

Book Reviews

Melissa Ames (ed.), *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programming*. University Press of Mississippi, 2012. ISBN 978-1-61703-293-6

Paul Booth, *Time on TV: Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television*. Peter Lang, 2012. ISBN 978-1-4331-1569-1

Paul Booth's monograph and Melissa Ames's anthology take as points of departure a common idea. Booth: '[t]he past decade has seen an increase in the type, frequency, and visibility of television narratives that utilize "time" in unusual and non-traditional ways' (p. 1). Ames: 'never before has narrative time played such an important role in mainstream television' (p. 9). How does each account further elaborate the nature of the change it posits and explain that change?

Ames's 310-page anthology offers twenty-one chapters (plus an introduction), almost all of which use one, two or three recent US television programmes as case studies. The first of five subsections considers the relationship between the US television industry and the aesthetics of its products; the final one explores 'Fan Fiction, Online Communities, and Audience Studies'. The second subsection, in which 9/11 looms large, considers 'How the Cultural Climate Impacts Temporal Manipulation on the Small Screen'. The remaining two have a more purely formal focus: 'The Functions of Time: Analyzing the Effects of Nonnormative Narrative Structure(s)' and 'Moving Beyond the Televisual Restraints of the Past: Reimagining Genres and Formats'. Many contributions offer vivid, insightful accounts of the effects achieved by the temporal manipulations of the programmes explored. However, the brevity of each contribution means the burden of exposition (a problem for television that becomes a problem for television studies) is often felt; not long after the dense and intricate web of context has been sketched, it is time to proceed to the next chapter. Booth's book suffers less from this burden, both because it is a monograph and because he focuses on fewer programmes in more depth.

Both books owe a debt to Jason Mittell's ongoing work concerning what he terms the 'complex TV' that has emerged on US television in the past decade or so.¹ Unfortunately, neither account matches Mittell's careful contextualisation and qualification of his model. Mittell demonstrates convincingly that there is a pronounced tendency for a strand of US serial drama to construct long-running puzzles, thus creating an 'operational aesthetic' and encouraging 'forensic fandom'.² However, this is only one species of 'complexity', and it should not blind one to others offered throughout television history by, for example, anthology drama, mini-series, and, yes, soap opera. In these books' eagerness to celebrate the (real, significant) achievements of contemporary US television, what is often sacrificed is a fair estimation of the achievements, innovations and variety of earlier television, and the intelligence of its viewers. For example, from a range of Ames's contributors³: 'Post-network era television has challenged its viewers like never

before' (p. 29); 'Previously unknown to prime-time serial TV, the sustained thematic reflexivity of both *Battlestar* (2003–09)⁴ and *Lost* (2004–10)⁵ is profoundly elegant' (p. 59); 'most shows produced during the era of TV I belonged to genres such as the soap opera, the situation comedy, and the crime show' (p. 103). And from Booth: 'new media has encouraged "more intellectually demanding" viewers – audience members whose intellects have been stimulated and advanced by the demands that new media places upon them' (p. 220).

Each book seeks to explain the handling of time in contemporary television in relation to a broader culture context. In Ames's anthology (as is often the case with edited collections), not only the case studies but the causal explanations offered are heterogeneous, offering the reader a range of perspectives to consider:

this collection suggests that the influx of television programs concerned with time may stem from any and all of the following: recent scientific approaches to temporality, new conceptions of (post)history, and trends in late-capitalistic production and consumption. These programs could also be viewed as being products of the new culture of instantaneity [...] or of the recent trauma culture amplified in the wake of the September 11 attacks. (p. 9)

Booth, by contrast, focuses much more on a single factor that he suggests is influencing contemporary television's treatment of time: namely, the emergence of 'transgenic media' – the label and particular inflection Booth wants to give to 'online/digital/social/new media [...] on which users can upload multimedia from a variety of sources' (p. 8). In certain respects, Booth is careful and circumspect concerning the scope of his argument. He repeatedly and explicitly disclaims any attempt to posit a straightforward causal relationship between the aesthetics of contemporary television and the communicative affordances of transgenic media. This has the effect, however, of limiting the value of Booth's intervention. The underlying factors that might explain the co-emergence of 'temporally complex narrative' and transgenic media tend to be referred to vaguely ('a cultural focus on issues of complex temporality') (p. 116). One can detect, however, an implicit technological determinism subtly at work in Booth's phraseology: 'digital technology has *revealed and built* vast networks of people' (p. 4); '[d]igital technology and transgenic media are *creating* a networked understanding of human relationships' (p. 192); 'with the massive influx of new technology comes societal changes' (p. 203) (my emphasis in both cases).

Ultimately, Booth's argument appears to be (to borrow a phrase from David Bordwell and his intervention in an analogous debate) a 'habits and skills'⁶ argument: a prevailing cultural context encourages particular habits and skills in its members; the same habits and skills that we deploy when using transgenic media are being traded upon by people who produce and consume contemporary television; this is what makes it illuminating and legitimate to place the two alongside one another (Booth's principal argumentative and rhetorical strategy).

This is fair enough, and often it yields valuable insights. The highlight of Booth's book is the fifth chapter, in which *Doctor Who* (1963–present)⁷ and its rewriting of history are placed alongside that particular type of web-text called the wiki. However, often the analogies are less felicitous. In little more than an aside, Booth tries to compare the 'adult relationships with [...] parents' made possible by time travel in *Life on Mars*

(2006–7)⁸ and *Ashes to Ashes* (2008–10)⁹ with ‘see[ing] our parents in a new light’ through our social media interactions with them: ‘We flip through a Picasa account instead of travelling in time, but the impetus is similar’ (p. 92). ‘*Lost*’s social network’, Booth asserts, ‘mirrors *precisely* [emphasis added] the social network we have in our own lives. We only know certain things about characters; we only know certain things about our friends online’ (p. 191). These analogies often feel undermotivated because one can replace either of the pair of terms with instances that come before Booth’s period of interest, thus undermining the pointedness of making the comparison in the first place. Instead of a ‘Picasa’ account, why not one’s parents’ old letters or photograph albums? The description meant to tie *Lost* ‘precisely’ to our (implicitly, online) social networks is true of almost all narratives: characters interact in complex ways and we do not know everything about them. The social networks of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–53)¹⁰ and Max Ophuls’s 1950 film *La Ronde*¹¹ mirror, more or less, the social networks we have in our own lives.

These two books, then, offer bold, intriguing and multi-faceted arguments about the relationship between contemporary television and broader cultural approaches to time, which are profitable to think through. They also, and especially, offer good close engagements with a broad range of contemporary US (and, in Booth’s case, British) television programmes. However, both are significantly hampered in their own ways by the claims they make regarding those programmes’ particular historical place and specificity.

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Notes

- 1 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, Media Commons Press, 2012–13, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/complextelevision/>, accessed 8 August 2013.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Contributors quoted here are Todd M. Sodano, ‘Television’s Paradigm (Time)shift: Production and Consumption Practices in the Post-Network Era’; Jordan Lavender-Smith, ‘“It’s Not Unknown”: The Loose- and Dead-End Afterlives of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*’; Aris Mousoutzanis, ‘Temporality and Trauma in American Sci-Fi Television’, respectively.
- 4 *Battlestar Galactica* (BSkyB/David Eick Productions/R&D TV/Stanford Pictures/UMS/Sci-Fi Channel, 2004–9).
- 5 *Lost* (ABC Studio/Touchstone Television/Bad Robot/Grass Skirt Production/ABC, 2004–10).
- 6 David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 142–43.
- 7 *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–89, 1996; BBC Wales/BBC, 2005–present).
- 8 *Life on Mars* (BBC Wales/Kudos/BBC, 2006–7).
- 9 *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC Wales/Kudos/BBC, 2008–10).
- 10 See Caroline Levine, ‘Narrative Networks: Bleak House and the Affordances of Form’, *Novel*, 42:3, Fall 2009, 517–23.
- 11 *La Ronde* (Max Ophuls, 1950).