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Watching “bad” television: Ironic consumption, camp, and guilty pleasures



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ABSTRACT

This research examines how people watch “bad” television—television programs that the viewers themselves label as “trash,” “stupid,” and “awful.” Such viewers experience a normative contradiction; while they have created or embraced a symbolic boundary between “good” and “bad” television, they find themselves transgressing that boundary by consuming and, in some cases, enjoying the shows that they condemn. By conducting 40 in-depth interviews, this research identifies the strategies used by television viewers to deal with this normative contradiction. Beyond “traditional viewing,” we show how viewers employ “ironic consumption,” a “camp sensibility,” and frame their viewing as a “guilty pleasure” to consume “bad” television.

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1. Introduction

How do people watch television that they *themselves* label as “trash,” “terrible,” “awful,” or “dreadful”? In other words, how do people consume television shows that they make negative esthetic *and* moral judgments about? How are persons able to watch shows that they react to by saying: “This is horrible. I can’t believe I am watching this [*Jersey Shore*],” or, “I know it’s not good for me. It’s like

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junk food! It's terrible, terrible; it's frivolity [*The Hills*]”? Persons who consume “bad” television¹ believe these shows as esthetically inferior, at times even morally objectionable, and yet for some reason they find themselves in front of their television sets, and now computer screens, perhaps in a state of shocked fascination or ridiculing contempt, unable to turn away. Day-time talk shows, made-for-TV movies, contemporary reality TV, soap-operas and other fare are watched even though (and at times, expressly because) they are seen to be so “bad.” How are persons able to both condemn and consume television in this manner?

In research on media consumption, the practice of consuming the products of popular culture that viewers themselves label as “bad” typically falls under the label of “ironic consumption.” While the concept of irony and ironic consumption has been used extensively in English studies, cultural studies, and the social sciences (e.g., Booth, 1974; Fish, 1983; Sontag, 1999[1964]; Ang, 1985; Gitlin, 1989; Klein, 2000; Thompson, 2000), there is a surprising lack of research on the actual people who consume culture ironically. Most scholars have been content to study the objects of popular culture and then make conjectures about how they are consumed ironically. We think it is better to focus on how viewers consume cultural products that they label as “bad.” We therefore performed forty semi-structured interviews to understand how television viewers, specifically highly educated viewers with considerable levels of cultural capital, consume “bad” television.

Contributing to the ongoing Bourdieusian debates, we follow the lead of Holt (1997, 1998). We see Holt as both working with and developing Bourdieu's research program by claiming that consumers find distinction not only through the consumption of specific forms of culture, but also find distinction in *how* these products are consumed. Advancing this Holtian framework, we claim that “bad” television is consumed in such a way that retains the viewers' symbolic boundaries between “good” and “bad” television. Such viewers maintain these boundaries, and the cultured status that goes with them, not through abstaining from cultural objects that are considered lowbrow, but instead by watching them ironically, with a camp sensibility, or as a guilty pleasure.

In this research we not only describe how viewers maintain their symbolic categorization of “trashy” television even as they consume it, but we also extend the theoretical framework of “ironic consumption.” In this existing framework, ironic consumers simply watch “trashy” television shows to make fun of and feel superior to them and their “traditional” viewers. We show how there is, in fact, a variety of ways that viewers consume “bad” television, each viewing style possessing its own character and purpose. We describe how these different styles allow viewers to consume “bad” cultural objects without letting go of their symbolic boundaries between “good” and “bad” television. Even though these viewers consume cultural objects they consider to be “bad,” they are not contaminated by them.

We do not focus on what causes people to watch bad television; we take it as a given that people will watch a variety of shows for a variety of reasons and that some viewers may come to characterize some of the shows they watch as “trashy,” “stupid,” or with some other pejorative label. We emphasize instead how people who consume “bad” television find themselves in a state of *normative contradiction*; they condemn the television shows they watch, yet find themselves still consuming these shows. These consumers of “bad” television accept a symbolic boundary between acceptable and unacceptable television, but also *transgress* that boundary by consuming television that they themselves label in negative terms. We show *how* viewers deal with this contradiction in diverse ways.

In response to their transgression of their symbolic boundaries, viewers employ different modes of consuming “bad” television, or what we call *viewing styles*.² Much like how Friedman (2012) uses “styles of comedic appreciation” to understand class-based reception of comedy in Britain, our “viewing styles” offer insight into how consumers maintain distinction while consuming “bad” culture. The main styles of viewing “bad” television that we observe in our interviewees are ironic

¹ It should be clear that for the rest of the paper when we talk about “bad” television we are referring to the esthetic and moral judgments of the viewers themselves and not any sort of objective evaluation of these shows.

² As we theorize it, a *viewing style* is not a description of particular type of viewer, but rather the manner in which a viewer consumes the cultural object. A single viewer is able to react to “bad” TV using different viewing styles and transition seamlessly between them.

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