

Thompson, E., & Mittell, J. (2013). Introduction: An owner's manual for television. In E. Thompson, & J. Mittell (Eds.), *How to watch television*, (pp. 1-9). New York, NY: NYU Press.

Synopsis

The authors discussed what good criticism is and how the definition of watching television is changing. In current society, a common way to criticize television, and other medias in general, is through the “thumbs up/down” model, which reduces criticism to a value judgment. They argued that instead, good criticism should broaden audiences’ experience and understanding of a text. Most of television criticism can be divided into five categories: TV form, TV representation, TV politics, TV industry, TV practices. Other important elements include reception of how it is received, history and the changes over time, and technological changes. The authors argued that television studies is a field that mixes examining television as a specific medium and examining television’s broader cultural context and issues. The authors argued that although the act of watching television has changed over time, television is still an important cultural practice, and now includes a variety of cultural forms. They noted that although watching television seems like a simple act, the act of watching and evaluating is different for everyone because television content is complicated and is viewed in different contexts.

Key Concepts

- **Thumbs up/down:** A “model reduces criticism to a simple physical gesture... the “thumbs” metric provided a jumping off point for discussion, and guaranteed that the two had something concrete to agree or disagree about with a reliable and consistent structure for each review” (p. 2).
- **Textual analysis:** “To connect the program to its broader contexts, and make an argument about the text’s cultural significance, thus providing a model for how you can watch television with a critical eye—and write your own works of television criticism” (p. 4).
- **Criticism:** “To provide insight into a text, not to proclaim a singular ‘correct’ interpretation” (p. 6). Good criticism, “applies a model of thinking to a text in order to expand our understanding and experience of it” (p. 1).

Key Quotes

- “Criticism is not the same as evaluation. You don’t have to like (or dislike) a particular television program to think and write critically about it” (p. 7).
- “Nobody watches the same TV. We watch a wide variety of programs, and even in those cases when we watch the same programs, we often watch them in vastly different contexts. Television is still a mass medium experienced by millions, but the specific experience of watching television is far from universal” (p. 7).
- “Much of television scholarship is focused on understanding the industrial, regulatory, and reception contexts of the medium more than critical analyses of specific programs... but we believe that there is a crucial role for television scholars to use our expertise about the medium’s history, aesthetics, structures, and cultural importance” (p. 4).

Essential Question

- Who should have the power to critique and evaluate television shows and other media?