

Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York, New York University Press, 2015, 391 pages.

Jason Mittell's 2006 article, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," is one of the most cited pieces in Television Studies over the past ten years. In it, he famously declares post-1990s TV programming as the "era of television complexity" and argues for "narrative complexity as a distinct *narrational mode*" (29, my emphasis). That short piece influenced a range of international scholarship on televisual narrative; meanwhile, Mittell continued to hone his theory of complex TV across multiple articles, conference presentations, and blog posts. In 2012, he began pre-publishing chapters of *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling* via MediaCommons Press, utilizing an approach to publication that mirrors the dialogic seriality of the TV that he analyzes. This final, bound version responds to comments from his MediaCommons readers and brings together a decade's worth of insights, creating an expansive investigation into how TV functions as a storytelling medium and how audiences engage with serial TV. Through its consideration of the interplay between narrative form and viewer experience, *Complex TV* crafts a detailed framework of televisual poetics and emerges as a defining text in the study of television.

Due to the serial creation and distribution of *Complex TV*, those who have read Mittell's other work will find parts of this book familiar, though I consider his articulation of key concepts clearest in this newest version. For newcomers to Television Studies, *Complex TV* is accessible, and Mittell's direct, natural prose makes the book an easy and fun read. Mittell develops a TV poetics lexicon with an array of useful, well-defined terms. The book uses short case studies and brief references to series as convincing illustrations of broader trends in TV storytelling. For me, having seen most of the series that he discusses (e.g. *Breaking Bad*, *Veronica Mars*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *24*, *The Sopranos*, *Dexter*), these gestures generated pleasurable narrative recall while solidifying Mittell's claims. I imagine that a lack of familiarity with these series could diminish the impact of some close readings, but unlike much other scholarship, chapters don't depend wholly on case studies—so even if you're unfamiliar with a particular series, the core ideas are clear and convincing.

The unique organization of the book contributes to its readability and to its diverse applications for academic and non-academic audiences. Rather than organizing

chapters around particular historical moments or especially influential series, chapters focus on core components of TV storytelling: beginnings, ends, paratexts, characters, et al. This structure makes the book flexible for classroom use, and it allows each chapter to develop an argument about serial television from a new angle. Thus, there is some overlap across chapters, but never to a point of redundancy—instead adding depth to the central claims of the book. As Mittell notes in the introduction, chapters 2-10 are designed to be read in any order. Indeed, when I first encountered the book in its pre-publication form, I read chapters in the order that felt most relevant to my work at the time, and the logical flow remained intact. To help guide nonlinear approaches, Mittell uses succinct internal referencing to direct readers to other chapters if they want to read more about any given topic.

Chapter one, “Complexity in Context,” outlines the stakes of complex TV, articulating how “narrative complexity *redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*” (18, his emphasis) through devices such as the “operational aesthetic” (41), “narrative special effects” (43), and puzzle plotting that encourages viewers to engage in “forensic fandom” (43). Chapter two takes an in-depth look at TV “Beginnings” and the demand on pilot episodes to achieve a “strange alchemy” between familiarity and originality (56). A successful pilot, Mittell argues, “teaches us how to watch the series, manages our expectations for what is to come, and inspires us to keep watching” (85). Chapter three focuses on the construction of “authorship” in serial TV, using examples of notable showrunners to parse how branding and paratexts lead audiences to understand an “inferred author function” (107) in spite of TV’s collaborative production models. Chapter four, “Characters,” is one of the most groundbreaking parts of the book, as it provides a uniquely in-depth consideration of how we understand and attach to characters in complex series. The chapter argues that serial TV affords particular modes of character development, noting how actors engender characterological intertextuality, how viewers “ship” character pairings, and how antiheroes challenge notions of “allegiance,” concluding with a fascinating look at *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White.

After the more specific forays of chapters 2-4, chapter five pulls back to consider the broader phenomenon of “Comprehension,” using a “contextual cognitive poetics” approach (building on David Bordwell) (164) that emphasizes how viewers “actively construct storyworlds” (164). He discusses the functions of curiosity, anticipation, and suspense that lead to a “cultural practice of theorizing” (173)) that also feeds into the prevalence of spoiler

culture. By demonstrating how complex series complicate traditional models of narrative knowledge, Mittell reveals how “cognitive models for viewer comprehension can fit within contextualized accounts of active audiences and participatory culture” (205). The next chapter addresses the practice of “Evaluation” and “the need to evaluate a series on its own aesthetic terms” (224), making important distinctions between “quality” and “complexity” (216) and between “centripetal” and “centrifugal” complexity (222-23). Chapter seven, “Serial Melodrama,” is one of the most ambitious of the book, tackling questions of genre vs. mode, gendered notions of affect and form, and historical assumptions regarding seriality. Ultimately, Mittell argues here that serial melodrama across TV genres enables “more fluid possibilities of gender identification” in complex TV (246). This chapter is remarkably efficient in its engagement with other scholarly writing, while also deploying close readings to shed light on the complexity of serial melodrama.

Paratexts are a recurring focus across the book, but chapter eight delves more deeply into a specific subcategory: “Orienting Paratexts” that help audiences make sense of complex TV. The chapter includes reflections on Mittell’s personal experience editing the *Lostpedia* wiki that illuminate how fan communities organize and prioritize narrative information. His discussion of paratexts and “drillable” (288) narratives provides a nice segue into chapter nine’s focus on “Transmedia Storytelling,” which includes a helpful overview of Jenkins’ famous theorization, followed by case studies from *Buffy*, *Lost*, and *Breaking Bad*. His distinction between “what is” and “what if?” models of transmedia storytelling is a useful contribution to the discussion that could be developed further through the contextual cognitive poetics model in subsequent scholarship. The final chapter, “Ends,” emphasizes how few series get to define the terms of their closure, creating a unique pressure on planned TV finales to “stick the landing” (322). Mittell discusses how the “discursive prominence of finales raises the narrative stakes of anticipation and expectation,” and how audiences are, more often than not, disappointed by these endings (ibid). In the closing pages of the book, Mittell shifts gears to offer some thoughts on how *Complex TV* might propel more politically minded textual analysis and, finally, reminding readers of the book’s own political commitment to demonstrating an alternative model of scholarly publication. This meta turn, in which Mittell uses his discussion of finales to reflect on the problem of ending a piece of serial scholarship, feels a little abrupt; but it allows Mittell to avoid the common problem of unnecessary recap in a more lengthy “conclusion.”

In the introduction, Mittell notes his decision to make the book “less citational than much scholarship to emphasize readability and flow” (8). It’s true that *Complex TV* is extremely readable, and overall, I appreciate his choice to avoid extensive, clunky citations. There are a few moments, however, where the book’s lack of attention to other scholarship may have prevented Mittell from making more nuanced arguments, especially regarding fan and audience practices. Similarly, the book’s admitted focus on contemporary series prevents Mittell from drawing comparisons and discerning patterns that could have provided a more historically minded perspective on TV storytelling. And while *Complex TV* is certainly interested in how digital technologies change the way that we experience TV storytelling, this is an area that could have been developed more fully throughout the book. Undoubtedly, the production and distribution models pioneered by Netflix (and now mimicked by other streaming services) complicate some of the central claims of the book regarding serial storytelling and complex TV.

While I don’t think that the emergence of a “Netflix Poetics” undercuts Mittell’s work, attention to how these series stack up against more traditional models might have revealed fresh insights about televisual poetics. I argue that visual style, story pacing, character development, surprise, suspense, beginnings, and endings, all operate differently in Netflix original series. Simultaneous release of full seasons, fewer restrictions on episode length, and nearly guaranteed multiple season renewal, give creators of Netflix series the freedom to experiment with storytelling form, resulting in a slate of programming that departs from traditional televisual poetics. For example, the pilot episodes of network and cable programming are almost always produced within a context of series precarity and are thus driven by economic imperatives of the industry; they must serve as “an argument for a program’s viability” (Mittell: 56). Meanwhile, Netflix series have the luxury to begin in whatever way the showrunner deems best for the particular story, with no obligation for the first episode to achieve that “strange alchemy” (ibid) of familiarity and originality upon which the success of commercial television depends. Nor do Netflix series face pressure to hook viewers with a single episode—in fact, some critics have suggested that entire first seasons on Netflix might serve as extended “pilots,” allowing character and plot exposition to unfold more naturally. These premiere episodes are just one example of how televisual poetics change in the context of Netflix, and I think attention to how these industrial shifts affect storytelling would have added a fascinating dimension to *Complex TV*. Nonetheless, the book’s clear articulation of televisual poetics leaves room for these kinds of extensions, inviting other scholars to build upon the model Mittell creates.

Complex TV is an essential contribution to Television Studies, and it will no doubt serve as the foundation for all future work on televisual poetics. With this landmark monograph, Mittell collects and reworks a decade of material into an expansive treatise on contemporary television storytelling. This book appeals to anyone interested in how audiences make sense of TV narrative: seasoned scholars, students, and media fans alike will find Mittell's insights clear and compelling. *Complex TV* is one of the most important books to emerge from its field, and I anticipate that, like his 2006 article, this monograph will generate a wave of exciting scholarship in years to come.

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Work Cited:

Mittell, J. [2006]: « Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television », *The Velvet Light Trap*, n° 58 (Fall), 29-40.