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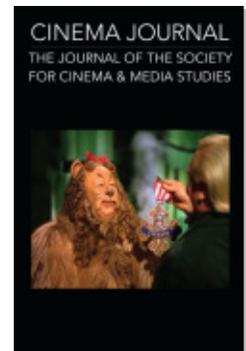
Book Review Essay: Television 2013

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Television 2013

by AMANDA D. LOTZ

Scholarship examining television in contexts around the globe continues to wrestle with the substantial changes in what has been known as television. A considerable range of terms and periodizations have been developed to theorize these transitions, and new ones continue to be proposed. Although the terminology varies—*TV1*, *TV2*, and *TV3*; *multichannel*; *post-network*; *neo-network*; and *post-broadcast*—the core features of the distinctions that such terms indicate remain fairly constant. For the most part, they denote similar changes in the industrial norms of producing, financing, and distributing television, many of which can be attributed to the arrival of digital technologies. New competitive practices enabled by these industrial adjustments have led to transitions from mass to niche audience norms, and the multiplying technologies for viewing television have led to changing notions of television time and the importance of what was once thought to be a foundational quality: liveness. Scholarship in this area aims to carefully contextualize technological and related textual developments, although such efforts are significantly complicated by the fact that, despite considerable parallels in these changes in television systems and industries around the globe, the particularities are profoundly nation specific and, to a degree, viewer specific as well.

This review essay primarily considers three edited collections: *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, edited by Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay; *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*, edited by Jostein Gripsrud; and *Television as Digital Media*, edited by James Bennett and Niki Strange.¹ This scope offers

1 See also a 2010 special issue of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (vol. 28, no. 2), which produced several articles very much in conversation with the edited collections considered here, including some by the same authors. The nature of the special issue—a mere fifty pages—makes it difficult to compare with these collections, but it remains noteworthy. Editors

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fifty-one individual pieces of scholarship that focus on developing understandings of how television programming, institutions, and audience experiences are changing in response to emerging industrial conditions that substantially disrupt television's previous norms. The collections continue the work of Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson's *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, the first collection to conceptualize and begin thinking through the then-nascent adjustments in television, as well as my own attempts to map the industrial dimensions of the US prime-time transition in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, and in other US programming forms in *Beyond Prime Time: Television after the Network Era*.² Considerable continuity exists across these precursors and the works considered here, as television scholars—like the industry workers we often write about—continue to struggle with emerging production and viewing practices that clearly are disrupting the status quo, although the extent to which these emerging practices will become common for all audiences and viewing contexts remains unclear.

A top-rate, advanced Television Studies class could easily be built from the readings of these three collections alone, and fruitful conversations transcend each anthology. I could imagine a syllabus that works through the collections individually in the manner intended by their editors or a syllabus built topically, placing essays on similar themes across the collections into conversation. Each collection provides a considerable number of essays that carefully contextualize and flesh out how new opportunities and realities for television require new ways of thinking about the medium. Several also undertake preliminary theory building that may be grounded in a particular case study for the purposes of a single chapter but that might easily prove valuable to scholars subsequently seeking to propose more expansive theories for the cultural operation of television in the twenty-first century. Other chapters remind us how much we hadn't yet figured out when substantial industrial disruptions first began to manifest themselves in the 1980s.

Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era. The Turner and Tay collection was published in 2009, and although aspects of what it identifies as the post-broadcast era remain considerably in flux, the book remains current. Its goal of pushing television scholars to “think beyond the Anglo-American nexus” is achieved with considerable accomplishment—and remains much needed.³ In his own contribution, Turner crucially notes that how the post-broadcast era “plays out varies significantly from market to market; these are highly contingent

Ron Simon and Brian Rose titled the issue “Mixed-Up Confusion: Coming to Terms with the Television Experience in the Twenty-First Century.” The essays included take a far more American-centric approach than found in the edited books, which may have its own merits for US instructors. Laurie Ouellette's article on the civic components of reality television engages with the conversations about the role of public-service broadcasting and offers some concrete textual analysis, and essays by Jonathan Gray on television promos and Daniel Chamberlain on television interfaces reveal the myriad possible topics requiring reconsideration in light of television's changing norms.

- 2 Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Amanda D. Lotz, ed., *Beyond Prime Time: Television after the Network Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 3 Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay, introduction to *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

rather than simply over-determined market responses.”⁴ The essays in the collection offer carefully grounded assessments that are detailed in the specifics of their contexts, yet also provide comparative and transnational insight. As the editors note, the answer to “‘What is television?’ very much depends on where you are.”⁵

The volume attends minimally to periodization or to establishing which conditions might be characteristic of its chosen focus, the post-broadcast era. Perhaps it is an indication of how much agreement exists about the general features of this industrial break—even if terminology varies—that the editors can merely note, “The objective of this book is to explore new ways of understanding the form, content, and function—the place—of television in the post-broadcast era,” without further meditation on what might distinguish a post-broadcast era.⁶ This need to speak generally of this new context is arguably required by their efforts to emphasize the pronounced variation in the global contexts considered throughout the book; it is unlikely that constant features could be identified for all of the cases. Yet even without more extensive delineation of the post-broadcast distinction, the collection achieves a more unified feeling than many anthologies do, and this is one of the book’s great strengths.

Taken together, the chapters provide a multifaceted conversation, with much deep, specific attention paid to particular contexts. At the same time, the book services a larger conversation about what we might purport to know about television more broadly, outside of particular national contexts at particular moments. The contributors skillfully weave in contextual details, making essays on Chinese, Canadian, Balkan, Latin American, Indian, and Arab television readily accessible to readers without much background in the particularities of these locales.

Although writing about the industrial and technological adjustments of contemporary television often suffers from a heady exuberance about presumed new possibilities, several essays in the Turner and Tay collection instead dampen a parallel exuberance regarding the arrival of globalization and the end of the centrality of nation and older notions of public-service broadcasting (PSB). Essays by Turner, Serra Tinic, and Stuart Cunningham carefully counter assertions that the post-broadcast era will be characterized by the demise of state-funded public-service broadcasters. Instead, they propose that the changed industrial norms will require adjustments in these institutions. They then begin the important work of probing the consequences of those adjustments. Turner illustrates how nation is still an important factor in studying post-broadcast television, whereas Tinic, in her comparison of PSB and commercial international co-productions, provides a case study exploring how the specific mission of PSB continues to have significant consequences for programming content. Such essays indicate the type of preliminary theory rebuilding that a post-broadcast era requires; although the institutions may remain the same, previous knowledge and presumptions about what they do and how they operate require reassessment.

4 Graeme Turner, “Television and the Nation: Does This Matter Any More?,” in Turner and Tay, *Television Studies after TV*, 62.

5 Turner and Tay, introduction to Turner and Tay, *Television Studies after TV*, 8.

6 *Ibid.*, 5.

The book is at its strongest in parts 2–4 (“The Function of Post-Broadcast Television,” “Television and Social Change,” and “Television Content: What’s On Now?”). The preliminary section organized under the increasingly common query “What Is Television?” fails to come together as well as others, and it might have better been a concluding, speculative section aimed at provocation. The essays in the collection’s other parts tend to speak more cautiously of the limited extent of television’s transitions, and many of those in the first section conjecture—perhaps correctly—that preliminary developments will ultimately redefine television broadly.

Although it clearly derives its title from the Spigel and Olsson collection, *Television Studies after TV* does not speak directly about Television Studies any more than the other books addressed in this essay. I note this not as a criticism but as a clarification—in many ways all of the essays across the collections could be united under the banner “Television after TV: *More* Essays on a Medium in Transition.”

Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context. Featuring contributions primarily from senior scholars, Gripsrud’s *Relocating Television* provides similar breadth as the Turner and Tay anthology. Though not as geographically diverse as the Turner and Tay collection, Gripsrud’s work mainly gathers scholars from the Nordic countries, which, though Western, still expand the Anglo-American emphases of much other scholarship. Many of the contributors are not frequent presenters at the annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, which means that those whose exposure to developing TV scholarship is framed by SCMS will find here some fresh voices and perspectives.

The key organizational thematic for this collection can be found in its subtitle: “Television in the Digital Context.” It seems that the impetus for contributions was to consider various facets of television’s transition from analog to digital, and overall the essays in this collection exhibit a remarkably restrained and sophisticated approach toward the opportunities and developments of digital television. Some contributors offer careful and precise arguments particularly about the implications of digitization for television, whereas others simply take this as the techno-historical context for considering an aspect of the medium. The idea of what digital television might encompass serves to push the boundaries of conventional topics—as in Nick Browne’s close analysis of the MSN homepage.

The book is organized into four parts: “The Medium of Television: Changes and Continuities,” “Changing Genres,” “Reception: Figures, Experience, Significance,” and “Critical Perspectives.” Television texts receive greater attention here than in the other collections, including analyses by Charlotte Brunson and Erlend Lavik that center on *The Wire*, though with very different foci. Other chapters consider television news texts and factual entertainment, but their discussion is abstract rather than providing analysis of specific shows.

For the most part, each chapter takes on a piece of the evolving puzzle; the reader might then place these particular perspectives together so that a conversation develops across the chapters. A good illustration of this can be found in consecutive chapters: “The ‘Bollywoodization’ of Indian TV News,” by Daya Kishan Thussu; “Amateur Images in the Professional News Stream,” by John Bridge and Helle Sjøvaag; and “A

New Space for Democracy? Online Media, Factual Genres, and the Transformation of Traditional Mass Media,” by Ib Bondebjerg. Each of these chapters explores—though not always explicitly—questions of the status of agenda setting in television news as it adapts to norms and possibilities of the digital era. All explore extremely different contexts: Thussu focuses on the experience of “infotainment” in India, Bridge and Sjøvaag offer a complex look at the use of amateur video in professional newscasts, and Bondebjerg deliberately identifies the differences in how technologies can be used from how they are used in exploring how a newspaper (the UK *Guardian*) comes to feature many aspects of televised news through its online videos. Each of these essays questions whether and how existing theory about agenda setting remains useful in the digital television era, and in some cases, they begin suggesting needed adaptations.

Overall, *Relocating Television* is more diffuse in topic and approach than the other collections. Some contributors offer fascinating and well-argued essays but only tangentially address digital television. Still, the book illustrates the richness to be found in paying careful attention to argument and evidence rather than making broad sweeping claims about “digital television” writ large. To that end, the essays help build theories for understanding contemporary television.

Television as Digital Media. Both *Television Studies after TV* and *Relocating Television* offer solid and sophisticated contributions to the conversation about how television is changing in important and significant ways. Yet James Bennett and Niki Strange’s collection *Television as Digital Media* manages to advance these conversations yet further. Taken as a whole, I found *Television as Digital Media* to be consistently excellent. Although I didn’t count words per page, the contributions here seemed longer, benefiting from the crafting of detailed arguments drawing on carefully considered evidence. Many essays included screen captures that were helpful to understanding the argument—and kudos to Duke University Press for their exceptional visual quality.

As with *Relocating Television*, “digital” television provides the distinguishing focus of the volume. In his introduction, Bennett begins demarcating this distinction by noting, “Television as digital media must be understood as a non-site-specific, hybrid cultural and technological form that spreads across multiple platforms as diverse as mobile phones, games consoles, iPods, and on-line video services such as YouTube, Hulu, Joost, and the BBC’s iPlayer, as well as computer-based mediaplayers such as Microsoft’s Windows Media Player and Apple TV.”⁷ Although opening with the technologies that have proliferated in this era, Bennett also reflects back on TV’s role in the postwar era, invoking the scholarship of Roger Silverstone, Lynn Spigel, and David Morley to remind us that “nothing about television is ever just about television,” thus making clear the breadth through which he and his coeditor conceptualize digital television.⁸ He notes, for example, that the book “addresses digital television’s position within the wider digital culture of matrix media and multiple windows, producing understanding of television as digital media as a complex interplay of sites, screens, technologies,

7 James Bennett, “Television as Digital Media,” introduction to *Television as Digital Media*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–3.

8 *Ibid.*, 4.

industries, economics, aesthetics, national and global contexts, domestic and public viewing spaces, citizenship and consumer functions, community and fragmentation, as well as new and established productions, user, and audiences practices.”⁹

Of the three books, Bennett’s strikes me as the most productively provocative. He unapologetically claims digital television as a form of “new media”—which I find compelling but which may earn sideways glances from the new media establishment—and engages with television and new media theory, claiming that the book “seek[s] to form a new critical paradigm for thinking about television in the digital era.”¹⁰ Contributors follow television’s extended and expanding areas of analysis not by claiming them as new media (and thus not television) but by illustrating the productive connections and dynamic possibilities of *Television Studies*.

Organized into sections of “Switchover: Historicizing the Digital Revolution,” “Production Strategies in the Digital Landscape,” “The Aesthetics of Convergence,” and “User-Generated Content: Producing Digital Audiences,” the collection covers broad territory—Max Dawson proposes tools for analyzing digital shorts, Daniel Chamberlain examines television interfaces, and Jean Burgess deconstructs the many facets of YouTube, for example—and, admittedly, I found fewer topical connections among essays within this collection than in the other two books, but all were nonetheless clearly engaged with the mission Bennett and Strange set forward. Notably, essays about television content are rare across the collection, and “audiences” are invoked more as constructs than as actual empirical entities.

One of my favorite features of this book is that several of the essays converse with those from the Turner and Tay collection. In fact, Turner authors a chapter in *Television as Digital Media* that expands aspects of his earlier argument about the continued importance of the nation in the era of digital media. Thus, a rich conversation across the books develops. Despite the two-year span in their publication dates, all read very much as of the same moment. If using all three books in a course, it would be particularly advantageous to read topically across the collections, as the conversations across the books are potentially robust.

Concluding Thoughts. Although we may not yet have widely shared terms—nor should we, necessarily—the range of scholarship gathered in the three collections considered here illustrates tremendous dynamism and diversity among post-broadcast, post-network, neo-network, TV 3, and digital television scholarship. It seems clear that the lack of common terminology for television in these times is not retarding the development of sophisticated and thoughtful work. These collections are successful whether they rely on an assumed understanding of what *post-broadcast* means, as in *Television Studies after Television*, or in more painstakingly demarcating “digital” television, as in *Television and Digital Media*.

Rather than proclaim the necessity of common terminology, it seems most important that authors in this area continue to make clear justifications for chosen terminology and that all working in this area acknowledge the truth of Turner’s caution

9 Ibid., 5.

10 Ibid., 7.

regarding the enhanced context dependence of television. In line with this concern, I do take issue with Gripsrud's efforts to distinguish "broadcast" television separately from its distribution structure and, more important, its different economic model, and to use "broadcast" as the distinction of "pushed" television, similar to "network era" as I call it, or what others call "TV 1." It seems Gripsrud intends to streamline our multiplying distinctions for television—whether periodizations or distinctions such as digital-analog, linear-nonlinear—in claiming the use of *broadcast* as the term to stand for all the industrial characteristics of television of that era. The problem with using *broadcast* as the single term to denote analog and linear delivery is that it erases the broader industrial distinctions between broadcast and cable television production, distribution, and economics that are incredibly meaningful to what television can be and does in these different contexts, as well as the fact that broadcast television can be experienced in nonlinear ways and continues to mean something quite specific with continued relevance, at least in the United States. That audiences can use a DVR to watch a show created by a broadcast network does not erase the fact that the program was created within the industrial logics of broadcasting.

While I have no desire to argue for one set of terms over another, the essays in the edited collections benefit from by their aggregation and from clear editorial demarcation of terms that carry throughout the collections. I am generally more troubled by scholarship that drops in *digital* as a modifier of *television* without further clarification, as though the reader should know which of the multifaceted adjustments the author means to indicate. Finding the space for the elaboration of terms is often difficult in the scope of a single journal article or in an edited collection not unified by examination of television's changing contexts. But if I were to be so bold as to make the call for my fellow television scholars, it would be to use *digital* in particular with care and precision. There is much compelling about the distinction of digital television that Bennett puts forth, but the sophistication of this understanding is not inherent to the word *digital*. Without specification, I'm often left wondering whether authors intend to distinguish the differences between analog and digital transmission, the differences in the interconnectivity among digital technologies, and so on.

These collections indicate that there are productive conversations to be had about ways of theorizing emerging television technologies, experiences, and programming norms—all of which require that we move beyond debates over what is or is not television. Likewise, perhaps it is time to stipulate an end to revisiting flow and liveness as essential attributes of television rather than acknowledging them as attributes that matched the conditions of previous eras of the medium. In thinking about contemporary television, I've often found variations on Michael Curtin's postulation that the network era's mass audiences were an aberration resulting from the industry's Fordist practices of "mass production, mass marketing, and mass consumption"; this postulation is helpful in deconstructing the seeming naturalness of these earlier formations.¹¹ The same might be said of flow and the centrality of liveness; these features were

11 Michael Curtin, "On Edge: Cultural Industries in the Neo-Network Era," in *Making and Selling Culture*, ed. Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway, and Elizabeth Traube (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 186.

unquestionably central to television in the network era, but they are no more inherent to the medium of television than the attributes emerging today. Jason Jacobs offers “interruption” as a comparable feature of television in the digital era that speaks to the contemporary experience of television, pushing beyond those who bemoan the status of these old attributes or awkwardly try to force them into television’s emerging formations.¹²

Somewhat surprisingly, given Television Studies’ history, the TV text itself receives far less treatment in considering contemporary television, whereas matters of technology, industry, regulation, and global contexts receive warranted focus across the volumes. It is certainly not the case that there is an absence of textual analysis of television produced today—as the bounty of writing on *Mad Men* and *The Wire*, for example, indicates. Some recent work, such as an essay by Anthony N. Smith in *Television and New Media*, valuably considers how particular textual features are enabled by the economic and competitive conditions of this post-broadcast, post-network, neo-network, TV 3, digital television environment.¹³ His work illustrates how much more might be done to explore whether there are particular textual attributes and features characteristic of television of the digital era.

In addition, I continue to hope for the generation of audience research in the age of digital television that extends beyond notions of the “producer” and the early adopter. Although new headlines about audience use of the technologies encompassed within Bennett’s construction of digital television feature prominently in near-daily trade press announcements, this “research,” largely generated by business consulting firms, consistently fails to offer even a modicum of insight into how audiences conceive the particular function or actually use these technologies. Detailed readings of methodological footnotes often reveal that claims like “85 percent of viewers watch online” are supported by survey questions like “Would you watch online?” which in no way measure actual behavior and often decontextualize the minimal amount of viewing that takes advantage of these new technologies—at least at this point. Along these lines, I continue to long for an update to Ann Gray’s *Video Playtime* scholarship that goes into the home, talks with audiences about their technologies, and even expands from doing interviews to observing media use.¹⁴

Regardless of the work that remains to be done and the questions yet to be answered, the range of studies assessed here indicates that Television Studies scholarship is richly and deliberately engaged with the substantial changes being wrought by adjustments in the technologies, distribution practices, and economics—among many other industrial and cultural facets—that characterize television today. *

12 Jason Jacobs, “Television, Interrupted: Pollution or Aesthetic?,” in Bennett and Strange, *Television as Digital Media*, 255–280 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

13 Anthony N. Smith, “Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC’s Original Drama Series,” *Television & New Media* (published online October 20, 2011), doi: 10.1177/1527476411418537.

14 Ann Gray, *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology* (London: Routledge, 1992).