

CHAPTER 9

Guidelines for Television Criticism

INTRODUCTION

Now that you understand the various aspects of television as a business, production procedures, television style, narrative, genre, elements of rhetoric and cultural studies, representation, and postmodernism, you are ready to do an in-depth analysis of a television program or an episode from a series. Whether you select fiction or nonfiction programming is entirely up to you. Select a program that you can record or watch online and will not mind viewing several times because you will need to examine several aspects of it. Select a program that you want to question or one with which you are familiar. As stated in Chapter 1, it is perfectly acceptable to analyze a favorite program or one that suits your interests and tastes. Your goals are to understand the various elements of a television program, to analyze it, to interpret possible meanings, to judge the quality of the program, and to communicate your assessment in writing.

This chapter brings together the elements of the previous chapters into eight sections: (1) critical orientation, (2) story and genre, (3) organization, (4) demographics, (5) context, (6) the look of the program and its codes, (7) analysis, and (8) judgment. Each category includes questions that you can ask about a television program. Depending on what you want to know about the program, you can select a few or all of the categories. Not all the questions will be relevant to the program you have selected, so you can choose the questions that are most pertinent. The questions are necessarily general, thus you can tailor them to fit the elements of the program you have chosen and the intent of your criticism.

To use the eight categories of questions in this chapter, the television critic needs to be familiar with the contents of the previous eight chapters of this book. I have used the ideas, theories, and methods of the previous chapters to develop questions for analysis and criticism. Rather than repeat unnecessarily, I have assumed that you have read the previous chapters and have participated in the exercises at the end of each chapter.

You will not want to use all the questions in this chapter nor do you need to. I hope that you will pick and choose the questions that will be most useful to you as you conduct your analysis. The more you watch the program you have selected to critique, the more you will see.

CRITICAL ORIENTATION

After you have selected the television program you want to analyze, ask initially what you want to know about it. Assess how you react to it and make a list of those reactions, for example, laughter, fright, shock, anger, empathy, relaxation, boredom, tension, curiosity, and so on. If it is an episodic program, try to be aware of other episodes. You can check the program's website for episode summaries, clips from previous programs, the names of the characters, the cast, the characters' back stories, the production staff, production information, and possibly blogs by the writers, which may give you some insight into the motivation behind the script. The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences has a useful archive of interviews with directors, producers, actors, and other television personnel on its website—<http://www.emmystvlegends.org>. The easiest way to locate television programs' websites is to use a search engine such as Google or Yahoo. Each of the networks has its own site, for instance, nbc.com. If it is a series or specialty programming, you can check the Nielsen ratings on the Web. You can also read what other viewers say about the program on the website or on Facebook. Music playlists for most shows are available to listen to on the website. You can also purchase the music CDs in most cases. Also, you can purchase or check out available books about the program from the library, bookstore, or online booksellers. Check to see if the book is unauthorized or is the official companion to the show. Unauthorized books may not be accurate, although they may contain useful information. In the authorized books, you are likely to find interviews with the creators, the writers, the producers, the cast, and the consultants. You also may find episode summaries with names of guest actors, writers of particular episodes, and directors. Books such as *Ultimate CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Marrinan, 2006) and *House, M.D.: The Official Guide to the Hit Medical Drama* (Jackman, 2010) include glossaries of scientific terms used in the programs.

Here are some questions to ask for critical orientation.

1. What attracted you to this program?
2. Do you identify with any of the characters?
3. Does the program have a personality or an actor whom you enjoy watching?
4. Are there relationships in the program that you find intriguing?
5. What interests you about the story or the contents of the program?
6. Is the program novel in some way, especially in comparison to other television programs?
7. Is this a program that you are willing to take seriously and spend a lot of time with?
8. Do you talk to your friends about the program?

STORY AND GENRE

Now that you have selected a program to analyze, watch it in its entirety and identify its genre. A very important question to ask at this stage is "How is the story told?" For most television narratives, there is deferred gratification and viewer anticipation. The critic asks how these factors occur.