

New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre.

Martin Shuster.

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Perhaps the most surprising aspect of **New Television: The Aesthetics and Politics of a Genre** is that it is not about 'new television' as many would understand the term. It does not consider Netflix or Amazon series, transnational production practices or forms of on-demand content that are today transforming how television itself is being watched and understood. It does not examine scripted reality or newer show formats that are proving popular with contemporary television audiences. Nor does it engage with whether 'television' in the age of streaming and multi-platform viewing is even the right word to describe television anymore. Instead, the book looks only at one form of television - quality television drama - examining the aesthetics and cultural politics of particular drama series that in many ways could now be considered 'old.'

The book focuses specifically on *Justified* (2010-2015), *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), all of which have now ceased production. Rather than considering their newness in relation to television, these three shows are used to illustrate the author's main argument, which is that television has in the last few decades 'come of age,' (2) transforming into a medium capable of producing 'serious works of art' (1) that require 'serious and sustained reflection' (2). It is not these series freshness that makes them so emblematic for Shuster, but rather their aesthetics and their shared thematic focus. In fact, he readily admits that he has chosen dramas from the past because they have concluded and can thus be 'analyzed as complete works of art' (5).

In spite of this seeming paradox, that he has chosen expired television series to accentuate the newness of television, it is when discussing the thematic aspects of his selected series that Shuster is at his best as he offers an informed and involving philosophical enquiry into the form and meaning of the television he admires. He makes a compelling case for how certain series convey 'the emptiness of late capitalism' (119) and again and again 'explore various ways of exhibiting the world ... as entirely emptied of normative authority, and, all while leaving intact *one* form of authority, that of the family' (167).

On the philosophical aspects he is captivating, as Hannah Arendt, Michael Fried, Martin Heidegger, Stanley Cavell and others are all brought to bear in support of his contention that 'new television' engages as profoundly, adeptly and artistically with modernity as any other art form. However, he is also at his weakest here, because while he will

spend many pages discussing a philosophical concept or be happy to ‘flag a debate between Kant and Hegel’ (175), or discuss at length television’s indebtedness to other art forms such as film or literature, he repeatedly fails throughout to sufficiently acknowledge how television in itself, as an art and industry in itself, has informed the series that interest him.

The entirety of chapter one (13-49), for instance, barely discusses television at all and focuses on film and photography. Chapter two discusses storytelling, again without a particular focus on television. Thus, while he persuasively argues how film, photography and even Greek tragedy help us to understand *The Wire*, nowhere does he acknowledge this series’ indebtedness to prior ‘quality’ television series such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-7), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-9) and *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005). This is a major oversight because, as good as *The Wire* undoubtedly is, he assumes that other, previous cop shows were far less complex, aspiring or inspiring. ‘Much of *The Wire*’s success hinges on utilizing the cop procedural while moving beyond it,’ Shuster argues, because it presents characters who are far more than their social roles (94). Yet in his haste to move beyond it, he offers neither an analysis of the cop procedural the series ‘hinges on,’ nor any real interest in it. Thus, he appears unaware of how just as in *The Wire*, which was set in Baltimore, *Homicide: Life on the Street* had delved into the grim underbelly of this same city over the course of several seasons and presented richly drawn and developing characters. *Hill Street Blues*, like *The Wire*, had complex multi-character narratives and commonly dealt with the breakdown or buckling of institutions such as the police, the judiciary and political offices, which Shuster argues lies at the thematic heart of new television. Instead, with a focus on cinema-like aesthetic qualities, none of these are ever mentioned and he chooses *Twin Peaks* (1990-1) as the inspiration for the television that followed it (45).

Overall, it is a remarkably personal, single-minded, or one could conceivably say, blinkered, view of television that Shuster offers, deciding upon what qualifies as ‘new television’ in highly subjective terms such as ‘the shows that occupy me’ (44) or ‘the television series that interest me’ (93). The decision to only deal with drama is never adequately explained and neither is why this form of television alone counts as art. *Murphy Brown* (1988-98), a show that in its original run Shuster admits was highly impactful, is dismissed from the discussion of new television on the grounds that it ‘is a much more traditional sitcom than the shows that interest me (125).’ It would appear that for him sitcom is not art, but drama is, but why?

More problematic still than the exclusive focus on long-form drama is that it is only American drama series that Shuster examines, suggesting that ‘new television’ is unique to America and does not and,

indeed, cannot exist, in the terms he defines it, in any other country (including the likes of the UK and South Korea, which are also prodigious producers and exporters of high-end television drama) because they do not engage with American culture and society. It is a wholly US-centric view of television that is being offered in an era when, with the growth of streaming and international co-productions, it is becoming an increasingly global form.

For Shuster, new television exposes:

... the negativity that animates the world of the contemporary United States ... This, I would argue, is the dominant position within new television, which appears to suggest that, as works of art, the shows of new television serve the function of revealing the pitfalls and failures of the contemporary United States (171).

Such a statement begs obvious questions that may include ‘what about shows that are American made but not about America, such as Netflix’s *Narcos: Mexico* (2018–present)?’ ‘What about shows that implicitly comment on American values, but are not explicitly about them, like HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–present)?’ Would *The Bridge* (2013–14) qualify as ‘new television’ because it is ‘about’ America while the superior Danish-Swedish series *The Bridge (Broen/Bron)* (2011–present), from which it was adapted, be disqualified because it is un-American? The answer to the latter would be yes because Shuster’s definition excludes the vast entirety of TV production outside of America.

Structurally, **New Television** is essentially a book of two ‘halves,’ with part one (chapters one and two) examining television’s indebtedness to film, photography and storytelling and establishing ‘an analytic framework’ for part two (chapters three to five), which applies this framework to television drama. It is a critical work with unquestionable ambition and on the positive side the author’s passion for the drama he values shines through. For him ‘at its best, new television cues us into possibilities that we might not otherwise see, presents understandings of ourselves and our world that we might otherwise miss or ignore, and gives voice to people and creatures who otherwise might remain silent or beyond the bounds of discourse.’ (202) Yet, negatively, such possibilities apparently only exist if they are presented in drama, understandings of ourselves are only applicable to Americans and the silenced voices can only ever be fictional, as factual television lies outside of the parameters of ‘new television.’

Ultimately, the book frustrates because it does not convincingly

define what 'new television' is. It slips between calling it a 'genre' (121) and a 'thematic mode' (5), the television under discussion is not intrinsically new and nor does it encompass 'television' in all its various and global forms. Its major drawbacks in credibly delineating new television, therefore, are that it neglects to look beyond the borders of the United States and fails to clarify what constituted 'old' television' before endeavoring to redefine it.