

INTRODUCTION

Why *Ally*?

Why read a book about a television series that is no longer being aired? Pop culture, by its very nature, moves on to the next hot item, feeding the hunger for the new. But eventually some television series become so old that they are “new” again and can be reclaimed as “classic,” gaining a second life as retro-hip artifacts replayed on TV Land¹ or as nostalgic bulletins from simpler times for a more harried society (the widespread syndication of *The Andy Griffith Show*, for instance). Occasionally some shows catch fire with a cult audience that recirculates and repurposes the original text (creating fan fiction romances for *The X-Files*’ Scully and Mulder or analyzing *Twin Peaks* in the magazine *Wrapped in Plastic*, for instance) and thus remain current in the everyday lives of their devoted fans.² Between these two points in time, between the current and the antique, television texts either become fodder for filling twenty-four-hour cable programming grids or disappear.

These texts disappear from academia as well. The study of popular television tends to follow the practice of popular culture, focusing on the latest fad or on historical artifacts. Both of these research pursuits are important. Academics need to act at the moment, to take advantage of the wealth of data available when a pop culture phenomenon occurs, and we need to do the difficult work of reclaiming the appeal of popular culture from the dust of history. But, although the temptation is strong, we need not mimic the dynamic of pop culture when we study it. In a widely circulated email guide to publishing, an editor of a leading academic media journal recently asserted that essays about contemporary media are more “attractive” when

they treat a "hot" topic: "there was a moment when work on *Ally McBeal* was really hot, but now the show is canceled and that moment is over."³ Pop culture necessarily is of the "moment," but the study of popular culture need not be.⁴

When academics valorize television because of its currency, we propagate one of the basic societal positions concerning popular media: they are evanescent and therefore not worthy of prolonged, serious attention. Imagine my opening question being asked about other media: Why read a book about a play that is not currently produced? Or about poems published in a magazine? Keeping television shows around makes economic sense (they may find a new market through syndication), but in terms of their intrinsic value, only a rare few critically acclaimed series "deserve" to be treated as something other than disposable. Here I argue something more than a simple "we need to claim more television shows as classics." We should recognize that our own emphasis on the currency of television treats the medium as being worthy of study *because* of its contemporary popularity (for instance, the rise of *Buffy* studies in the wake of that show's cult following). Without current popularity—or without reasserting its historical value as a beloved commodity—scholars of television seem to believe there is little reason to explore a television show. Complexity of narrative or the beauty of construction can justify critical consideration of a novel or a film, but when a television show is no longer *au courant*, these considerations matter little. As long as my opening question rings true, we are accepting the notion that television is basically bad and can only be reclaimed academically when it is directly, socially relevant.

The burgeoning field of popular television studies has certainly done much to take television off the garbage heap of culture, asserting that texts from *Alias* to *Dragon Ball Z* can produce interesting insights. And yet the way that television studies tends to approach series still contains hints of the assumption of the medium's inferiority. The dominant mode of television analysis treats programs as an instructive nexus of more important discourses, a highly public site of struggle where social contestation occurs over what it means to be a woman or a man, a homosexual or a heterosexual. A popular television series provides a particular configuration of elements (themes, characters, buzzwords) that activates and tweaks the larger social discourse in vivid ways. Television shows are better at energizing one side or another of a broader debate than they are at subtly advancing their own specific arguments. The construction of the program itself is therefore less important than the way television (as arguably the most widely consumed

medium of our time) establishes a space where the culture can consider vital issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.⁵ A television show can voice these concerns elegantly or awkwardly, but that is of less concern to most television scholars.

In fact, we assume that the power of the television text to promote water cooler discussion and living room arguments may be because of its somewhat ramshackle construction. We conceptualize the television text itself as full of contradictions because popular culture raises multiple ideological possibilities in its greedy attempt to give pleasure to a large, diverse audience. The academic examining a television program should pay as much or more attention to the "absences" in the text as he or she does to what the text says, because the power of ideology relies heavily on what it leaves unsaid. Such texts encourage audiences to integrate television programs into their daily lives, and scholars justify their interest in a show in terms of this possibility for active political engagement, as opposed to grounding their arguments in analyses of the show's elegant architecture.

A television program, however, is more than a "site" or a "space" in which more important cultural discourses play. The formal properties of the program—the narration, the style—powerfully shape those discourses. In our zeal to explain the social power of television, we have neglected to give much specific consideration to the aesthetic and narrative construction of television at anything other than the broadest levels. By examining television narrative patterns in genres (as in the important work of Tania Modleski, Robert C. Allen, Jeremy Butler, and E. Ann Kaplan)⁶ or by discussing the overall "flow" of television itself, we unintentionally echoed the message of the larger culture: television has great social importance, but specific programs are worthy of consideration only if they tell us something about society as a whole.⁷

And so the accepted way to examine *Ally McBeal* would be to look at, for instance, what the controversy about Calista Flockhart's thin body has to say about anorexia and issues of women's bodies,⁸ or to situate the show as a postfeminist icon, or to discuss how *Ally* uses black characters as emblems of sexuality, or to study how Robert Downey's very public drug problems created a dialogue about addiction and recovery.⁹ The book you hold in your hands is not that book, although all these issues are interesting and I touch on each one briefly.¹⁰ By examining the show's narrative and formal construction, I am intentionally downplaying the questions that current television studies tends to emphasize, questions that the show raises in passing without focusing on them.¹¹

In part this academic emphasis on the social importance of television has to do with the institutional history of television studies, which emerged as an outgrowth of film studies. Film studies began as a close consideration of the aesthetics of the text, and of course when television studies tried to distinguish itself from its parent discipline, it did so by carving out a very different approach.¹² Unlike film studies, which traditionally was content to deal with the text alone, TV studies did not shy away from what actual audiences did with television texts; instead, it emphasized the complexities of audience interactions around television shows. Looking to justify the study of what was broadly considered trashy, television studies proved that images of Madonna and Roseanne were important because of the ideological complexity they summoned. Important early works of television criticism made the split with older criticism explicit. John Fiske explicitly defines cultural studies as a “political” framework in polar opposition to the study of culture’s “aesthetic” products.¹³ Television studies and cultural studies became linked, rising at the same time with similar concerns and approaches. As John Caldwell notes, the conjoining of cultural studies and television meant that “from a methodological perspective the very television program itself—its visual and aural presence—has been written out of history.”¹⁴

Because of the different institutional histories of film and television studies, it is acceptable to do a book-length aesthetic analysis of a film, but to analyze a television series on primarily aesthetic and narrative terms is a radical notion. There are a few scattered examples of pioneering essays that focus specifically on TV aesthetics,¹⁵ but single-author book-length academic works on individual television shows are rare. Television shows receive chapters in single-author books (e.g., Janet Staiger’s *Blockbuster TV*),¹⁶ and they are increasingly becoming the subject of anthologies by multiple authors using a variety of perspectives (dealing with recent “hot” series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Simpsons*, *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, and *The X-Files*).¹⁷ There are critically savvy single-author works on *The Avengers*, *The Untouchables*, and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, television series from long ago.¹⁸ But most single-author works on contemporary shows are little more than glorified guides, leading the reader through the show episode by episode instead of providing a consistent focus on the overall construction of the series.¹⁹

The most important academic book on a single television series by an individual author is Julie D’Acci’s *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*.²⁰ While I greatly admire D’Acci’s approach, her simultaneous attention to the text, its production, and its reception sends an

unwritten message that the text itself is not complicated or worthy enough to sustain critical attention. We now can study individual television programs in intensive, sustained fashion; we should be able to do so without justifying our efforts in terms of the show’s popularity, its ideological reach, its industrial strategies, or its audience interaction. Just because TV studies came of age in a certain institutional context does not mean that the field needs to remain defined by its origin. Television studies and cultural studies are not necessarily synonymous. We have already accommodated a broad range of historical and economic work; it is time to make room for readings grounded in aesthetic and narrative considerations. Part of the reason for writing this book is to assert that television is too important to read quickly past the text to the larger social forces without examining its aesthetic construction. A series can deserve close attention on its own terms, as a well-constructed, narratively complex, stylistically rich text.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating that all of television studies deal with aesthetic or narrative readings of texts. I am not championing an “Everything is aesthetic” mantra as a replacement for the slogan “Everything is political” (though obviously both statements are true). But by focusing on innovative devices and their narrative/aesthetic functions, I wish to demonstrate how to unpack the complicated, elegant, artful construction of a single television series as it both makes explicitly political arguments and creates beautiful television.

To assert the importance of aesthetic/narrative television criticism is not a simple return to our origins in film studies.²¹ Instead, within the micro-politics of academia, treating television as if it deserves close aesthetic/narrative consideration is a way to fight back against the broader social awareness of television as a bad object. As Henry Jenkins has said, “To map the aesthetics of an otherwise neglected form, then, constitutes a political act, helping to question the naturalness of the aesthetic norms separating high and low culture.”²² To study popular aesthetics and narration in this context, therefore, is not a return to retrograde practices; it is an attempt to assert the value of a degraded form in a way that the dominant (and undeniably rich) mode of cultural analysis simply cannot.

Television studies tends to lean toward the lowbrow, with occasional forays into highbrow fare (such as John R. Cook’s book *Dennis Potter*).²³ Low cultural forms help cultural studies make its points more clearly. Lowbrow television tends to make its assertions more aggressively, and so criticism can take advantage of the energy it provides. Because many lowbrow texts are popular, this allows the critic to read through them to get at the widely held beliefs that a particular text condenses. And so television/cultural

studies makes a kind of challenge to the highbrow/lowbrow distinction: it argues that lowbrow works, like highbrow works, are worthy of critical attention, but it tends to do so by examining lowbrow television for what it can tell us about society.

Our academic discussions frequently leave out the middlebrow, the vast number of popular culture forms between the high and the low. There is a hipness about academic study of works that deal in "trash," and there is relatively little hipness in examining television aimed at the great middle. Beginning with Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and Dwight Macdonald's "Masscult and Midcult,"²⁴ criticism has denigrated the whole notion of the middlebrow as being fatally compromised: not energetic enough to be lowbrow and not complicated enough to be "art."²⁵ Part of the reason I have chosen *Ally McBeal* for this book-length study is because it is so squarely a middlebrow text, not aspiring to the rarefied heights of *The Singing Detective* but not exactly fighting zombies either. Just as we need to overcome our prejudice toward popular culture as emphasizing the current, we need to deal with our tendency to reduce popular culture to hipness.²⁶ As television studies grows, we should increasingly deal with the vast expanse of texts that are "squarer" than *The Simpsons* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* but that are not PBS fare either. We have done much to reclaim the lowbrow as a worthy object of study. In this book I argue that we need to begin a similar reclamation of explicitly middlebrow works as a way to combat the notion of television as bad object.

One traditional way to examine middlebrow to high culture works is to justify their status by pointing to their author.²⁷ This would certainly be one way to handle *Ally McBeal*, situating it in terms of television auteur David E. Kelley's work on *L.A. Law*, *Picket Fences*, *Chicago Hope*, *The Practice*, and *Boston Public*, among others.²⁸ On the one hand, I want to recognize the extraordinary extent to which *Ally McBeal* is the highly personal product of one creative mind. The easiest job in Hollywood is being on David Kelley's writing staff, so the joke goes. This is especially true for *Ally McBeal*. Although Kelley does much of the writing for his other series,²⁹ he seemed especially protective of *Ally* and was much less likely to farm out scripts to other writers. In a medium that is necessarily collaborative, *Ally* is as close as we will probably ever get to a primetime series as personal expression.³⁰ Out of 111 episodes, Kelley wrote an astonishing 102 of them by himself (sharing story credit on 10). He cowrote 8 others, leaving only one episode out of five seasons for which Kelley did not receive screen credit.

In such a work, it is difficult to avoid dealing with authorship. Without

Kelley having acquired status as a television hitmaker, it is hard to imagine how *Ally* could exist. By 1997 Fox TV had established itself as a viable fourth network on the strength of ribald and outrageous comedies, such as *In Living Color*, *Married with Children*, and *The Simpsons*, but it was not a brand widely associated with quality hour-long television (with the exception of the cult hit *The X-Files*, Fox's hour-long hits leaned toward the sudsy, such as *Beverly Hills 90210*). Luring an established producer of quality (more about this term later), Fox gave Kelley the freedom to create an intensely personal show that dealt frankly with sexuality, something that might be more difficult on the established networks.³¹ *Ally's* examination of sex and the workplace could only be possible at a moment when broadcast standards about explicit language were loosening. *Ally McBeal* fit in Fox's lineup as a comedy that stretched the limits of sexual expression on television,³² but it also distinguished itself as the first hour-long nonvariety comedy show on primetime (although, with its dramatic elements, it is more accurately described as a "dramedy").³³ *Ally McBeal* is made possible by a nexus of forces: Fox's desire to gain status, the loosening of broadcast standards on sexually explicit talk, and Kelley's established track record as an auteur.³⁴ In this book I do not focus primarily on Kelley's auteur status, the traditional method of justifying a work as art.³⁵ This is a book about the text of *Ally McBeal*, not about Kelley's entire oeuvre. Although Kelley tends to circle around certain key topics (sexuality, eccentricity), I do not spend much time tracing these themes across his work. Nor does this book situate the show among Fox's industrial practices.³⁶ Although both of these approaches would produce interesting insights, my focus on the text's artistic construction is aimed at combating one of our basic understandings of television.

The public discourse about television reiterates certain themes so frequently that they have become "truths" that no longer need to be established: TV causes violence, shortens attention spans, reinforces stereotypes, and appeals to the lowest common denominator. We almost never hear someone express my most common reaction to television today, that much of it is drop-dead gorgeous. American primetime television today presents an embarrassment of riches.³⁷ When I began writing this book in 2002, I could watch within a given week *The Simpsons*, *The Sopranos*, *Oz*, *ER*, *The Practice*, *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The X-Files*, *King of the Hill*, *Felicity*, *The West Wing*, and *Alias*, all complicated and innovative texts. Certainly there is much unartfully made television, but this is true of any medium ("Ninety percent of everything is crap," says

the old adage). Television is simply too diverse to have the cultural cachet of theater or the novel,³⁸ and so it becomes easy for even academics to reduce television to a 500-channel extension of *The Jerry Springer Show*, allowing us to condemn the medium as a whole (a faculty member in my department has a bumper sticker on her office door that urges people, "Kill Your Television," whereas a "Burn Your Theater" sticker would be unthinkable). Because the medium has long been established as a bad object, we seem unable to see television for its beauty.³⁹

A publisher once told me, "The only word you can't say in academia today, the only *obscene* word, is beauty."⁴⁰ The television industry itself avoids the term, preferring instead to focus on "quality," a word with different meanings in different contexts.⁴¹ In Europe, "quality" has been used in official policy documents to provide an elusive, highly debated description of a desired type of programming.⁴² In America the notion of "quality television" has served as a targeted marketing strategy. Jane Feuer has noted the link between "quality" television and the "quality" (i.e., desirability) of the audience it delivers (a young, more urban, wealthier consumer for the sponsors).⁴³ Feuer says:

The quality audience is permitted to enjoy a form of television which is seen as more literate, more stylistically complex, and more psychologically "deep" than ordinary TV fare. The quality audience gets to separate itself from the mass audience and can watch TV without guilt, and without realising that the double edged discourse they are getting is also ordinary TV.⁴⁴

By providing expensively produced, high-profile programming called "loss leaders," networks hoped to lure people to their television sets to see commercials for their other programming, at times accepting a potential loss in revenue in order to create interest for their less expensively produced shows. Such quality programming becomes even more crucial in a moment of crisis in which network broadcasters are trying to attract viewers who have departed to watch cable fare.⁴⁵

Feuer also reminds us that the overt politics of American quality television leans toward the left: "Quality TV is liberal TV."⁴⁶ This tendency to parade more tolerant values in front of the American public often leads quality television to a certain quirkiness of characters, and so we find communities like Cicely, Alaska (*Northern Exposure*), and Twin Peaks.⁴⁷ Another characteristic that distinguishes much quality television from the

mundane is its tendency to refer to other television shows. Feuer asserts, "Intertextuality and self-reflexivity operate both as the normative way of creating new programmes *and* as a way of distinguishing the 'quality' from the everyday product."⁴⁸ Winking references congratulate viewers on their tele-literacy, and such television often flatters its viewers for recognizing the quality of its construction. And so, as John Caldwell notes, "quality" refers to both narrative and visual principles: "the industry legitimizes itself as much by overproducing and complicating narrative as it does by overproducing and complicating high-production values."⁴⁹

If I want to argue that a "quality" television series can sustain prolonged aesthetic scrutiny, why choose *Ally McBeal*? Why not make the argument about well-crafted television using something like the current critical darling *The Sopranos*, which most people could instantly agree is "art"? Or, if you're so in love with David Kelley's work, my friends have asked, why not do one of his more "serious" shows like *The Practice*? One of the reasons I have chosen *Ally McBeal* to make the larger argument is *because* it does not instantly leap to mind as "quality television," although it has won a number of awards.⁵⁰ If I can show the complexities and elegant narrative technique of a sometimes "silly" show like *Ally*, it becomes easy to argue for the aesthetics of "weightier" shows.⁵¹

Another reason for exploring *Ally's* aesthetics is because of the way the show has expanded the formal and narrative devices of the medium. *The Sopranos* and *The Practice* depend on solid writing, acting, and directing, but they do not push the boundaries of television style and expressivity. *Ally McBeal*, however, has changed the way special effects and music can be used on television, and my understanding of aesthetics can shed light on how this happens.

In my discussion of "aesthetics" in the first section of the book, I rely on a rich set of theoretical assumptions articulated by the Russian Formalists of the 1920s.⁵² The Formalists were concerned with understanding how artworks use various "devices" to achieve particular "functions." A "device" can be any of a set of historical strategies available to a mediamaker: choices about camera setups, character qualities, dialogue, editing, and so on. A "function" is the desired effect on the audience member, an attempt to attain certain narrative (crucial story information), emotional (how we should feel about the story), or aesthetic goals. Once mediamakers decide to try to accomplish a certain function, they consider what devices would be best to accomplish it. For instance, if a mediamaker wants to give us insight into a character's memory, he or she can do so with a variety of devices. One

can have the character reminisce aloud about old times, or show us a flashback, or let us hear a voiceover, and so different devices can accomplish the same basic function. Conversely, the same device can perform different functions; for instance, voiceover can be used to convey a character's subjective perspective, or it can be used to provide "voice of God" commentary. Available technology, economic constraints, and historical convention establish what aesthetic devices are available to mediamakers to accomplish their storytelling goals at any given moment. An innovative text can open up new options for later mediamakers, in the way that (for instance) *The Shining's* use of the Steadicam paved the way for *ER's* mobile camera.

One important job of the aesthetic critic operating within a Formalist framework, then, is to articulate the links between functions and devices. In chapters 1 and 2 of this book, I lay out the multiple functions served by music and special effects in *Ally McBeal*. I assert that *Ally's* innovative aesthetic strategies have changed the options that primetime television has available to convey subjective experience, to tell jokes, and to comment on action. It is not enough to enumerate the different functions that devices serve in a text, however, because devices are not independent for the Formalist. An artwork combines and coordinates devices to create a distinctive *system*, to build a world that operates under certain principles. Once I have discussed the basic functions served by music and special effects in *Ally*, I explore how the show uses these devices together to accomplish more complicated purposes. I examine these formal choices as a system that encourages certain attitudes toward the characters and values presented by the show. Because devices work in a system, they make richer meanings possible.

I start the book with two chapters of close consideration of these overtly *formal* strategies (the "art" of *Ally*) but then turn to an examination of the distinctive *narrative* tactics of the show. Music and special effects serve multiple functions (including some narrative ones), but *Ally's* most complex narrative strategies have to do with how it constructs and elaborates its network of characters. The show uses its characters to construct an elaborate political debate, and television studies needs to develop tools for elaborating how this debate progresses over time. The last part of the book deals with laying out the "argument" of *Ally McBeal*.

Key here is an understanding of *Ally* as serial television, as a show that tells a continuing narrative over its entire run. Television has long understood the power of serial narrative to attract and maintain a loyal audience, but for most of its history, television used serial strategies only to gain a

daytime audience for soap operas. Primetime audiences, it was assumed, would not devote the time required to get to know serial characters and to understand a long-running plot, and so primetime series tended to be nonserial so that audiences could start watching them at any point without having to catch up. After the popular success of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and the popular and critical hit *Hill Street Blues*, primetime recognized that the serial form provided a strong impetus for viewer loyalty to its quality shows, and so serial narrative became a hallmark of quality television.⁵³ Even sitcoms such as *Roseanne* and *Friends* began to integrate serial plotlines (will Ross and Rachel end up together?) into their episode-oriented form.⁵⁴ The increasing number of serial shows on television emphasizes the question of how a serial narrative unfolds in primetime.

Television studies has yet to wrangle in detail with this topic,⁵⁵ and so the last several chapters of the book demonstrate how we might approach these issues. How does *Ally* take advantage of the serial's possibilities for character growth without fundamentally undoing the basic setup of character relations? How does the show use an ensemble cast, a set of series regulars, and guest stars to achieve different narrative payoffs? I do not systematically lay out all possible narrative strategies for primetime serial narrative. Instead, I show how *Ally McBeal* finds its own balance among the various narrative pressures of long-term storytelling. Each series navigates these concerns in different ways, discovering new possibilities for telling continuing stories. My hope is to encourage more scholars to investigate these serial narrative practices. If we do so for a wide range of primetime serials, we can come to a better understanding of the strategies available for these important shows. *Beautiful TV* is at the same time a book specifically about *Ally McBeal* and also about how serial narrative can proceed in primetime.

To investigate this serial construction, television studies must be willing to look at such series in their entirety. Here is another argument for television studies to examine series that are no longer current. If we only discuss a show while it is ongoing and hot, we can only discuss the work in part. A serial television show can be looked at before it completes,⁵⁶ but we need to recognize that this prevents us from examining the overall arc of the show. We justify our middle-of-the-run publishing partly in terms of expedience; after all, a publication deadline is a publication deadline. But also implicit in our acceptance that it is no big deal if we do not examine the full television text is (once again) the understanding of television as being narratively simple. Certainly a snapshot approach makes considerable

sense for nonserial television, since story lines resolve entirely at the end of the episode and the narrative mechanisms do not vary much over the course of the run (except for changes in cast, writers, etc.). I too have done work on single seasons and individual episodes of television, and I believe that such an approach can provide insight into the show as a whole.⁵⁷ But unquestioned acceptance of a snapshot approach to a serial admits that the overall course of the narrative has little to say that cannot be found in examining particular episodes.⁵⁸ We need to begin a tradition of analyzing the whole of a serial television text.

Admittedly, this is not easy (and I can attest to this as someone who has done close analysis of five seasons of a series). The formal and narrative tools developed to discuss a 90-minute feature film need to be adapted to look at a 111-hour narrative such as *Ally McBeal*, and this book is an attempt to extend those tools usefully to serial narrative. In part my justification for publishing a book on a primetime series after it is over is to argue that only then we discover certain meanings. I argue that *Ally McBeal* engaged in a long-running public dialogue about certain key concerns: what it means to be a woman or a man in the modern workplace; what place romance has in the therapeutic understanding of relationships; the value of eccentricity and how much oddity we as a society should tolerate; and what utility fantasy has in the pragmatic world. An individual episode of *Ally* can seem to endorse one rhetorical stance on these issues, and a subsequent episode may take the exact opposite position. This is not to say that *Ally* is incoherent or merely full of "contradictions."⁵⁹ I assert that *Ally McBeal* creates a coherent, nuanced argument about its central issues, an argument that veers in one direction and then in the other before arriving at an overall conclusion, an argument that is only possible through serial form, an argument that we can examine best by viewing it in its entirety.

We assume that long-running television shows are going to go awry at some point. This recognizes the singular difficulties of maintaining quality and innovation while producing twenty-two episodes per year, but this is also a way that we can continue to sneer at television. We await the inevitable moment that a series "jumps the shark,"⁶⁰ and much fan discourse argues over when the series diverges from what fans perceive as the show's central pleasures. Many *Ally* fans cite the departure of Ally's lifelong love interest, Billy, as the moment when the series began its decline, although some people place the decline earlier.⁶¹ Clearly a show's fans have every right to police the central text, and I do not wish to engage in an argument over a definitive series apex or to position *Ally McBeal* as a flawlessly constructed text.

However, I assert that our academic tendency to focus on contradictions, in combination with our broadly held understanding of the inevitable decline of television series, blinds us to the possibilities of articulating the continuities of a series. We can thus miss the complexity of the serial argument such as *Ally*'s. Not every serial engages in such a long-running debate, but *Ally* apparently benefits from series creator David E. Kelley's experience as a lawyer to articulate a remarkable disputation over the show's central issues.⁶² This book takes this argument seriously.

And so a good part of the book is engaged with laying out this argument. In *Beautiful TV* I assert that *Ally McBeal*'s literal argument needs to be articulated because it requires full knowledge of the text to show the richness of the discussion. By presenting the argument as the series does, I demonstrate that a television series can create such a debate *on its own terms* in ways that are richer than much social criticism has done.

"Foul!" the discerning reader may cry. "I thought social criticism was exactly what this book was *not* going to do!" My understanding of narration and aesthetics is that the choices involved in making media shape the kinds of meanings that the text produces. I believe that formal choices such as music and special effects are not totally independent of what they are trying to convey. A mediamaker chooses a device to achieve a particular function, and often that function is explicitly argumentative. To ignore the fact that the text is explicitly making an argument about the place of romance in the modern work environment or the utility or liability of the concept of sexual harassment just because these debates are social/political is to limit unnecessarily the value of narrative and aesthetics. When a mediamaker chooses a device to convey an argument, that formal choice affects the way we perceive the argument. Narrative practice also uses political attitudes for its own purposes; introducing a character by having him or her say something sexist, for instance, is a good way to establish that character as the heavy. The last part of the book examines how formal decisions about how and when to voice political attitudes construct an argument that is richly imbued with the long-term emotions that serial television can muster. Considering the "art" of *Ally McBeal* is not incommensurate with an exploration of its "argument." Therefore, in my chapter on music, for example, I not only delineate the various narrative functions that *Ally*'s sound track performs but also discuss how these choices make it possible for the series to portray a particular kind of community. In the chapter on subjective devices (special effects, flashbacks, voiceover), my analysis begins with laying out the distinctive ways *Ally* uses these stylistic choices,

but I then argue that subjective access provided by these devices challenges our assumptions about the value of doubt and indecision.

Beautiful TV discusses these matters not because they are innately more important but because they are an overt focus of the show's argument. To neglect them would be to do violence to the series itself. I am not insisting on divorcing formal criticism from its social and cultural realm (and thus overcompensating for cultural studies' lack of attention to aesthetics). Instead I am asserting that aesthetic and narrative choices in television are a valuable, overlooked basis for analyzing television. Certainly such choices may underwrite or advocate certain kinds of social meanings (*Ally's* musical community, or the series' advocacy of eccentricity). An aesthetic analysis should not be justified solely on the basis of what it can tell us about real-world issues. Nor should a focus on narrative isolate us from discussing the show's overt commentary. *Beautiful TV* demonstrates the value of taking a television series seriously on its own terms, not using its setup as a springboard for discussing larger issues that the series voices in vivid but not especially articulate ways. This book treats television as capable of beautiful innovation in aesthetics and narrative and of nuanced debate on its explicitly framed central topics.

I am grateful to *Ally McBeal* because I have learned things from its very public debate. By following its narrative, I have considered political perspectives that I would not normally engage in, and it has caused me to question the underpinnings of some of my basic political stances. Like many well-meaning, card-carrying, left-leaning academics, my politics are what I call "cocktail party politics." I like hanging out in the hermetically sealed world of the left more than the hermetically sealed world of the right, and so I have adopted lefty politics partly through personal inclination and beliefs and partly through association. Of course I believe in tolerance and gender equality, and so does everyone in my social circle. It is very easy to do so at the abstract level of issues, and my sanctimonious politics will tend to remain unchallenged at my cocktail parties (and the same is true for the sanctimony of the right). There is plenty of discourse from the other side floating around, but I am unlikely and uninclined to listen to the wild posturings of Bill O'Reilly or Rush Limbaugh.

With *Ally*, however, we get a seemingly liberal stance toward the world, one that values tolerance, sexual openness, professional roles for women, and sensitivity for men. These characters would not seem particularly out of place at my cocktail parties. And yet the series places these well-meaning characters in very difficult circumstances, which make them blurt out the most outlandish political assertions, exactly the kind of things that would

be shocking to hear at a good liberal intellectual gathering. This debate asks us to do what the left rarely does—look at the trade-offs of our high moral stances and consider compromises in our positions. Such a discussion is made possible because it is cloaked in the form of overtly tolerant characters and because it is presented in an engaging narrative form. *Ally's* debate about sexuality and the workplace has provoked more consideration of the issues for me than most works of social criticism I have read. *Ally* asks me to reconsider some of the left's sacred beliefs, such as faith in the law's ability to change social attitudes, and so as a card-carrying lefty I squirm at some of the apparently conservative conclusions that this narrative maneuvers me toward. At the same time, I recognize how emotionally powerful, intellectually astute, and well constructed this argument is. Attention must be paid to such an argument.

Having said that *Ally* and company would fit in at my cocktail parties, I must also confess that I would never invite people like them (if they existed). *Ally* (Calista Flockhart) is a waifish, self-centered lawyer prone to hallucinations, unrealistic expectations, and internal and external expressions of doubt. In her eternal search for her romantic soulmate, she plows through a range of prospective suitors, including long-term lovers Greg Butters (Jesse L. Martin), Brian Selig (Tim Dutton), Victor Morrison (Jon Bon Jovi), and Larry Paul (Robert Downey Jr.). She similarly makes her way through a dizzying array of strange therapists, from snide Tracey Clark (Tracey Ullman) to smiley Harold Madison (Fred Willard). She works for Richard Fish (Greg Germann), an unrepentant capitalist who has a fetish for loose-hanging wattle flesh, and John Cage (Peter MacNicol), a powerhouse lawyer who needs numerous gimmicks to bolster his ego and to win court cases. *Ally's* confidantes include Elaine Vassal (Jane Krakowski), an oversexed secretary who loves being in the limelight, and her roommate, Renee Radick (Lisa Nicole Carson), a romantically cynical public defender. Her fellow attorneys at Cage and Fish include her former lover Billy Thomas (Gil Bellows) and his wife, Georgia (Courtney Thorne-Smith), who are both so straight-laced that the other characters comment on how boring they are. Joining the firm for most of the series are two vicious lawyers, frigid careerist Nelle Porter (Portia deRossa) and pampered diva Ling Woo (Lucy Liu). Other characters have briefer stays at the firm: Mark Albert (James LeGros), Coretta Lipp (Regina King), Jenny Shaw (Julianne Nicholson), Glenn Foy (James Marsden), Raymond Milbury (Josh Hopkins), Claire Otoms (Dame Edna Everage/Barry Humphries), Liza Bump (Christina Ricci), and Wilson Jade (Bobby Canavale).

I realized fairly early on that I adored the show while I abhorred each of

the major characters, and I recognized how rare that phenomenon is. How could a show bring me back week after week when I disliked its principal characters? This initial question led me to investigate the show, and it led me to emphasize the argument of *Ally McBeal*. I kept coming back (in part) because I was enjoying the give-and-take of the debate about important issues regarding gender, romance, and work. I want to highlight the complexity of this issue-oriented debate as it is waged through these frequently obnoxious characters.

Which brings me to the issue of Ally-hating, a fairly widespread phenomenon.⁶³ “How can you possibly tolerate doing a whole book on *that* show?” friends have asked. “I can’t stand to look at her for five minutes.” The reaction to Ally can be visceral and immediate, which for many has to do both with Calista Flockhart’s thin body and Ally’s tendency to whine about her pampered life. My romantic partner had exactly the same reaction to *Ally* and avoided it for several seasons. As I kept watching, she eventually came to see *Ally* for its complex construction, and she became a regular viewer as well. I recognize that some of you may hate the very sight of Ally McBeal, and I ask you to hold that distaste in abeyance here. You don’t have to like Ally. I don’t, particularly.⁶⁴ But I will ask that you be open to the possibility that this show presents a subtle, well-constructed debate. If you come to recognize that a middlebrow and sometimes obnoxious television show can be beautiful and rich, then my work here is done.

One last note: I intend this work to be read by a variety of people, not only the academics who are interested in how television studies chooses its object of study. Therefore, I have minimized the number of specialized terms I use in this book. Those that are used are defined briefly in a note. I believe that all too often we academics hide behind our jargon and that when dealing with popular culture in particular we have a duty to use plain speech whenever possible. The study of popular culture need not mimic the ups and downs of pop trends, as I have argued, but we should not overcompensate for dealing with popular subjects by making our writing too arcane. To write about pop culture is to participate in it. Just as the best popular culture can be read by a wide range of audiences, I assert that the criticism of popular culture should be approachable as well.⁶⁵

Aesthetics

.....