In defence of the objectivity of evaluative television criticism

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As Alan McKee notes in a characteristically lucid paper, ‘One of Cultural Studies’ most important contributions to academic thinking about culture is the acceptance as axiomatic that we must not simply accept traditional value hierarchies in relation to cultural objects’. Among McKee’s aims in his essay is challenging the oft-encountered argument that poststructuralist theorizing results in ‘anything goes relativism’, since, as he correctly points out, ‘Postmodern thinking, and the sociological turn in Cultural Studies informed by the work of Bourdieu, do not refuse all distinctions. Neither do they refuse all evaluation.’

The move to which McKee objects is a bad inference from a true claim – ‘the Cultural Studies/postmodern turn denies absolute, universal value judgments’ – to a false one – ‘this means that everything is relative, anything goes’. As McKee and numerous other television studies scholars such as Charlotte Brunsdon have observed, even as these theoretical debates play out, ‘judgments are being made’.

Since the 1990 publication of Brunsdon’s seminal essay, from which I quote, television studies has intermittently returned to ‘issues of judgement and value’ (to borrow the title of another important paper on the topic), seeking to address the apparent gulf between the field’s historical rejection of universal values and the undeniable fact that evaluative judgement is an ineluctable part of our engagement with television. Television scholars from a wide range of perspectives have observed that attempts to bridge this gap are often stymied by the
difficulty of identifying uncontroversial criteria by which evaluations are made.  

My essay takes as a starting point the work of McKee and the other writers on television studies who have tracked a ‘return of value’ in the field. Like McKee, I want to investigate an argument that starts from the premise that there are no universal principles of value – in this case specifically artistic value. For the sake of argument I will, like McKee, assume the truth of this premise, although I do not agree that it is ‘axiomatic’ and think much depends on precisely how it is formulated. It is also important that this premise is assumed because it is crucial to my purposes here to show that one can simultaneously accept it and the arguments I proceed to make – most controversially, that at least some judgements of artistic value in television are objectively grounded and evaluable for (approximate) truth.

There are two matters to clarify before I begin. First, I am not using the term ‘art’ in an honorific sense, according to which ‘arthood’ is essentially a matter of achieving a certain level of value or status. Rather, I am using ‘art’ in a descriptive, classificatory sense to pick out a cluster of related practices and their products – from the plays of Aristophanes to As the World Turns, from The Wire to the poetry of W. B. Yeats. Second, in discussions about the value of art it is common to speak of aesthetic judgements and judgements of artistic value as if the two were synonymous. Commentators often slide from speaking of aesthetic judgements of a given work to talking about the work’s artistic value. In some cases this is harmless. However, there is an important distinction here if one accepts the idea that art has a plurality of values, not just aesthetic but political, cognitive, moral, spiritual, and so on. Because I am a pluralist about the value of art, I do not want to use the terms interchangeably. In my view, it would be hard to talk about the value of television as an art without considering, say, its cognitive value because in many cases a programme’s cognitive value is part and parcel of its artistic value. So I will assume that the real issue in debates about evaluative criticism is usually not merely the aesthetic value of particular works of television but rather their overall artistic value (of which aesthetic value may be a constituent part).

The motivation behind this essay is to contribute to television studies’ (relatively) recent return to questions of judgement and value. I see this as a positive development but one that has, perhaps, not advanced as much as it could because television studies scholars have not availed themselves of some of the theoretical concepts and distinctions in the branch of analytic philosophy known as value theory – more specifically, philosophy of art. The philosophy of art can help us to clarify what is agreed and disagreed upon in our debates about the evaluation of television, and to sort sound arguments from unsound ones.

The central claim of this essay is that some theorists have moved too quickly from the plausible premise that there are no universal principles of artistic value to the dubious idea that evaluative judgements of
television can be neither objective nor evaluable for truth. My counterargument is that there is a bad inference in this claim and that there are positive reasons for thinking that at least some instances of evaluative judgement are objective and truth- evaluable.

Specifically, I will critically examine the argument that because there are no universal principles of artistic value, evaluative television criticism has no objective basis. In evaluative television criticism, therefore, what may seem to be (or purport to be) objective judgements of artistic value are, in fact, wholly subjective expressions of taste, which are not evaluable for truth (or falsity). Sometimes this conclusion is formulated slightly differently, such that ‘taste’ is replaced by ‘opinion’ or ‘emotion’, but these variants seem to be less common. Their important common feature is that they all posit evaluative television criticism as expressing subjective attitudes rather than rendering objective judgements that purport to be true — this may be called the expressivist argument.

Although the expressivist argument is hardly specific to television studies, it enjoys considerable popularity in the field. However, it seems to me that those television studies scholars who accept expressivism tend to assume it implicitly rather than argue for it explicitly. Understandably, this is because the key point, for many television scholars, is not related to the metaphysics of value; rather it is that artistic value is heterogeneous, sociohistorically contingent, and relative to particular interests or purposes. Work in television studies, cultural studies and philosophy of art has advanced compelling arguments for this latter point, which I am happy to accept. My claim is that this point neither depends upon nor entails the further, logically separable claim that judgements of artistic value can be neither objective nor evaluable for truth. Perhaps some scholars of television hold no strong commitment to expressivism and will be happy to relinquish it if I can persuade them that doing so does not threaten what I take to be the key points about artistic value that they want to endorse.

For these reasons, in the critical portion of this essay I focus closely upon explicit statements of the expressivist argument in television studies. For example, Michael Newman and Elana Levine offer a sociologically oriented statement of the expressivist argument in their recent book, *Legitimating Television*. With insufficient argumentation, Newman and Levine move from the plausible claim that ‘judgments of taste […] are always products of social situations’, to the contentious assertion that ‘taste […] is a system through which “the social order […] is inscribed in people’s minds”’. Moreover, they claim, ‘this inscription is generally hidden from our direct perception, naturalized as true value and legitimate hierarchy’. This view of the nature of artistic value underpins Newman and Levine’s overall project, which they describe as ‘analyzing patterns of taste judgment and classification […] to unmask misrecognitions of authentic and autonomous value, bringing to light their political and social functions’. Thus, for Newman and Levine, evaluations that purport to be objective judgements of artistic value are rather entirely socially determined expressions of taste because works of television do not have...
any objective (that is, ‘true’ or ‘authentic’) artistic value. (I shall return to the more puzzling notion of ‘autonomous value’ later.)

So, while expressivism may not often be explicitly endorsed in television studies, it is no straw-man; neither, I hasten to add, is it naive. Its formulations in the context of cultural and television studies are probably well-known to many readers, so here I will merely add that in philosophical aesthetics, too, expressivism has a long history that can be traced as far back as David Hume. Indeed, on at least some readings Hume’s conception of the difficulties raised by judgements of taste anticipates some of the claims of cultural studies.\(^{17}\) Since then, expressivist (also known as emotivist) views have waxed and waned in popularity but have never entirely disappeared.\(^ {18}\) In carefully developed formulations, expressivism has undeniable intuitive appeal and respectable arguments in its favour. My critique is thus grounded in the assumption that the expressivist argument in television studies is worthy of serious scrutiny.

Ultimately, however, I hope to show that the expressivist argument in television studies faces insurmountable problems. I shall discuss two of these in particular, neither of which, as far as I can see, have ever been extensively addressed. If expressivism is correct, then what explains: one, the fact that in evaluative criticism we give reasons to justify our claims; two, the apparent normative force of evaluative criticism? We might call the first of these the problem of rationality and the second the problem of normative force.

Let me briefly elaborate what these ‘problems’ involve. There is no question that when we are confronted with works of television or any other art form, some of our evaluative claims are partly subjective in the sense that they involve the expression of attitude – an expression of taste. Often such claims are made upon an initial encounter with a work or as conversation starters: consider, for example, ‘South Park is genius’, ‘Modern Family is unbearable’, ‘Sesame Street is brilliant’, ‘The Newsroom is puerile’, ‘Dora and Friends is insipid’, ‘Bron is addictive’ and ‘Who Do You Think You Are is boring’. The problem of rationality arises because these sorts of claims do not exhaust our evaluative discourse. Rather, we often go on to distinguish our personal response to a work and its relative artistic merits or demerits. (Sometimes, of course, these are deeply entwined – as in comedic works.) Furthermore, and crucially, we usually give reasons in support of these more considered evaluations: ‘The genius of South Park is its recognition that, as animation, it can satirize topical issues that would be too controversial for a live action programme like Saturday Night Live’; ‘I find Modern Family unbearable because it simply rehashes stereotypes that it purports to wink at knowingly’; ‘Dora and Friends is insipid, but there are few other programmes that do a better job of introducing children to a second language’. Moreover, the sorts of reasons we give usually involve objective (that is, mind-independent) properties. Once we start giving reasons to support our evaluative claims, we are able to debate our
evaluations in a way that is not possible when two people do not see eye to eye about the flavour of coriander, chopped liver or hops. We can, for example, go on to debate whether *Modern Family* actually offers a substantive commentary on stereotypes or merely rehashes them opportunistically, or we can debate whether *Dora and Friends* actually does a good job of introducing native English speakers to Spanish.

This is not to say that such debates are always or even usually settled. Rather, the problem of rationality highlights a contrast between purely subjective expressions of taste and reason-giving evaluations. My wife thinks cookies-and-cream ice-cream is disgusting, which I find baffling, but there is neither any need for her to go on to give reasons why, nor any sense in me offering reasons to sway her view. If the expressivist argument were right about the purely subjective nature of our evaluative claims, then it would be the same with all of our evaluative discourse about television: I think *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is hilarious and *Rastamouse* is offensive; you might feel just the opposite, but it would be irrational to give reasons in support of purely subjective expressions of taste. The problem for the expressivist argument is that we often do give reasons in support of our evaluative claims; we often strive to ground such claims with facts about the mind-independent, intersubjectively accessible properties of television artworks. The problem of rationality identifies an element of many evaluative claims that is reasoned rather than just felt. Such evaluative claims evidently aim towards truthfulness insofar as our reason-giving is a rational activity that typically involves objective features of the work.

The problem of normative force also identifies a feature of our evaluative discourse for which the expressivist argument seems unable to account. As I indicated above, if all evaluative claims about television artworks were analogous to subjective expressions of preference for various flavours or foods, debate and disagreement would be incoherent. Claims like ‘*Sesame Street* is a good children’s show’ would be equivalent to ‘In my opinion, *Sesame Street* is a good children’s show’. The latter is a descriptive claim; it simply describes my opinion. The former is a normative claim; it asserts that *Sesame Street* has merits that one’s interlocutors should recognize. The problem for the expressivist argument is that while, perhaps, some evaluative discourse takes the descriptive form sketched above, most does not. For example, when David Bianculli of National Public Radio calls *The Singing Detective*, ‘television’s most polished, audacious masterpiece’ and Steven Armstrong of *The Guardian* claims it is ‘one of the best pieces of TV you’ll see in your life’, these claims have normative force. This is also true of some academic criticism. When Sarah Cardwell writes of a moment in *Perfect Strangers* that Stephen Poliakoff has ‘achieved something extraordinary in this sequence in terms of mood, through his manipulation of stylistic and formal elements’, she is not simply expressing a favourable attitude towards what Poliakoff has done. Rather, she is making normative claims that his achievement is, as a matter of fact, extraordinary and that competent viewers should...
recognize this because it is true. Again, the problem for the expressivist argument is that it lacks the means to account for this feature of our evaluative discourse.

In the philosophy of art, the problems of rationality and normative force are familiar challenges for expressivist accounts of artistic value. Because metatheoretical debates are not within the purview of television studies, television scholars who endorse the expressivist position typically do so tacitly, without mounting an argument for it or considering objections and counterarguments. This is understandable as a practical consequence of the field’s purview, but it has also allowed for some dubious theoretical claims to survive unchallenged. Therefore, at this point, I want to work with what I think is the most explicit and sustained statement of expressivism on offer in television studies, supporting it as much as possible with salient arguments from philosophical aesthetics. I have in mind Jason Mittell’s recent account of television evaluation, which, if correct, could dissolve the problems of rationality and normative force.

Evaluations of television, according to Mittell, do not ‘aspire to the status of fact or proof’. That is, in his view evaluative judgements are not intended to be statements about what is true of a given television show but are more like expressions of attitudes towards television programmes as we perceive them. Evaluative criticism involves explaining why one perceives television shows as one does, as well as guiding others’ perceptions so that they may see the show as the critic sees it. In Mittell’s words, ‘I am inviting you to see the shows how I see them, hear how they are speaking to me’.

Yet why should we think that evaluative criticism is really a matter of explaining and fostering perceptions of a work? Mittell attempts to make the case by offering brief, comparative analyses of Alias and 24, and The Wire and Breaking Bad, as well as an independent critique of Mad Men. In his analyses he qualifies many of his claims. Rather than contending that ‘Alias is a far more effective series [than 24]’, he writes, ‘For me (as such evaluations are always draped in the cloak of personal caveat), Alias is a far more effective series [than 24].’ Perhaps needless to say, this is hardly convincing evidence to suppose that by their nature evaluative judgements are more like explanations of how one perceives things than normative assertions. The issue is not only that Mittell has composed his examples for the specific purpose of supporting a broad, contestable claim about the very nature of evaluative criticism. Further problems include the fact that Mittell offers what look suspiciously like justifying reasons to support his claims and that he slides, quickly and often, from making qualified evaluative claims (‘for me’) to unqualified evaluative claims (‘24 takes its own ludicrousness way too seriously’).

These problems are, I think, indicative of the fact that Mittell is unsuccessful in his attempt to defend a moderate expressivism.

However, there are arguments to support Mittell’s case if we look beyond television studies and cultural studies. In philosophical aesthetics, John Bender notes that
There is a long tradition of pragmatist/rhetorical theories of aesthetic justification and it is often said that a critic’s main function is to direct our attention over a work’s features in such a way that we come to see the work as the critic does, i.e., to agree with his or her aesthetic ascriptions.\textsuperscript{26}

The most sustained account of this position in the recent philosophical aesthetics literature is Arnold Isenberg’s 1949 article, ‘Critical communication’, in which he emphasizes the critic’s role ‘as one who affords new perceptions and with them new values’.\textsuperscript{27} Specifically, Isenberg’s claim is this:

\begin{quote}
\textit{it seems that the critic’s meaning} is ‘filled in,’ ‘rounded out,’ or ‘completed’ by the act of perception, which is performed not to judge the truth of his description but in a certain sense to understand it. And if communication is a process by which a mental content is transmitted by symbols from one person to another, then we can say that it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content. If this is accomplished, it may or may not be followed by agreement, or what is called ‘communion’ – a community of feeling which expresses itself in identical value judgments\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

According to Isenberg, then, criticism is essentially about inducing perceptions. As Joe Zeccardi summarizes in a recent defence of this position, ‘we do not describe artworks with an eye to arguing that they possess or lack certain properties that bear some relationship to aesthetic value or disvalue […] Rather, we describe artworks in order to help others see things the way that we see them.’\textsuperscript{29} It is here the similarities to Mittell’s account of evaluative criticism are evident.

Like expressivists in television studies, Isenberg takes issue with ‘a theory of criticism, widely held in spite of its deficiencies, which divides the critical process into three parts’:\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{quote}
\textit{There is the value judgment or verdict (V): ‘This picture or poem is good –.’ There is a particular statement or reason (R): ‘ – because it has such-and-such a quality –.’ And there is a general statement or norm (N): ‘ – and any work which has that quality is pro tanto good’.}\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

In this formulation, the norm is necessary because the verdict, which is a value judgement, does not follow directly from the reason, which is just a description, without additional support. In other words, it is not enough to say, ‘The Wire is good because it is narratively complex’; one needs to then explicitly or implicitly invoke a generalized norm – in this case, ‘and any work which is narratively complex is pro tanto good’.

Expressed concretely, this ‘widely held theory of criticism’ faces an obvious problem that television studies scholars have been quick to recognize. In the above example, the difficulty is that the generalized...
norm – ‘any work which is narratively complex is pro tanto good’ – is at the very least contentious and indeed probably false. In his writing on narrative complexity, Mittell has been at pains to make this point – to avoid ‘assuming universal or essential criteria of value’ – to such an extent that he backs away from claiming that narrative complexity is, objectively speaking, an artistic merit in all television shows.\(^{32}\) And surely he is right that in certain contexts narrative complexity creates artistic disvalue. For example, in children’s television programmes, such as Bob the Builder or Fireman Sam, narrative complexity is likely to impede the target audience’s enjoyment.

It is worth, however, pausing over the following consideration. As Zeccardi and other commentators have pointed out, the fact that a value judgement (or verdict) does not follow directly from a description (or reason) ‘still leaves open the possibility that descriptions can provide inductive support for verdicts’.\(^{33}\) True, for a value judgement to follow as the conclusion of a deductive argument, appeal to a universal value norm would seem to be necessary. But weaker, defeasible principles might nevertheless lend prima facie support to an inductive argument that has a value judgement as its conclusion. Here is an example modelled after one that Zeccardi gives:\(^{34}\) a general (but non-universal and defeasible) principle along the lines of ‘children’s television programmes with significant amounts of repetition tend to be good’ could offer prima facie support to the value judgement that Blue’s Clues and Dora the Explorer are good – especially if we add that children’s television programmes are designed with the aim of eliciting particular responses (such as recall of previous narrative events) from a relatively well-defined target audience (such as novice appreciators of narrative fiction). Similarly, I think that the general approach of weakening and localizing principles to which value judgements appeal is the way forward, but I will make this argument in due course.

To return to the ‘widely held theory of criticism’, however, the problem identified both by Isenberg and by the television studies expressivists is that any norm – that is, any statement like ‘any work which is narratively complex is pro tanto good’ – appears to be, in Isenberg’s words, ‘a precept, a rule, a generalized value statement’.\(^{35}\) But there are no such rules or universal principles of artistic value (at least, that is, I accepted this ‘particularist’ assertion for the sake of argument at the start). Although this is commonly claimed to be a lesson of poststructuralism or cultural studies, Isenberg (writing in 1949, it should be noted) is content to draw this conclusion from the putative fact that, ‘There is not in all the world’s criticism a single purely descriptive statement concerning which one is prepared to say beforehand, “If it is true, I shall like that work so much the better”’.\(^{36}\) As an aside, it is worth highlighting that this way of putting things conflates two distinct issues in a way that is understandable but erroneous. The onus is on the expressivist to demonstrate that evaluations of artistic value boil down to expressions of ‘liking’ or ‘disliking’; even if she succeeds in this, it...
would not follow that artistic value simply is a matter of what one does or
does not like. This claim would require a separate argument – one that
would explain away the fact that there are plenty of television artworks
that I like which, prima facie, are not very good (the original *Batman*)
and that I do not like but which I recognize are good (*Hannibal*). In any
case, what I think Isenberg should want to say is that the absence
of general principles of artistic value entails that, despite appearances to the
contrary, the reasons given in support of evaluative claims do not (since
they cannot) function as premises in arguments for the truth of verdicts or
judgements of artistic value.

This conclusion, alongside the allied particularist premise I accepted
for the sake of argument, is supposed to motivate Isenberg’s alternative
account of what is going on in evaluative criticism. As James Shelley
helpfully summarizes:

R [the reason] functions not as a premise for V [the verdict] but as a
guide to a perception of the work that allows for the value specified in
V to be grasped directly. Since on this view it is an act of perception
that mediates R and V, as opposed to an inference [...], there is simply
no role for N [the norm] to play.37

Here we see an important difference between Isenberg’s original
argument and the way it has frequently been appropriated by
expressivists. Isenberg maintains that the absence of general principles
of artistic value does not entail that evaluative criticism is in no way
objective.38 Rather, it seems to be Isenberg’s view that evaluative
criticism is intended to ‘induce a sameness of vision’, in which case
subjectivity and objectivity are somehow irrelevant.39 Although
Isenberg’s conclusion is rather different from that of the expressivist, his
argument can be and has been marshalled in support of the expressivist’s
claims. A hybrid expressivist/Isenbergian argument comprises four
theses:

1. the Isenbergian thesis that, because there are no general principles
   of artistic value, evaluative criticism cannot involve reasons that
   function like premises in arguments;
2. the Isenbergian thesis that, granted 1, it is plausible to conceive of
   reason-giving in evaluative criticism as intended to induce
   perceptions;
3. the expressivist thesis that, granted 1, there are no objectively true
   judgements of artistic value; and
4. the expressivist thesis that, granted 2 and 3, the point of inducing
   perceptions in evaluative criticism is to get the reader to see the work
   as the critic sees it not because the critic’s perception attends to
   something true about the work but for some other reason.

Something like this argument is, I think, implicit in Mittell’s work on
evaluation. If I am wrong, and it is not, I would still maintain that this is

37 James Shelley, ‘Critical compatibilism’, in Matthew
Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds), Knowing Art: Essays
in Aesthetics and Epistemology (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004),
p. 126.
38 Isenberg, ‘Critical communication’, p. 338.
39 Ibid., p. 336.
the best way his work could be read and the most plausible version of expressivism in television studies.

Nevertheless, this formulation of the expressivist argument is unworkable. 3 is supposed to follow from 1, but it evidently does not, and in any case I will argue that 3 is false. But because my criticisms of 1 and 3 will serve as a segue to my positive account of evaluative criticism, I want to focus on 2 and 4 for the moment. First, 2: the Isenbergenian thesis that it is plausible to conceive of reason-giving in evaluative criticism as intended to induce perceptions. I think it is important here to distinguish between the idea that it is plausible to conceive of the descriptions of works involved in some kinds of criticism as intended to induce perceptions versus the notion that it is plausible to conceive of such descriptions as reasons given, in evaluative criticism, by the critic in an attempt to engender a particular perception of the work.

The former claim seems cogent. In some critical contexts, the point of criticism is surely to bring about a particular perception of the work, and this is done through describing a work in such a way that calls attention to particular features or details. However, if the goal is to bring about a particular perception, then it is not at all clear that such descriptions can be functioning here as reasons, per se. In Frank Sibley’s words, ‘an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called reasoning. I may have reasons for thinking something is graceful, but not for seeing it.’ For example, I could describe elements of Sesame Street with the hope that my description might let you see the show as, say, satirical; or I could give you reasons to believe the show is satirical. But it does not seem to make sense to say that my reasoning could engender a perception on your part, because that does not seem to be how perception works. Thus the dilemma is, as Robert Hopkins puts it, ‘how to reconcile the rationality of critical discourse with its leading to perception. How can there be an argument with a perception as its conclusion?’

Hopkins offers an interesting, albeit tentative, argument to try to answer this question. However, he gives too much away at the outset by assuming that ‘the point of critical discussion is not the formation of belief, but the engendering of perception’. For while it is plausible that inducing perception is the point of some critical discussion, there are good reasons to think that the point of evaluative criticism is in fact the formation of belief. Prima facie, the nature of our evaluative criticism indicates that the critic’s goal is to move readers to accept her judgement that a show really is excellent, or terrible, or whatever. That is, the critic aims to persuade readers to believe that the show is how she claims. And this view seems to offer a more plausible account of the fact that evaluative criticism involves justifying reasons. Perhaps this is most clear in cases where artistic and ethical, political and ideological values interact. For example, it seems deeply implausible that critics who have harshly judged 24 because of its representation and endorsement of torture are merely inviting us to see the show as they did and feel as troubled as they did. Rather, they want us to accept – as truthful, as
correct – the claim that 24 is flawed (artistically, politically, ethically) because it endorses torture (given some fairly noncontroversial assumptions about the ethics of torture).44

In sum, the second premise of the expressivist’s Isenbergian argument faces two main problems. Although it is plausible that in the context of non-evaluative criticism the critic’s goal is to engender perception, it does not seem plausible that this sort of criticism could involve reason-giving rather than simply describing things. Moreover, we have prima facie evidence to think that the goal of evaluative criticism, in particular, is not the engendering of perception but the formation of belief. So the challenge to the second premise is that it is unclear how reasoning could engender perceptions, or how the engendering of perception could be the aim of evaluative criticism. A defender of the premise cannot forgo the latter claim without also abandoning her larger argument regarding the nature of evaluative criticism. But if she drops the former claim, then she owes a further account of the apparent rationality and normative force of evaluative criticism.

We find similar problems with premise 4, the expressivist thesis that, granted 2 and 3, the point of inducing perceptions in evaluative criticism is to get the reader to see the work as the critic sees it not because the critic’s perception attends to something true about the work but for some other reason. It is worth noting that this is not a view that would be endorsed by Isenberg or Hopkins. It is, however, a position maintained by Mittell. Two problems with this thesis carry over from the discussion of the second premise. First, there are good prima facie reasons to think that evaluative criticism is in the business of belief-formation (rather than perception-engendering) and this offers the most plausible explanation of both the normative force and rational nature of judgements of artistic value. These two matters become acute for the defender of 4, who also needs to reconcile them with the stronger claim that there is nothing objectively true about a given work that criticism aims to reveal. But it is unclear how this account of criticism could possibly explain the normative force that is, prima facie, part and parcel of evaluation. If this account of evaluative criticism were accurate, then our critical judgements would not even raise the problem of normative force that the account actually has to try to explain away.

The second problem relates to my objection to premise 2, which was that it is does not make sense to give reasons in an attempt to induce a perception. The additional challenge for the proponent of premise 4 is that it is even less clear why television evaluation involves reason-giving if the perceptions induced do not reveal any objectively true features of the television show in question. For if there is no truth about a programme that can be grasped by perceiving it in a particular way, then giving reasons to justify our claims seems to be incoherent.

The problem of rationality, like the problem of normative force, not only threatens premise 4 but the overall expressivist argument. If there were no objective basis to evaluative judgements, such judgements

would need no justification at all. We would simply assert how we felt and there would be no debate. But we do give reasons. We debate specific judgements such as ‘Sesame Street is a good programme because it fosters an enjoyment of learning’, and ‘Gratuitous violence against women mars the artistic achievement of Game of Thrones’. As Daniel A. Kaufman points out, ‘The critic, when he or she makes such statements, intends the “because” clauses to support the evaluative claims in a very particular way, namely, as support for their purported truthfulness’. In short, if we want to hold on to the idea that evaluative criticism is a rational and coherent activity, then it seems like we must accept the idea that judgements of artistic value aim for truthfulness.

Let us briefly return to Mittell’s account of evaluation to see how these tensions play out. Glossing what he thinks evaluative criticism entails, Mittell writes:

An evaluative critique does not aspire to the status of fact or proof. By claiming that a given program is good or that one series is better than another, I am making an argument that I believe to be true, but it is not a truth claim [...] Of course I do hope to convince readers that my evaluation is correct, and I certainly believe it to be true. But we do not make evaluations to make a definitive statement about the value of any given text; instead they are contingent claims lodged in their contextual moment that will almost undoubtedly be revised after future viewing and conversation.

Despite my respect for much of Mittell’s work and his attempt to talk about evaluation in a way that is still often frowned upon in television studies, this passage is rather confused inasmuch as it runs together a number of quite distinct concepts – ‘fact’, ‘proof’, ‘truth’ and ‘definitive statement’. These need to be prised apart to access what is relevant. First, we should not worry at all about ‘proof’, since it is unclear that anyone actually thinks the reasons she or he gives to justify an evaluative judgement constitute proof – at least if that concept is understood as involving verification or deduction. Similarly there is a sense in which the idea of evaluative judgements having ‘the status of fact’ is a straw man; who, for example, would claim that ‘Mad Men is an outstanding artistic achievement’ reports a fact in the same manner as ‘Mad Men is set in the 1960s’? ‘Definitive statement’ is yet another straw man; there is no reason to think evaluative judgements cannot be of objectives facts or properties, aspire towards truthfulness and remain open to revision. C. I. Lewis had a nice phrase for these: ‘non-terminating judgments’. The real issues, as I have tried to indicate, are whether evaluative judgements aim towards truthfulness, whether they are in any way objective and thus evaluable for proximate truth (or falsity).

Because of his scepticism about truth (at least with regard to the artistic value of television shows), Mittell holds that when he makes an argument he believes to be true, he nevertheless maintains ‘it is not a truth claim’. But I doubt this is a coherent idea. Does it make sense to argue for a proposition, P, one believes to be true without claiming that P

\[ \text{Kaufman, ‘Normative criticism’, p. 151.} \]

\[ \text{Mittell, Complex TV, pp. 207–08.} \]

\[ \text{C. I. Lewis, An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1962 [1946]), p. 376.} \]
is true? It seems to me that if you are not claiming $P$ is true then you cannot be arguing that it is. This is one sense in which Mittell is being pulled between his commitment to expressivism and the rational, normative nature of our actual evaluative practices.

But the fact that Mittell describes his evaluative criticism as involving him ‘making an argument [he] believe[s] to be true’, indicates that this position is untenable. First, as we have seen, if Mittell’s account of evaluative criticism as perception-guiding were correct, he should not need to make an argument at all. Indeed, it would not make any sense for him to be offering arguments because one cannot get someone to have a perception by arguing for it. Rather, one makes an argument in the hope of getting someone to adopt a belief. In fact Mittell admits as much in this passage: he does ‘hope to convince you that [his] evaluation is correct, and [he] certainly believe[s] it to be true’. Here is the crux of the problem for Mittell: it is incoherent to try to convince someone that an evaluation is correct or to believe (yourself) that it is true if you hold the expressivist view that evaluations are not matters of objective fact.

Thus the oddness of Mittell’s chapter on evaluation is that despite admitting that he hopes to convince readers that his evaluations are correct and that he believes they are true, he concludes by explicitly embracing expressivism. At the end of the chapter he writes, ‘My negative reaction [to *Mad Men*] is ultimately analytically inexplicable, only pointing to my own personal preferences and tendencies’. Yet this conclusion, following a lengthy close analysis that offers plausible reasons to believe *Mad Men* fails on its own terms and is thus not as good a show as is commonly thought, is deeply unsatisfactory, if not incoherent. That is, whether *Mad Men* fails (or does not) on its own terms is not simply a matter of how Mittell or anyone else perceives the show. For there are facts, which are in principle discoverable, about what the show’s creators intended to achieve and whether or not they succeeded. If Mittell’s analysis is accurate, the correct conclusion to be drawn is not the one at which he arrives; rather it is that a negative evaluation of the show is objectively warranted to the extent that the creators’ failure to achieve their aims constitutes a pro tanto artistic flaw.

Rehabilitating the idea that judgements of artistic value may be in some sense objective has not been a popular gambit in television studies. But if the preceding arguments are sound, then we ought to consider it within reach. The core idea, to which I have already alluded and upon which we ought to build, has been extensively developed in contemporary philosophy of art and, in fact, has a parallel with work in television studies. The argument goes roughly as follows. Television programmes and other artworks are particular kinds of cultural artefacts. They are human creations which, in the overwhelming majority of cases, are intentionally designed for particular purposes, to fulfil particular functions. But of course art, including television, has a wide variety of purposes and a plurality of functions. The purposes and functions of any particular work depend on the kind of work it is, where ‘kind’ encompasses things
including medium, genre, mode, style, historical period, and so forth. So evaluation is objective when it assesses the extent to which a particular work achieves its specific aims or purposes as well as fulfils the broader functions of the categories in which it is situated. Noël Carroll has dubbed this view ‘the pluralistic category approach’ to evaluation, but various other philosophers, including Robert Stecker and Stephen Davies, have argued for something similar. It should also sound familiar to film and television studies scholars because it parallels points made by V. F. Perkins, in Film as Film, and Jason Jacobs, who has developed some of Perkins’s ideas in the context of television studies.

I am by no means suggesting that we have in our grasp a complete solution to difficult problems about artistic value and evaluation. For example, as Christine Geraghty has pointed out in response to the proposals of Carroll and Jacobs, there is a need to elaborate how this approach to evaluation could work in the context of television evaluation. On the one hand I want to emphasize that my intention is not to offer a complete account of television evaluation but merely to establish that it does, in some instances, have an objective basis; on the other hand I want to outline two ways in which television studies might build upon this rather general sketch of evaluation. First, with reference to children’s television, I will attempt to show more concretely how reference to the functions of particular kinds of television establishes an objective basis for evaluative judgements without reference to universal criteria. Second, I want to suggest that if one accepts the idea that artistic value interacts with, and is constituted by, other sorts of value and the idea that political and ideological analyses of television are evaluable for truth, then in cases where political or ideological values are simultaneously artistic values in works of television, judgements of the artistic value of those works are also evaluable for truth.

We could begin with the broad, hopefully uncontroversial, point that most cultural artefacts are created with the intention that they fulfil some particular function. Thus their value is as least partly a matter of how well they fulfil the function for which they are meant. For example, the goodness of a particular chair is relative to how well it fulfils the function of a chair to afford comfortable sitting. This is not to say that the fulfilment of this function exhausts the value of the chair; a chair that does not afford comfortable sitting may, for example, be valuable inasmuch as it is beautiful or expensive. However, a chair’s value as a chair is a matter of how well it fulfils the primary function of chairs. It is important to see here that, assessed this way, a chair’s goodness is a matter of objective fact; the chair is good relative to how well it fulfils the function of a chair, and the function of a chair is an objective matter of fact. Kaufman puts it nicely:

objectivity with regard to function entails a commensurate objectivity of value. The function of a hammer is defined objectively, as the performing of a specific task, so the corresponding excellence of the hammer is likewise objective in nature.


50 Geraghty, ‘Aesthetics and quality’.

51 Kaufman, ‘Normative criticism’, p. 156.
It should be noted that this does not commit one to the claim that hammers or chairs have an unchanging, timeless function that could not be otherwise. On the contrary, as Amie Thomasson writes, ‘artefactual kinds are notoriously malleable and historical in nature’. But those functions still remain matters of objective fact. In any given sociohistorical context it either is or is not the case that the primary function of a chair is to afford comfortable sitting. In practice there may be a divergence of opinion regarding how well a particular chair fulfils its function, and thus how good it is. But this does not jeopardize the objective basis of evaluative judgement. Crucially, the evaluative criterion against which this debate plays out is objective: the debate is about whether or to what extent the chair fulfils its function. Furthermore, we can debate whether chairs actually have the function of affording comfortable sitting, and we might even decide that a distinct function of chairs is to provide back support. But again, such debates do not threaten the objectivity of judgements regarding the fulfilment of a chair’s function.

Now we could turn to television, bearing in mind Jacobs’s and Geraghty’s points about the importance of categories of television – genres, modes, and so forth. Although I acknowledge the difficulty of specifying purposes and functions of broad categories such as ‘television melodrama’, there is no need to set our sights so high in the first instance. Instead, consider children’s television, which plausibly has a more specific target audience and a narrower range of purposes and functions. Suppose, for the sake of argument, one of the purposes of children’s television is to exercise and develop children’s cognitive skills without exhausting or frustrating them. If the artefactual kind ‘children’s television’ has this (or any other) characteristic function, then an instance of children’s television is objectively good qua children’s television to the extent that it fulfils that function, which is an objective matter.

Below is a more formal presentation of the argument that makes clear how it overcomes the Isenbergian and expressivist challenges. First, the general argument.

1. Children’s television programmes are cultural artefacts.
2. Artefactual kinds like ‘children’s television’ typically have particular functions.
3. Instances of children’s television are good to the extent that they fulfil the particular functions of the artefactual kind, ‘children’s television’.
4. Features that aid in the realization of children’s television’s particular functions are good-making features.
5. Facilitating the exercise and development of children’s cognitive skills (without resulting in exhaustion or frustration) tends to aid in the realization of (at least one of) children’s television’s particular functions.
6. Facilitating the exercise and development of children’s cognitive skills is a good-making feature of children’s television \(\textit{pro tanto}\).

Now, here is how a practical application of the argument would look when plugged into the Isenbergian syllogism:

1a. \textit{Blue’s Clues} is an instance of children’s television. (Description 1a.)

1b. \textit{Blue’s Clues} facilitates the exercise and development of children’s cognitive skills. (Description 1b.)

2. Given the functions or purposes of children’s television, instances of children’s television that facilitate the exercise and development of cognitive skills are good \(\textit{pro tanto}\). (General, but defeasible norm.)

3. \textit{Blue’s Clues} is good \(\textit{pro tanto}\). (Verdict or value-judgement.)

It is important to note that rather than relying on a universal principle to connect the descriptions 1a and 1b to the value judgement 3, this argument makes do with a general, \textit{pro tanto} principle. That is, the argument accepts that the general claim made in 2 is defeasible. The claim of 2 is merely that owing to the purposes of children’s television, exercising and developing children’s cognitive skills tends to be a good-making feature.

Let me anticipate a few objections. Some readers might be thinking that the function of exercising and developing cognitive skills might be a good-making feature of children’s television but is not an \textit{artistic} value. (This is, in turn might be related to the objection that children’s television just is not art.) But this objection ignores the overwhelming \textit{prima facie} evidence that cognitive value is often a significant component of artistic value (consider ‘narratively complex’ television serials, puzzle films, dense novels, cryptic poems, and so forth) and the extensive arguments that have been mounted in defence of this point.

Readers also might be thinking that children’s television has a variety of other purposes and functions; it is a mistake to think that the cognitive value of children’s television exhausts its overall artistic value. My response is that this is true and is not actually an objection. My claim is merely that a show like \textit{Blue’s Clues} has artistic merit to the extent that it fulfils this cognitive function. This is a \textit{pro tanto} artistic merit that interacts with other artistic merits and flaws, which are in turn established by the extent to which the show achieves whatever other purposes we agree children’s television has. This (or any other) \textit{pro tanto} artistic merit may indeed be insufficient to warrant a positive judgement of the programme’s overall artistic value.

This, it should be clear, is the important move that secures the objectivity of the evaluative judgement without reliance upon universal principles of artistic value. If the argument is sound, then it shows that evaluative criticism need not be saddled with the problem that Isenberg suggests. More importantly for present purposes, it definitively refutes even the more plausible formulation of the television studies expressivist argument developed above. In particular, it does so by undermining both
premise 1 the Isenbergian thesis that, because there are no general principles of artistic value, evaluative criticism cannot involve reasons that function like premises in arguments; and premise 3 the expressivist thesis that, granted 1, there are no objectively true judgements of artistic value.

Staying with the idea that artistic value interacts with and is constituted by other sorts of value, I want to suggest that political, ideological and ethical flaws in an instance of television may constitute artistic disvalue in an objective sense. Given the prevalent scepticism about ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ aesthetic and artistic value, clearly one contentious premise in this argument is that political, ideological and ethical value is real and that estimations of such value have objective grounds and are evaluable for truth or falsehood. Consider the popular television studies project of analyzing ‘the politics of x’, where x is usually an instance of television that embodies or endorses some politically or ideologically retrograde values. Are the television scholars who dedicate their careers to such work really expressivists about political and ideological value? It seems doubtful. If the analyses of television that seek to expose sexism, racism, classism, and so forth have no objective basis and are not truth evaluable, then what is the point? If such work is coherent and meaningful in any sense, it must be because it aspires to truthfulness and objectively identifies real political or ideological merits or flaws. However, if one accepts this premise, along with the premise that artistic value is plural and partly constitutes both other sorts of value, it follows that there is another way in which judgements of artistic value are also objectively grounded and evaluable for truth or falsity.

Suppose we accept the plausible claim that reality makeover programmes, in the mould of Extreme Makeover, essentially police women’s bodies and simultaneously subvert potential critiques of this function by couching it in neoliberal individualist rhetoric. There is significant support for this claim in a number of compelling feminist analyses of reality television. As the authors of one article put it:

This normalization of flawless femininity is obviously problematic for feminists, and the problem is compounded by a liberal logic that celebrates disciplinary practices of femininity as ‘free’ choice and individual pleasure [...] the historical feminist insistence that disciplinary femininity is a symptom and effect of gender oppression is reshifted in this context as a denial of women’s agency. 55

If we accept all this, then something like the following thesis follows: the policing of women’s bodies in reality makeover television series constitutes a form of gender oppression.

We might add the plausible assumption that gender oppression is a political or ideological disvalue. It follows that if it can be shown that in certain instances of reality television (or any other sorts of television art) political or ideological value is a constituent of artistic value, then those instances of television that involve the policing of women’s bodies have
identifiable artistic flaws, the (dis)value of which can be objectively judged. To be clear, I am not suggesting there is a unidirectional relationship by which political or ideological merits always constitute artistic merits and political and ideological flaws always constitute artistic flaws. Rather, what my argument requires and what I am claiming is merely that sometimes political or ideological flaws constitute artistic flaws or create artistic disvalue. There are a number of ways to argue for this position, but here I will merely sketch a simple one.

In just about any artistic context imaginable, including reality television, artistic success or value is partly a matter of creating sufficient interest or pleasure that the beholder continues to engage with the work – in the case of temporally organized works, through their completion. If the beholder is compelled to disengage from the work, then the work plausibly has a pro tanto artistic flaw and in many cases could be regarded as an artistic failure, although of course there are exceptions to this. Reality television (and television more generally) is a kind of art that particularly depends upon viewer engagement for its artistic success because of its deep connections to commercial interests. Again, to be clear, there are significant degrees of variation here. Plenty of television programmes are artistic successes despite their low ratings. But if a programme’s target audience is compelled to disengage from the show, it has evidently failed to achieve one of its primary aims or purposes.

Now we could consider a reality makeover series like The Swan, which aired for only two seasons on Fox in 2004. The Swan (which putatively turned ‘ugly ducklings’ into ‘swans’ through cosmetic surgery) was evidently so ideologically noxious – and recognizable as such to a wide variety of viewers – that people simply stopped watching it. That is, The Swan had the artistically disvaluable feature of being too troubling and offensive for (most of) its target audience to watch. And this feature resulted from its ideologically and ethically reprehensible attitudes towards its contestants and women more generally.

In The Swan, we have a case in which political and ideological value interact with artistic value; the programme’s ideological flaws constituted artistic flaws. To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I am not claiming that the artistic value of The Swan or any other show can be measured in terms of popularity or audience ratings, or even that cancellation due to lack of ratings is indicative of artistic disvalue. Rather, my claim is that driving the target audience to disengage from the work is a pro tanto artistic flaw, and in many cases could be regarded as an artistic failure, although of course there are exceptions to this. Reality television (and television more generally) is a kind of art that particularly depends upon viewer engagement for its artistic success because of its deep connections to commercial interests. Again, to be clear, there are significant degrees of variation here. Plenty of television programmes are artistic successes despite their low ratings. But if a programme’s target audience is compelled to disengage from the show, it has evidently failed to achieve one of its primary aims or purposes.


which gender oppression is a species of disvalue are in any sense objective or evaluable for truth.

This is an appropriate segue to my conclusion, in which I want to respond to criticisms of the ‘aesthetic turn’ in television scholarship – in particular, its putatively ‘regressive’ nature. For example, according to Hills, one of the lessons of poststructuralism is supposedly that the sort of value judgements made by me and other advocates of the ‘television aesthetics’ project ‘cannot ultimately and finally be sustained through critical argument’.  

This view, I have tried to show, is a common though erroneous one; what is interesting about Hills’s essay is how he goes about criticizing those who he thinks have not accepted this ‘lesson’. Such scholars stand accused of ‘pre-structuralism’, which involves ‘assertions of inherent textual value which are supposedly objectively given “in the medium” or “in the text”’. Pre-structuralist invocations of TV aesthetics’, Hills tells us, ‘are readily identifiable by virtue of the fact that they position aesthetic value as textually inherent (that is, transcendent) rather than as textually and evaluatively relational.’

One immediate reason for scepticism about Hills’s objections to television aesthetics is that this description of ‘inherent value’ is one that I think most contemporary philosophers of art would find puzzling. Aestheticians (and moral philosophers) from Monroe Beardsley onwards have tended to follow Lewis in understanding ‘inherent value’ as a species of extrinsic value. For Lewis, ‘inherent value is an objective property of the thing to which it is attributable’, which may seem like the view Hills wants to reject. For Hills wants to deny that value is not a constituent or integral feature of ‘texts’. But Lewis’s view is subtle: in his account, inherent value ‘consists in a potentiality of the thing for conducing to realization of some positive value-quality in experience’. That is, inherent value is not intrinsic to the ‘text’ (or other object), but rather is ‘realizable through the presentation of it’. Lewis thus conceives of inherent value as objective but not intrinsic; Hills seems to think that value cannot be objective because it cannot be intrinsic.

The problem is that few, if any, contemporary philosophers of art hold such a view; Hills is battling a straw man. Although Lewis himself distinguished inherent and instrumental value as two sorts of extrinsic value, subsequent philosophers of art and ethics have often thought about inherent value as a kind of instrumental value because it is a value only insofar as it leads to another end – namely, a valuable experience. And this is how many philosophers of art characterize artistic value, although they do not typically use the term ‘inherent’ to describe it – no doubt in part because of the confusion the word is liable to generate. Indeed, one of the crucial points of Dickie’s exacting study of theories of art evaluation is that most of the major contributions to the literature in the twentieth century (including Beardsley’s ‘traditional’ aesthetic theory of art) have advocated instrumentalist accounts of artistic value, according to which value does not obtain in the work itself. Rather, the work is valuable instrumentally to the extent that it affords a valuable experience.
It is within this tradition that I have tried to situate my own modest proposal, according to which the artistic value of a given television programme exists neither in the programme (or “text”) itself, nor its good-making features. On the contrary, my central claim is that insofar as a given programme is a cultural artefact, designed to fulfil a particular function or functions, its value is instrumental. Furthermore, insofar as a given show belongs to a particular artefactual kind, its artistic value is relative to how well it realizes the purposes of its kind. Thus we can specify general but defeasible pro tanto principles that subtend the objectivity of evaluative judgements. Moreover, this proposal serves as a direct rebuttal of the claim, made by Newman and Levine as well as Hills, that ‘if excellence was based on any criteria whatsoever, then its recognition and identification could emerge only through a series of binaries, being set against “bad” Others’. 68 This claim is manifestly false, as I hope my own proposal and examples have made clear.

The reason for pointing this out is that I want to close by emphatically rejecting the idea that the television aesthetics project is ‘regressive’, as Hills claims and Newman and Levine imply. 69 The ad hominem argument is regrettable, and the inconsistency of using ‘othering’ rhetoric to criticize those who are putatively doing the ‘othering’ is not lost on me, but my concern is much more substantive and pragmatic. If television and other media scholars aspire for their work to be politically progressive in any real, meaningful sense and they accept the plausible claim that political value sometimes interacts with, and partially constitutes, artistic value in works of television, then judgements of artistic value had better be no less objectively grounded than judgements of political value. Television and media studies’ role as a force for progressive sociopolitical change would seem to depend on it.

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69 Ibid., p. 100; also see Newman and Levine, Legitimating Television, pp. 160–71.