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Scholars as Audiences, Symbolic Boundaries, and Culturally Legitimated Prime-Time Cable Drama

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Abstract: This article addresses Jason Mittell's controversial essay "On Disliking *Mad Men*" (2010) in the cultural context of post-network television. The author uses 72 critical reviews of five HBO series to place Mittell's argument alongside other rhetorical strategies that resist the prestige associated with high-status prime-time cable dramas. In relation to these rhetorical strategies, the troubled publication history of and negative scholarly reactions to Mittell's essay are understood as indicative of elite post-network television audiences policing the symbolic boundaries surrounding culturally legitimated texts.

Keywords: post-network television, audience, critical reception

Introduction

Noted television scholar Jason Mittell does not enjoy AMC's award winning drama *Mad Men*.¹ In March 2010, he was asked to compose an essay explaining his feelings by several (then anonymous) scholars editing a collection about the show. The resulting essay, 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' (2010), generated a significant amount of scholarly conversation. Ultimately, however, the essay was excluded from the anthology *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s* (Goodlad et al., 2013). More than a year later, Mittell (2011) explains that the editors felt the collection "as a whole was too critical and not enough 'fun'" and the essay was excluded "in the hope of making a more uniform 'pro-*Mad Men*' book. The publishers believed such a book would read better despite the editors' advocacy to retain all of the pieces." These events are significant, according to the slighted author, because of what "it tells us about the state of academic publishing" (Mittell, 2011). I would like to offer an alternative interpretation. Inspired by Hills' (2007) observation that "media academics are always-already media audiences"

¹ *Mad Men* is routinely discussed as one of the greatest shows of all time (Kuo and Wu, 2012; Goodman, 2013) and is the winner of four consecutive prime-time Emmy awards for Outstanding Drama Series between 2008 and 2011 (Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2012).

(46), this analysis considers the relationship between audience reception and prestige in what some describe as American television's "third golden age" (Martin, 2013).

This article begins with a discussion of the social processes associated with post-network television's increasing cultural status. According to the dominant narrative, starting in the late 1990s, a wave of hour-long cable dramas began discarding the rules of traditional TV by introducing complicated characters and raising the quality (in terms of production, writing, and visuals) of the medium (Sepinwall, 2013). In addition, I describe the textual characteristics associated with high-status prime-time cable dramas and discuss the use of such textual elements in *Mad Men*. In the second section, negative critical reviews of five HBO programs demonstrate that cultural legitimation is always a contested social process. Using these negative evaluations, I highlight critics' rhetorical strategy to refute claims of prestige associated with high-status prime-time cable drama.² In the third section, I describe Mittell's critique of *Mad Men* and note his use of a similar rhetorical strategy to dispute the prestige associated with the show. In the fourth section, I describe academics' negative reactions to Mittell's essay. I also address 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' in the context of television's increasing cultural legitimacy. I argue that Mittell's (2010) position is particularly problematic for elite audiences (like scholars) as he both challenges their cultural capital and their belief in the qualitative superiority of legitimated television texts. This research concludes by noting that the troubled publication history of Mittell's essay is both indicative of television's increasing status and a useful demonstration of symbolic boundaries in the post-network era.

Cultural legitimacy in the post-network era

The cultural legitimacy of high-status prime-time cable dramas is only made possible by the shifting economic realities of the television industry, industrial discourse positioning premium cable content as qualitatively superior, and the ability of individual texts to appeal to elite audiences. For most of its history, however, the vast majority of content on American television has been produced in the same highly commercialized context (Gitlin, 1982). As a consequence, middle-class Americans largely distanced themselves from television as a lowbrow cultural form. Seiter (1999), for example, highlights the hesitancy and defensiveness with which many middle-class audience members admit to watching television because of its historical association with feminine passivity, laziness, and the masses; specifically, she asserts that middle-class individuals with lower levels of socioeconomic status and higher levels of educational attainment "cannot afford the luxury of indulging a love of popular culture, for fear that they will appear uneducated" (131).

² Examples of high-status prime-time cable dramas currently being broadcast include FX's *The Americans*, AMC's *Mad Men*, and HBO's *True Detective*.

It is only at the beginning of the post-network era that this begins to change as digital technology and new economic realities of production exacerbate existing trends and dramatically increase the diversity of content available on television. In describing this shift, Lotz (2007) notes that the emergence of so many new networks and niche channels fundamentally changed the economics of the television industry and altered the ways in which content becomes socially important. In contrast to the economics of the network era which rely upon delivering large audiences to advertisers, within this new economic environment producers like advertiser supported cable networks can afford to create content that will only be watched by 1% of the available audience (Lotz, 2007: 37). In this context, the quality of the audience a program can deliver to advertisers becomes more important than its overall size and the cultural relevance of any content ceases to be a direct function of audience size. As a consequence of these economic and cultural realities, post-network television differs from the programming of the network era in that producers are no longer limited to creating content that appeals to “a multiplicity of social types at once” (Gitlin, 1982: 248).

In addition, these industrial changes create the opportunity for particular content to become affirmed by “hierarchies of artistic taste and social importance” and “imbued with what Pierre Bourdieu terms ‘cultural capital’” (Lotz, 2007: 40) when it is legitimated by elite audiences like industry critics and media scholars (Newman & Levine, 2012).³ To take advantage of this, subscriber based cable channels, most notably HBO, successfully rebranded themselves as purveyors of legitimated television. The introduction of the now famous slogan “It’s not TV. It’s HBO” in 1996 is representative of the network’s broader institutional discourse that, according to McCabe and Akass (2007), “work[s] hard to tell us how the channel defies, resists, and scandalizes” (66). Similarly, discourses that position television showrunners as *auteurs* explicitly attempt to bring the medium more closely in line with traditionally highbrow cultural forms. While not an official title, using the term “showrunner” in reference to the head of television production for texts in a variety of genres ideologically promotes “a strategy of legitimation” by “calling attention to the artistic status of comedies and dramas promoted and consumed as *authored* texts” (Newman & Levine, 2012: 39, italics in original). Like 1960s film directors’ self promotion as artists (Baumann, 2007), showrunners employing this strategy and critics who repeat such assertions rely on tropes of authorship familiar from older, already legitimated and aestheticized cultural forms including Romantic notions of the author as guarantee of art. By 2009, however, with several critically acclaimed prime-time dramas including *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* on its schedule and an a new slogan proclaiming “Story Matters Here”, AMC remained the only basic cable with status rivaling that of HBO.

At the level of the text, high-status prime-time cable dramas, of which HBO’s *The*

³ Bourdieu and Passeron (1973) first use the phrase “cultural capital” to describe the non-monetary assets associated with education and social/intellectual knowledge in the context of explaining the mechanisms by which social inequality is reproduced by the educational system.

Sopranos and *The Wire* serve as useful ideal types, appeal to elite audiences in two distinct fashions. First, scholars observe that such content is largely incompatible with passive viewing experiences. In general, this incompatibility is associated with the prominence of “narrative complexity” which refers to the rejection of episodic and serial conventions associated with network-era television (Mittell, 2006: 32). Klein (2009), for example, asserts that “play with melodramatic conventions is employed in *The Wire* to subvert the passive, satisfied viewing position typically established by prime-time social melodrama. In its place the series constructs an active, socially engaged viewer” (188). Nannicelli (2009) similarly observes, “*The Wire* regularly refuse to offer viewers any sort of episodic narrative closure or even the promise that dangling questions will be answered in the next episode” (193). Although the concept is often used regarding *The Sopranos* in reference to the lack of episodic closure (Mittell, 2006), scholars note that the use of narrative devices like flashbacks and dream sequences is also incompatible with passive viewing (Lavery & Thompson, 2002). With such textual features, these programs allow television to become appropriate for middle-class audiences by requiring intellectual engagement (Lamont, 1992).

Second, scholars observe that high-status prime-time cable dramas appeal to elite audiences through the use of intertextuality. Lavik (2011), for example, asserts that *The Wire* is appealing because rather than being “fond tributes or symptoms of postmodern simulacrum”, the references in the show “serve to set *The Wire* apart from ordinary, escapist, socially irrelevant television” (59). More specifically, Polan (2009) argues that the use of highbrow allusions in *The Sopranos* is particularly significant in the context of the relationship between the title character Tony Soprano and his psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi. For example, a dialogue between the two characters includes the following exchange:

Tony: All this from a slice of *gabagool*?⁴

Melfi: Kind of like Proust's madeleines.

Tony: What? Who?

Melfi: Marcel Proust. Wrote a seven-volume classic, *Remembrance of Things Past*. He took a bite of a madeleine -- a kind of tea cookie he used to have when he was a child -- and that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately, his entire life.

Tony: This sounds very gay. I hope you're not saying that. (Chase & Van Patten, 2001)

The inclusion of Proust in this scene allows “the viewer who gets the reference” to “both feel superior to Tony and be impressed by his talent at clearing away the verbiage and getting to the core of the situation” (Polan, 2009: 52).

Like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, *Mad Men* confirms its superiority to elite audiences through its incompatibility with passive viewing and its use of intertextuality.⁵ According to Butler, for example, the show's intertextuality

⁴ A slang term for capicola.

⁵ For all of the critical acclaim directed at *Mad Men*, the show is not particularly popular. The show's fifth season two-hour premiere, for example, was watched by 3.5 million viewers (Steinberg, 2012); that same week, a rerun of *NCIS* on basic cable network USA drew 3.9 million viewers. Yet,

provides elite audiences with an opportunity to display their knowledge of 1960s history as its “style showcases historical specificity and urges us to engage with it” (2011: 69). Regarding *Mad Men's* narrative complexity, an additional consequence of the show's mise-en-scene is the ability to challenge the idyllic image of 1960s America while appealing to elite audiences with 'modern' characters. According to Siska (2011), the “nonchalance” with which the characters ignore the coming “tidal wave' of social change in the early 1960s is 'part of the show's critique” (204). However, the “intensely loyal audiences” continue to engage with the show because “Don Draper is a character on an inner quest for self-understanding and self-acceptance” (Siska, 2011: 199). In this, Siska observes, Draper is a “common character in the best of American literature of the last half of the twentieth century – Bellow's Herzog, Updike's Rabbit, and Roth's Zuckerman” (2011: 199). Others make a similar argument regarding several of *Mad Men's* female characters. Although they live in the 1960s, Haralovich (2011) asserts that Peggy, Joan, and Bobbie “are designed for the twenty-first century” (162). As such, the “pernicious causal sexism” of *Mad Men* is shocking because, according to Akass and McCabe (2011), it forces the audience “to see how women are complicit in their own degradation; and more alarming is how we still have not entirely liberated ourselves from those sexual politics, despite half a century of social progress and legislative change” (191). Although *Mad Men* uses narrative complexity and intertextuality in ways distinct from *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, all of these high-status prime-time cable dramas are similarly incompatible with passive viewing and make similar appeals to elite audiences.

On the basis of such scholarship, one could reasonably expect to find consensus among elite audiences like professional television critics regarding the appeal of high-status prime-time cable dramas. The relationship between high-status content and elite audiences, however, has never been so simple. In fact, the critical reception of HBO dramas demonstrates that some have been resisting the asserted legitimacy of high-status prime-time cable dramas for at least the last decade.

Critical reception of HBO drama

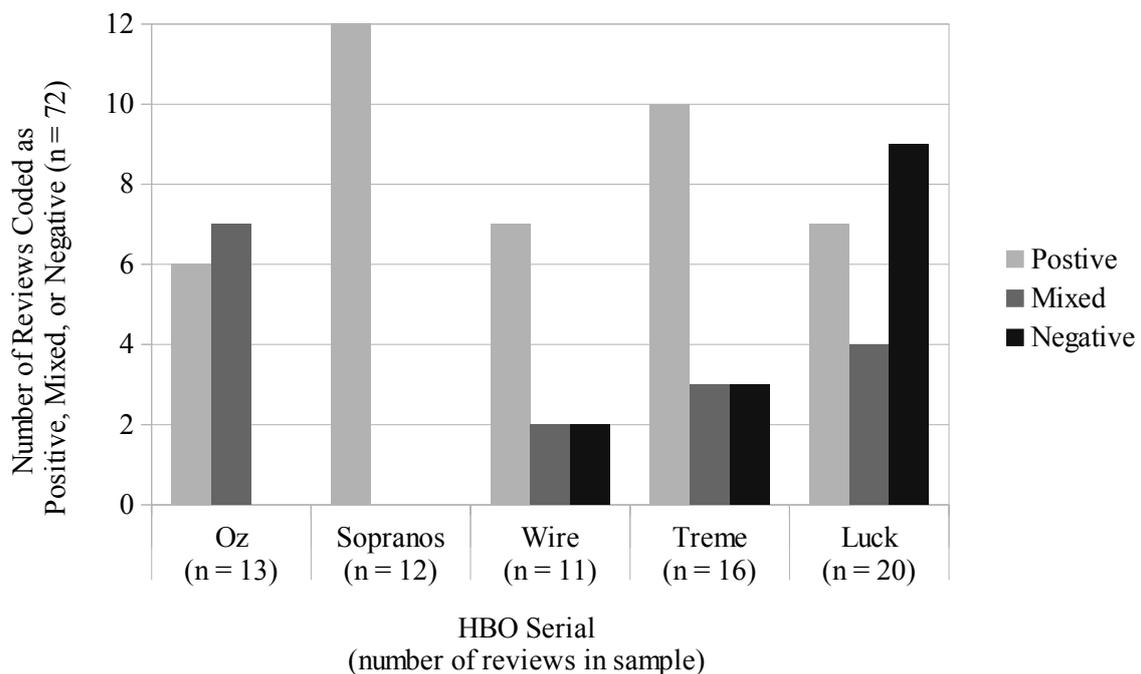
In this section, critical reviews of HBO prime-time serials represent elite reception of high-status prime-time cable dramas more generally (Amaya, 2008) and highlight the instability (Ang, 1996) of such audiences between 1997 and 2012. Unless otherwise noted, all of the data presented below was published in major US newspapers (as defined by the Lexis-Nexis Academic search engine) in response to the premieres (beginning the week before and ending three weeks after) of the following five dramas: *Oz* (1997), *The Sopranos* (1999), *The Wire* (2002), *Treme*

the show's small audience is the TV's wealthiest (not including viewers of premium cable). Fifty-four percent of adult viewers (25-54) who watched *Mad Men's* seventh season premiere have incomes that exceed US\$100,000 per year (O'Connell, 2014). By and large, the show functions as a loss leader for AMC (Smith, 2013) earning critical and industry acclaim while more popular shows like *The Walking Dead* generate significantly more advertising revenue.

(2010), and *Luck* (2012). The choice to address reviews of HBO drama series' premieres was made in response to several factors.

First, although television reviews are published in newspapers in the days before or immediately after a series premiere, critics are typically provided with “screener” copies of several episodes by networks (Lotz, 2008). As such, the critical evaluations collected by this research refer to more content than the premier episode alone. Second, the production of television criticism has changed considerably between 1997 and 2012. Although weekly episode recaps have become a feature of online television criticism, at the end of the multi-channel transition, television reviews published by newspapers did not address a single show on a regular basis. In fact, many shows were only ever mentioned when they first premiered. Third, I hoped to avoid the issue of critics changing their opinions later in a series' run. This does not discount the possibility that a show might receive favorable reviews as a result of its showrunner's reputation. Nonetheless, considering these factors, the sampling method described above was adequate to address the issues at hand.

Chart 1: Critical reception of high-status prime-time cable drama in major US newspapers



Once collected, seventy-two reviews from more than forty-five professional critics shows were analyzed. Each was coded as either positive, negative, or mixed. Of these seventy-two, forty-two (58%) were coded as positive, twenty-one (29%) were coded as mixed, and nine (13%) were coded as negative. As previous scholarship has identified the elements associated with the critical celebration of prime-time cable drama (Newman & Levine, 2012), this analysis was designed to find negative

and mixed critical evaluations. The goal was to identify common issues in critical evaluations that resisted the prestige associated with HBO drama. Exclusively descriptive reviews were not considered. In addition to the critical reviews of the later series, particularly relevant critical evaluations from other sources, such as general interest magazines and prominent cultural blogs, are used to supplement the data from major American newspapers.

Oz, HBO's first original drama series, premiered in the year following the introduction of the network's anti-TV rebranding. Although many critics were positive, it seems nearly an equal number were initially hesitant to embrace this new prestige. Pergament (1997), for example, questions the appeal of the graphic and often brutal portrayal of prison life featured in *Oz*. He writes, "If he [Tom Fontana, series creator] can get viewers interested in people as revolting and violent as the inmates in *Oz*, Fontana is indeed a miracle worker" (Pergament, 1997). Jubera (1997) also calls into question the aesthetic experience of *Oz* and writes, "Whether you'll vow to return to this creepily realized world-within-a-world week after week is something else ---a sentence you'll have to impose on yourself." In offering such observations, these critics questioned whether taking advantage of the freedoms offered by a subscriber-supported economic model would ultimately produce content that appealed to audiences.

While it was chronologically preceded by *Oz*, David Chase's *The Sopranos* is the first high-status prime-time cable drama that can be conceptualized as culturally legitimated by elite audiences (Newman & Levine, 2012). For example, the show has been the subject of several academic anthologies, several more scholarly books, and countless peer-reviewed articles. In addition, the show was nominated for the prime-time Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series every year it was eligible (winning in 2004 and 2007) and earned two Peabody Awards (2000, 2001). Furthermore, all of the critical evaluations in this sample were positive. Many critics immediately declared it to be qualitatively superior to all other television dramas (Bianculli, 1999; Winfrey, 1999). Simon (1999), for example, writes, "Even in the era of *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, *Homicide*, *NYPD Blue* and *The X-Files*, the hour long *Sopranos* is so far above everything else on the weekly TV schedule that it's a veritable sunburst of imagination."

Although it might seem surprising now that the show is taught at any number of American universities (Bennett, 2010) including Harvard (Chaddha & Wilson, 2010) and discussed with *The Sopranos* as the best show ever (Traister & Miller, 2007), the initial critical reception of David Simon's *The Wire* included some negative evaluations. Of the available eleven full length critical reviews, seven were positive and two reflected a similar kind of critical ambivalence as the mixed reviews of *Oz* (McDaniel, 2002; Genzlinger, 2002). However, both of the critics who evaluated the show negatively resist the asserted legitimacy of the text using identical rhetorical strategies. First, they acknowledge the assumption of prestige. After claiming to be "put off" by *The Wire*, Buckman (2002) asserts that the show

“demonstrates, if nothing else, that even the vaunted HBO can cough up a dud once in a while”. Bianculli (2002) similarly begins his negative review by writing, “Program development at HBO has been so impressive for so long ... that any new HBO series is held to the highest possible standard: the channel's own”. Second, critics position *The Wire* as deficient in relation to other culturally legitimated texts. Bianculli (2002), for example, asserts, “As a story about the intricacies and eccentricities of criminals, for example, it's nowhere nearly as artistic or compelling as *The Sopranos*”. Similarly, Buckman (2002) advises his readers, “You want to see tough-as-nail cops warring with bad guys on the bloody, crumbling streets of a post-modern gritty city? Check out *The Shield* on FX”. Third, they point to the show's slow pace as particularly problematic. Buckman (2002) complains, “I watched the first two episodes and no one had yet agreed to wear the proverbial wire ... But it gives you an idea of how slow-moving this show is that it's still unclear where it's going after two hours”. Bianculli's (2002) displeasure is nearly identical, “this series seems to take the real-time aspect of 24 and reduce it to slow motion ... but it's hours into the series before the wiretap is even approved”. This three-step rhetorical strategy can also be found in the negative evaluations of Simon's next HBO project.

Among the critical reviews of *Treme* included in this analysis, all three of the negative evaluations reference the prestige of showrunner, position the show as deficient in relation to other culturally legitimated texts, and complain of the slow pace (Ostrow, 2010; Perigard, 2010; Wiser, 2010). Although the majority of critics gave positive evaluations, many in reference to the music or the authentic depiction of post-Katrina New Orleans, this show also generated the most prominent example of elite audiences rejecting the prestige associated with a high-status prime-time cable drama. In a *Wall Street Journal* blog post titled “Is it okay not to love *Treme*?”, general interest columnist Rosman (2010) asserts that, despite its “nearly unanimous” positive reception by critics, “tentatively and in small numbers, some writers and journalists are making a confession: They don't particularly enjoy the show”. She cites a tweet by Rob Corrdry, former correspondent on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and star of NBC's *Community*, for example, in which he writes, “Watching *Treme* on HBO. I hope it's as important as it is boring” (Rosman, 2010). Well-known journalist Susan Orlean similarly announced via Twitter, “Forgive the blasphemy but I was underwhelmed by *Treme*” (Rosman, 2010). According to Rosman (2010), conceptualizing such negative reactions as heretical is appropriate since the show's subject matter has “been cast by the media as sacred”, its showrunner deified as the creator of a previous “much-loved (especially by journalists)” HBO series, and celebrated for taking “pains to present an authentic portrait of its host city”. It seems the failure to appreciate the show was not similarly problematic for the critics who evaluated *Treme* negatively.

This rhetorical strategy is also prominent in the critical reception of David Milch's short-lived and controversial horse-racing drama *Luck*. Of the reviews considered,

all five similarly resist the cultural legitimacy associated with the text (Feeney, 2012; Hinkley, 2012; Nussbaum, 2012; Stanley, 2012; Stuever, 2012). While the tropes of this rhetorical strategy have changed little since *The Wire*, the negative critical evaluation of more recent texts include the explicit acknowledgment that the failure to enjoy high-status prime-time cable dramas is transgressive. In her review of *Luck* for *The New Yorker*, for example, Nussbaum (2012) asserts that she takes “no pleasure” in expressing her negative feelings about the show. She explains, “To the contrary, I feel the ghastly critical chill of admitting that I was bored by such obvious prestige television, created by people whose work I admire” (Nussbaum, 2012). However, the tension experienced by elite audiences in relation to high-status prime-time cable dramas at this point in the post-network era is best expressed in Moylan's (2012) review of *Luck* for the influential website Gawker.com. The review begins with the admission that both attempts at engaging with the show ended by falling asleep and, after acknowledging the narrative complexity of such content is akin to a “slow burn”, asks, “but how long am I supposed to wait before feeling the heat?” (Moylan, 2012). Although Moylan (2012) employs the same rhetorical strategy to explain *Luck*'s lack of appeal, his review also includes a broader critique:

That's the problem with these slow burn shows, especially ones with fancy pedigrees backed by highbrow channels like HBO or AMC. We can't imagine how they could not be good, so we keep watching, episode after boring episode, all the while waiting for some amazing payoff. And sometimes, like a skilled horse coming from behind, it pays off. But remember: For every *The Wire* there is a *Treme*, and for every *Mad Men* there is a *The Killing*.

As Moylan (2012) notes, the success of shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* has led elite audiences “to believe that shows with a deliberate pace will be rewarding”, yet, as he observes in reference to *Treme* and AMC's *The Killing*, “Sometimes slow isn't good. Sometimes slow is just drab.”

The shift from characterizing HBO texts as qualitatively different, in the case of *Oz*, to qualitatively superior, in the case of *The Sopranos*, indicates the emergence of a coherent critical discourse asserting the cultural legitimacy of high-status prime-time cable dramas. The negative critical reviews of *The Wire*, *Treme*, and *Luck*, however, also reflect the emergence of a distinctive rhetorical strategy that resists the cultural legitimacy associated with these texts by acknowledging the aura of prestige, challenging a text's status by comparison, and ultimately justifying a negative evaluation by claiming the narrative structure is problematic. Within this context, 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' (Mittell, 2010) hardly seems controversial.

Mittell and *Mad Men*

The publication history of 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' begins in March 2010. Having previously written about *Mad Men* on his blog as a show that did not appeal to him, Mittell was invited to contribute a chapter to a forthcoming edited collection

of essays about the show. According to Mittell (2010), “the editors knew that I didn’t like the show, and wanted me to write about why”. He says he accepted their invitation as “a kind of challenge”. In late July, Mittell published the essay on his blog.

Mittell (2010) begins 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' by admitting that his negative opinion of the show is transgressive since “all of my authorial neighbors found the show sufficiently interesting and engaging to focus their critical energies on the series”. The author also invokes all of the relevant tropes associated with the rhetorical strategy outlined above. First, he acknowledges the show's prestige explicitly, “I fully acknowledge that it is a ‘good’ series: well-crafted, smartly written, expertly produced, and effectively acted”. Mittell (2010) even goes so far as to say, “It is objectively better made – to whatever degree measures of quality can be objective – than the vast majority of programs airing on American television”. He then positions *Mad Men* as deficient in relation to other culturally legitimated content. Unlike “the titular mafia don of *The Sopranos*, the serial killer Dexter, *Deadwood*’s ruthless mogul Al Swearingen, corrupt cop Vic Mackey on *The Shield*, or the murdering meth-cooker Walter White on *Breaking Bad*”, the main character on *Mad Men* “seems almost moral in contrast” and “the least compelling from this cast of characters” (Mittell, 2010). Lastly, he explicitly references the “slow pace and cool tone” of the show to explain his reaction (Mittell, 2010).

Obviously, Mittell (2010) was not the first to challenge the cultural legitimacy of a high-status prime-time cable dramas. Nonetheless, in a blog post more than a year after 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' was first available online, Mittell (2011) reports that the essay was cut from the edited collection. He reports that the editors provide only vague reasons for their decision citing the essay's inappropriate “tone” and its failure to be “pro-*Mad Men*” (Mittell, 2011). Yet, unlike critics' negative reviews which reject the prestige associated with a particular text, in the section below, I argue that 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' (2010) is problematic in a scholarly context as it attempts to question the cultural capital of elite audiences engaging with high-status prime-time cable dramas.

Responses to Mittell and challenging cultural capital in the post-network era

Scholars began questioning the value of 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' (2010) immediately. Some felt that Mittell had not watched enough of the series to justify his opinion (Petersen, 2010). Kociemba (2010), for example, comments, “I feel that we have an obligation to write about the experience of the entire work of art, not just its first act”. Others took exception to the way Mittell (2010) engages with the text. As McNutt (2010) comments, “. . . I can’t help but think how bizarre it must be to watch a season of television, having already formed various arguments against its first two episodes, for the purpose of writing an article about why you

dislike it". In addition, some felt the essay was more about its author than about *Mad Men* (Busse, 2010). Most significantly, Bogost (2010) argues the essay contributes nothing to academic discourse while being both uncritical and theoretically problematic. Of the essay's value as scholarship, he writes, "the only thing that disappoints me about Jason's essay is that I didn't learn anything new about *Mad Me*" (Bogost, 2010). He also asserts that the essay lacks a critical edge. After claiming to be "disappointed that Mittell wasn't able to really rip it to *Mad Men*", Bogost (2010) complains that the essay fails to explain "why the show is bad or dangerous or unrefined or incomplete or any of the other things that it's praised for not being".⁶

In countering the common claim that television has qualitatively improved in recent years, Newman and Levine (2012) argue that the medium is now bifurcated. Post-network niche-targeted content is "good" television because of its association with the active, masculine viewing experiences of elite audiences while other content is "bad" television because of its association with the passive, feminized viewing experiences of mass audiences during the network era. In this stratified cultural context, being anti-*Mad Men* takes on added significance because in the process of explaining his failure to appreciate the distinctive features of this particular high-status prime-time cable drama, Mittell (2010) challenges the cultural capital of individuals who find the show (and presumably other consecrated content) appealing by positioning the text and its audience alongside the devalued content and passive experiences of the network era.

Of the narrative complexity that makes high-status prime-time cable dramas class-appropriate for elite audiences, Mittell (2010) claims that *Mad Men* has none. He writes, "The romance plots are the stuff of fairly conventional television melodrama, upgraded into the more culturally validated realm of contemporary quality television" (Mittell, 2010). Furthermore, *Mad Men* is compared to the most historically devalued of television genres – the soap opera. In particular, Mittell (2010) asserts that the focus on romantic relationships is similar to the prime-time soap *Peyton Place*. However, after noting the similarities between the two programs, he adds:

While sensational in the 1960s, *Peyton Place* comes across as methodical and dry to today's viewers, and to me it feels quite similar to *Mad Men*. The latter replaces the former's high melodrama staging and score with a more subdued style and tone, but the actual situations and stakes feel similar – and in neither case does the romantic geometry make for particularly compelling drama. (Mittell, 2010)

Here, Mittell (2010) not only compares a culturally legitimated post-network drama to the most feminized network-era content, he also proclaims the soap opera to be more artistically innovative.

⁶ This critique, in the theoretical sense, is largely a reaction against the notion of the Aca-Fan made popular by Hills (2002) and Henry Jenkins who authors the prominent blog 'Confessions of an Aca-Fan'. In contrast, Bogost (2010) advises, "Those of us who make an enviable living being champions of media, particularly popular media, must also remain dissatisfied with them". As a consequence, any individual scholar's feelings about any text are ultimately intellectually irrelevant.

Regarding the intertextuality of high-status prime-time cable dramas that appeals to elite audience's sense of intellectual superiority, Mittell (2010) expresses frustration with "the show's initial winking, heavy-handed use of period details". Specifically, he finds the use of period-specific historical knowledge to be problematic:

... especially in the pilot, the show seemed content to pat us on the back for knowing more than the characters in terms of the health impact of cigarettes, gender norms, and the future career path of Dick Nixon. In these moments, the commentary seems to be little more than condescension toward the 1960s characters, as we are meant to feel superior to them at a fairly obvious level ... (Mittell, 2010)

However, Mittell's (2010) critique extends well beyond the text itself. In fact, he claims that positive reactions to *Mad Men's* historical intertextuality only emerge in the context of passive viewing. He writes, "Perhaps this reading position is only possible with a tactic of emotional detachment that foregrounds the temporal gap, regarding it as a world clearly unlike our own and thus accepting the era's politics as simply part of the decor" (Mittell, 2010). According to Mittell (2010), it is only due to such passive viewing practices that audiences find the racism and misogyny of the show's characters unproblematic. He claims that "simply accepting the cultural politics as emotionally distant background forces you to swallow a lot of unpleasant behavior in how characters treat each other" (Mittell, 2010). The implicit assumption here is that if the show's fans were (capable of) actively engaging with the text, then, they would not find the text appealing.

Furthermore, Mittell (2010) calls into question the artistic integrity of *Mad Men's* showrunner and implies that fans are victims of the consumer culture depicted in the text. In attempting to explain the reasons for finding the characters so unpleasant, Weiner is explicitly blamed for "fueling the emotional gap that keeps me from warming to the show" (Mittell, 2010). Mittell (2010) writes, "While I know it's my own projection rather than any authentic access to authorial intent, I can't help but feel that *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner ultimately feels contempt toward Draper and the rest". In contrast, Mittell celebrates *Deadwood* by noting, "Al Swearingen might be a bastard, I always feel that creator David Milch loves the guy." In addition, he explicitly applies a pre-network-era theoretical understanding of mass audiences to this post-network drama's audience as the attempt to explain the appeal of *Mad Men's* distinctive visual style borrows heavily from Frankfurt school critical theory. Although Mittell (2010) doesn't believe "fans are being duped by the show's style" as "these are legitimate and heartfelt aesthetic pleasures, not the illusions of false consciousness", he nonetheless claims that "there is an incongruity inherent in embracing and emulating the stylistic sense of a series that regularly highlights the manipulations of marketing and the creation of consumerist consciousness". By failing to identify the text as crassly commercial and thus problematic, *Mad Men* fans are again linked to the audiences of the network era.

Conclusion

In the case of post-network television, the cultural legitimacy of prime-time cable dramas, like *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*, is only possible with the support of cultural elites who invest “the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return” (Newman & Levine, 2012: 7). As such, it is seemingly no longer appropriate to ask of elite audiences, as Bogost (2010) does, “But who cares, really, that two people have different if weirdly conflicting taste in television?” And, if the increasing cultural legitimacy of high-status prime-time cable dramas is dependent upon the belief in masculine, active, and artistic television (Newman & Levine, 2012), then 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' (2010) is problematic precisely because it proclaims such a text to be feminine, lacking artistic merit, and only capable of appealing to intellectually disengaged audiences. From this perspective, the negative reactions of media scholars are unsurprising. The editors of *Mad Men*, *Mad World*, however, were not consulted for this research. As such, the exact reasons for excluding 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' remain unknown. Furthermore, whether or not one believes, as argued here, that Mittell was punished for invoking a rhetorical strategy that calls into question the prestige associated with niche-targeted post-network content is largely besides the point.

Although, as Mittell (2011) observes, the troubled publication history of 'On Disliking *Mad Men*' will have little effect on his career, the purpose of this analysis, in my opinion, is to demonstrate the larger post-network possibility that the presumed failure to appreciate culturally legitimated content can be linked to negative real-world consequences. The contrast between the findings of this research and Lamont's (1992) observation that television is a devalued leisure activity among upper-middle-class American men, for example, is stark. If, watching television was once outside the realm of middle-class appropriate behavior because of its association with a lack of intelligence and intellectual curiosity (Lamont, 1992: 98), then, perhaps, the negative scholarly reactions to Mittell's (2010) essay are indicative of elite audiences policing the newly formed symbolic boundaries that surround highbrow post-network drama. To expand on this analysis, future research should consider the social consequences made possible by the symbolic boundaries of post-network television to explore the degree to which America's last remaining form of mass culture has become an emerging site of cultural inequality.

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