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The Contemporary Television Series/Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting

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□ Hammond, Michael and Lucy Mazdon (eds.) (2005). **The Contemporary Television Series**. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 260.

□ Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas (eds.) (2007). **Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting**. New York, NY: New York University Press. pp. 368.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is often credited with the saying that “one cannot put a foot in the same river twice.” His admonition,

of course, refers to the constant movement of the water, thereby effectively creating a different river every moment. The development of television is much like that river. It is ever-changing. Books on the nature of television, like those under review, allow us to see a snapshot of a single moment in the evolution of television. However, that snapshot is left quickly behind and can only tell us what television *was* and not exactly what it *is*. While both of these books make interesting reading and have an important place in the literature of television, their references to programs and technologies have become very dated in only a few short years after their publication.

In *The Contemporary Television Series*, the editors have compiled twelve essays that address, what they call, the television series/serial form. They define this form as programs that are given detailed coverage in both popular magazines and in the quality press. They are shows that will be issued on DVD and video, suggesting that they will be watched more than once. These programs will have a "life" beyond everyday broadcasting (p. 4). The series/serials described here are not so much "television" programs as they are "entertainment media." The viewer is no longer tied to a broadcast schedule, nor is she limited in the number of times she may watch a given program (limited by an outside programmer) or on what medium she views the work. In reality, the word "television" no longer functions as a descriptor of these mass media.

The essays are divided into three sections: "Histories," "The Series/Serial Form," and "Receptions." Each section is preceded by an introductory essay written by one of the editors.

These are followed by essays built around programs that meet the definition of the "series/serial form."

Unfortunately, the programs referenced are very dated, and unless the reader is very familiar with them, much of the message is lost. By way of example, the essays address programs such as "thirtysomething," "Ally McBeal," "The West Wing," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." "The Sopranos" is one of the newest programs subjected to analysis. While many of these programs may have been relatively familiar vehicles for analysis at the time of the book's publication, they have now receded into history for most younger readers. For example, just this year one of my colleagues experienced frustration in her introductory television studies class because she had great difficulty finding one television series, for an analysis project, that all thirty students had seen. This speaks volumes about the changing role of television as mass entertainment in our society.

In contrast, the introductory essays are especially helpful and hold up fairly well over time. Despite a few dated references to the "new TiVo" technology, each of the introductions could still preface an entirely updated set of essays that deal with newer programs that illustrate many of the same points. Certainly the ready availability of DVR technology to today's television viewers would impact any discussion of the viewer's control over the texts of programs (p. 79).

Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting is a collection of essays that discuss the development of multi-channel pay television services in the United States. Although the word "cable" appears in the title, the issues discussed cross platforms to include

satellite television (which transmits many of the same channels as traditional cable television), as well as a fleeting reference to the promise of Internet television (p. 82). The book is divided into three sections: "Institutions and Audiences," "Channels," and "Cable Programs: The Platinum Age of Television?" Each section is preceded by an introductory essay.

The first section is a collection of essays addressing the history of cable television, set against the backdrop of the failed regulatory scheme that stifled the promise of over-the-air broadcasting. Cable began as a means of retransmitting broadcast signals to underserved areas, but soon offered the hope of shows that transcended the "lowest common denominator" programming theory favored by over-the-air broadcasters (p. 6). Because it was not limited to one channel, cable did turn broadcast program theory on its head. Instead of seeking to program to a general audience, cable began seeking out niche markets. In so doing, cable would quite naturally begin to air programs that broadcasters would not. Spurred on by fewer content regulations than their broadcast counterparts, cable producers and programmers could take greater creative risks in seeking to attract viewers.

The next collection of essays builds upon these concepts, and addresses the growth of niche channels, such as "Discovery," "BET," and "Nickelodeon." The essay, "Tunnel Vision and Food: A Political-Economic Analysis of Food Network," is especially enlightening. Author Cheri Ketchum explains how the Food Network, as part of mass media conglomerate E.W. Scripps, embarked on a

series of steps that would eventually take its brand far beyond that of a cable channel (p. 170). The Food Network integrates its Web site into almost all of its programming by posting recipes and information directly related to programs. Also, anyone who has visited a local retail outlet can view the results of Food Network's phenomenal reach. Shelves are stocked with any number of cookbooks, cookware, and spices that are written, endorsed, or concocted by homegrown Food Network stars such as Paula Dean, Rachel Ray, and Alton Brown.

The final collection of essays focuses on specific programs and how these have targeted niche audiences not previously served by broadcast television.

Both books reviewed here provide useful snapshots of American commercial television entertainment media in the first decade of the twenty-first century. They also may help us understand how these mass media will continue their evolution. Factors such as government regulation, developing technologies, economic conditions, and public demand all will play a part in the growth or decline of television as it currently exists. Since the essays in these books were written, YouTube and other Internet video sites have become more dominant forces on the "legitimate" television scene. CNN's iReport is but one example. The 1990's cable idiom of public access television (that spawned the characters of "Wayne's World") has been eclipsed by the antics of do-it-yourself producers on YouTube.

Indeed, just as cable's niche programming eclipsed broadcasting's "least common denominator" approach, "on-demand" programming

will necessitate yet another approach to drawing viewers to shows.

Clearly we are entering the next era of television. We have been “beyond broadcasting” for some time now, and are rapidly moving beyond cable. The river just keeps flowing.

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