Carol and Sara all express similar sentiments as their levels of education vary substantially. Such attitudes towards the most legitimated content of the post-network era are meaningful precisely because the most obvious differences in reception occur within middle-class audiences.

CONCLUSION

Although there is not a direct correlation between the social location of these young adults and their behaviour as members of television audiences, their discussions of the medium illustrate the uneven consequences of cultural legitimation in the post-network era. The data presented in this article indicate that the structure of access to the discourses associated with television's increasing cultural legitimacy varies with social location. Furthermore, the distribution of meanings associated with post-network era television's cultural legitimation is hardly random. Most broadly, this indicates a degree of similarity between post-network television and other forms of new media. Regarding issues of cultural inequality, as Internet scholarship makes clear, the relationship between new media and social class is significantly more complicated than structural limitations on access. Furthermore, this analysis creates the opportunity to draw parallels between contemporary television and the social processes that legitimated earlier forms of American popular culture.

Just as knowledge about film, a cultural form once considered 'cheap shows for cheap people' (Hampton 1970: 61), became 'a high-status cultural cue' as a result of cinema's association with art during the 1960s (Baumann 2007: 171), it seems that greater access to discourses of cultural legitimacy allow some middle-class young adults the opportunity to treat post-network television content as a form of cultural capital. In doing so, they also place higher value on the cultural competencies required by post-network television and socially distance themselves from those seen as lacking this ability. In contrast, like the dominant American middle-class taste frameworks emphasizing individual subjectivity, less-privileged respondents frequently explained personal preference in subjective terms and resisted critical judgement. They tend to reflect mass audience mentalities in some ways while distancing themselves from that same mass audience in others.

This research also demonstrates that the economic, social and culture hierarchies that structure matters of taste are always dynamic and multi-causal.

When addressing social class in America, these issues are further complicated by the American tendency to claim middle-class status as a normative identity. Yet, the data presented above begin to connect the broader social processes through which objects and knowledge become cultural capital with the specific practices and discursive resources that allow class symbols, knowledge and identities to be constructed as meaningful. As the prominence of status-based distinction in the post-network era results in high-status audiences conceptualizing some content as cultural capital, future qualitative research might reasonably explore the ways in which the deployment of such capital varies with televisual content and social context.

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