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Complex series and struggling cable guys

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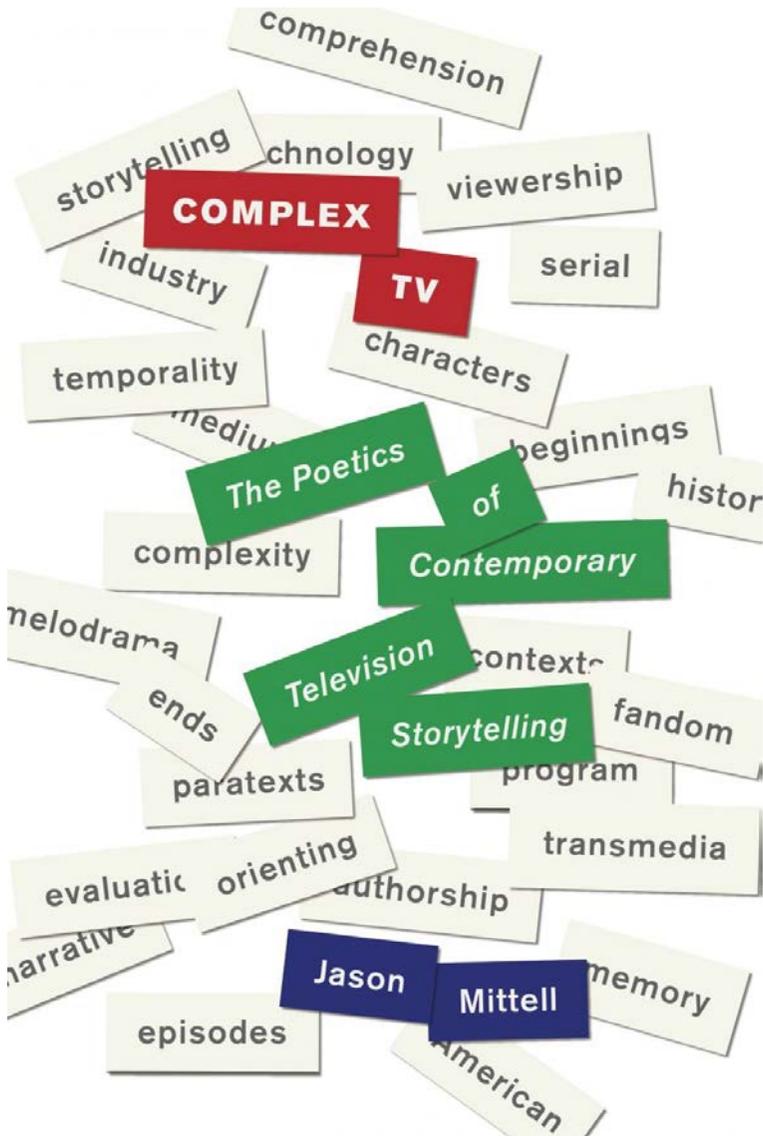
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Both Jason Mittell's *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015) and Amanda Lotz's *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014) significantly contribute to filling the gap in research on recent television series. Over the past two decades a new form of television storytelling has emerged that Mittell defines as 'complex TV', a mode of television that has sparked different kinds of audience consuming habits and that has changed production and distribution models. Different from most previous scholarship (e.g. Allen & Hill 2004; Peacock & Jacobs 2013), Mittell cleverly explores complex TV on its own terms, favouring a formal analysis investigating the poetics of television series over discussing their cultural impact or interpretation of content. Looking at how television tells stories Mittell shows the contribution of technology, reception, and industry in changing television into a 'lived cultural experience' where different forms of 'cultural engagement' are key to understanding the textuality of Complex TV (p. 7). Similarly aware of industrial changes but more specifically addressing broader socio-cultural issues, Lotz examines the shifting portrayal of masculinity on 21st century television. Avoiding simplistic content analysis, she uses approaches from cultural, communication, and film studies to explore changes in storytelling norms, also discussing the cultural significance of these changes. I suggest that these books complement one another, particularly, as we shall see, with regards to discussing characters on television; each uses their own approach to address the changes in 21st century television.

It is worth mentioning the dedicated website accompanying Mittell's book, allowing the reader to watch the analysed clips while reading or enabling him/her to revisit particular instances by considering the excerpt placed next to the clip. Although the analyses offered by Mittell are satisfac-

torily clear and precise the clips cement a sense of what the series look like. Thus befitting the style of this book, which elaborately chronicles the importance of paratexts and transmedia storytelling, the website functions like a form of transmedia storytelling by providing the visual material one would otherwise likely search for on Google. Narrative complexity is a distinctive and oftentimes unconventional mode that typically breaks with traditional episodic narratives and seriality by playing with the four main elements of serial television: storyworld, temporality, events, and characters. Often fearlessly confusing spectators, complex TV offers its viewers a ‘cognitive workout’ (p. 35), encouraging them to become more actively engaged in observing and problem solving. Most interestingly, Mittell introduces the concept of the ‘operational aesthetic’ (p. 42), a characteristic element of complex TV encouraging a meta-reflexive viewing mode that makes viewers engage with series form in addition to content.

Mittell also discusses melodrama as being a recognisable narrative mode of complex series. Oftentimes referred to as being ‘soapy’, Mittell successfully discusses how melodrama should instead be seen as a narrative mode that ‘uses suspense to portray “moral legibility”’ (p. 244). While contending that ‘the prevalence of serial melodrama within complex television across a range of genres enables a particularly provocative set of practices to challenge and revise established gender norms’ (p. 260), Mittell says that precisely our understanding of melodrama as a part of complex TV affects our comprehension of the gender politics in these series, as complex TV usually offers a mix of gendered appeals and redefines traditional representations of gender in various ways. Looking at beginnings, Mittell brings in David Bordwell’s ‘model of narrative comprehension’ (1985) to explain how the pilot of a series establishes its intrinsic norms and points to the relevant extrinsic norms (e.g. style, narrative mode, genre). By arguing that it is more useful to discuss a pilot in terms of narrative comprehension rather than close content analysis Mittell shows how this works as a blueprint and marketing technique to interest network executives and eventually television audiences.



Acknowledging how all series begin and eventually conclude, endings are appropriately discussed in the final chapter. The first case study discusses how many series turn towards metafiction in light of their impending finales. Befitting complex TV's operational aesthetic, 'curtain calls', call-backs, or flash-sideways allow us (and the creators) to say goodbye to the characters we have come to know so well. Mittell furthermore highlights the controversy surrounding endings, using the cut-to-black of *The Sopranos*. After

giving his own interpretation of the ending Mittell concludes by stressing the importance of endings in general: '[e]ither way, the finale highlights the degree to which endings matter in serial television, serving as the lasting image (or lack thereof) that will be remembered and discussed long after the rest of the series fades from memory' (p. 338).

Before delving deeper into audience comprehension of complex series it is worth mentioning the third chapter, focusing on authorship in television and how viewers tend to use it. As a producer's medium, Mittell argues that authorship in television can be defined as 'authorship by management' (p. 88), with the head writer often being referred to as creator and showrunner (also executive producer) of a series. However, television authorship can be flexible, influenced by external discourses and often dependent on legal and economic regulations. It is in online fan cultures that showrunners most significantly assume this role of authorship and where they can engage with fans through paratexts. Acknowledging that viewers are aware there is no single creator and that they do not need authorship to understand narratives, Mittell rightly claims that many do infer authorship, making the showrunner into a god-like persona. Finally, Mittell does well to link this inferred author function to the operational aesthetics, saying that when viewers engage 'upstream' (using Torben Grodal's [2005] term) they marvel at how the inferred author has accomplished something (p. 108).

Three chapters focus more specifically on viewer comprehension of complex TV. Using Bordwell's 'cognitive poetic model' that assumes spectators actively construct story worlds in their minds, the fifth chapter researches how the viewer comprehends complex storytelling that is based on planned confusion. Series manage viewer memories by using diegetic techniques such as subjective flashbacks and dialogue, as well as non-diegetic techniques like recaps and credit sequences, and through extratextual memory triggers by means of online paratexts. As the drive of watching series is to increase knowledge the forming of curiosity and anticipation hypotheses signal our investment in them – an activity that turns into theorising when viewers engage in online discussions. Spoilers do not necessarily exclude pleasure, due to our involuntary emotional responses to suspense. Mittell furthermore argues that the spoiled watcher and the re-watcher may derive additional pleasure by functioning more like a critic, looking at the operational aesthetic and comparing the experience to the previous viewing. This critical viewing mode is further explored in the next chapter, where Mittell, in line with later chapters on paratexts, argues for

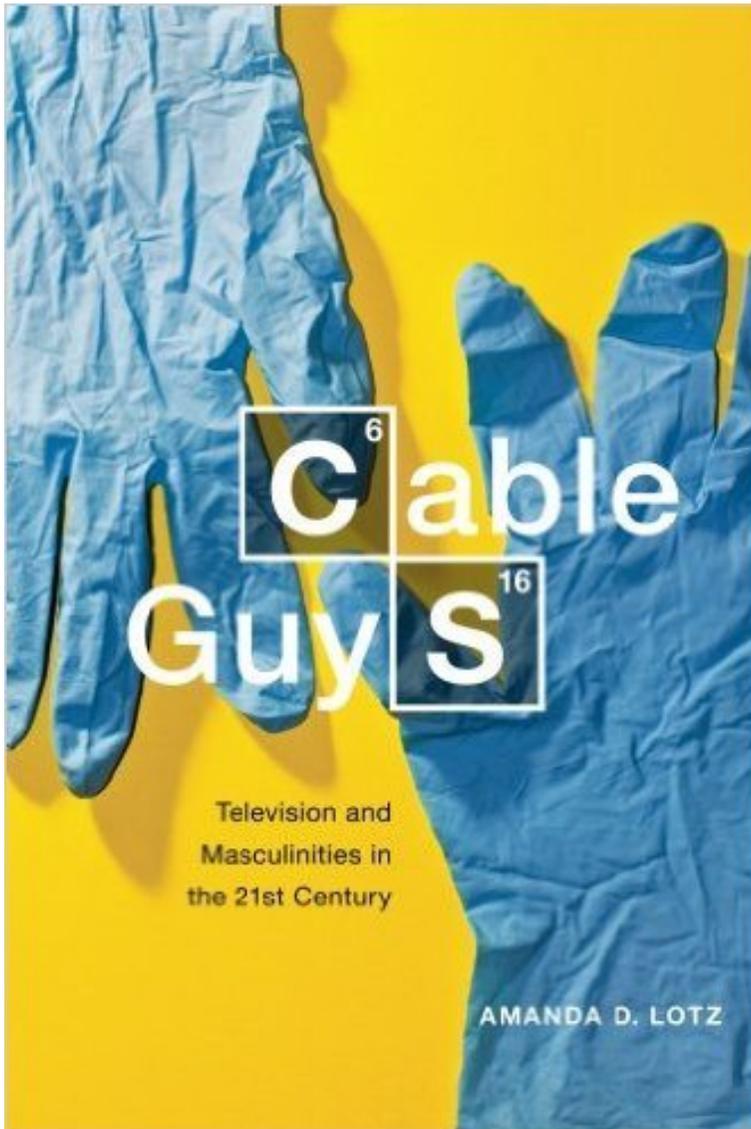
the inclusion of proper evaluative texts in scholarship. By looking at 'why something matters' (p. 226) evaluative texts invite useful debates that could give us a better insight into how a series works and how the viewer engages with it. Stating that complexity could be used as a criterion of evaluation rather than valuation, as quality TV indicates, Mittell engagingly demonstrates the usefulness of evaluation of a series 'on its own aesthetic terms' (p. 224).

Comprehension is furthermore likely fed by official and unofficial orienting paratexts outside the diegetic storyworld that can help viewers make sense of the often confusing and challenging narratives of complex TV. Distinguishing between three forms of orienting paratexts – recapitulation, analysis, expansion – Mittell shows how fans orient the four storytelling dimensions of time, events, characters, and space. Here, one can identify what may be a key distinction between complex TV and other contemporary media: complex series are 'drillable' rather than simply 'spreadable'. By inviting viewers to not only engage horizontally with a series but also inviting them to dig deeper, complex series invite a different kind of fandom that, as Mittell recognises, may not be for everyone. One can furthermore engage with a series through the transmedia paratext, which is the unified experience of a story resulting from the combination of integral elements of a fiction that has been spread out across a variety of media. Arguing that television generally invites unbalanced forms of transmedia with the series being the main element of the story Mittell furthermore notes that these texts are constrained by needing to reward those that engage with them without disregarding those who do not. Transmedia paratexts such as books and video games allow us to spend additional time with characters with whom we maintain parasocial bonds, posing a challenge for creators to make the paratexts 'real' to the series. Extremely useful here is Mittell's case study based on his own experience with engaging in the transmedia paratexts of *Lost*, which in combination with a look at *Breaking Bad* shows how different forms of complex storytelling warrant different forms of transmedia storytelling.

Finally, I will briefly explore Mittell's fourth chapter, which focuses on arguably the most important element of television series (p. 118): characters – the subject in which Mittell's and Lotz's books most notably connect and complement each other. Using Murray Smith's 'structure of sympathy' (1995), Mittell demonstrates how one forms parasocial relationships with characters resulting from the stability of core characters in serial television.

Favouring the term ‘character elaboration’ over ‘development’, Mittell rightly states that most characters hardly change over time, but our perception of them does. However, complex TV characteristically plays with traditional norms, with the antihero providing a popular complication of our parasocial relationships. Like charisma, relative morality, and ‘fictional relief’ (Vaage 2013), Mittell suggests that ‘operational allegiance’ may contribute to our liking of the antihero, as our fascination with the construction and presentation of a character makes us root for his ‘triumph in storytelling, if not his actual triumph within the story’ (p. 163).

Complementing Mittell’s predominantly formal analysis of complex characters, Amanda Lotz incorporates approaches from a variety of fields (e.g. cultural, gender, and television studies) to investigate male characters on contemporary cable television. Building on previous work on characters, *Redesigning Women* (2006) in particular, Lotz has written a much-needed book on the representations of men and shifting masculinities in 21st century television. Although she addresses the industrial contexts this book’s focus is on identifying the varied constructions of masculinities on television, which, mostly due to the prominence of feminist debates, have been left largely unexplored in television studies. This book does not provide a blueprint of what male characters are supposed to be like; it rather explores the struggles of men as represented on 21st century television. Lotz sets out analytical boundaries and explains terminology in the first chapter. Researching masculinities in cable series at the beginning of the 21st century, a period which she calls ‘post-second-wave’, Lotz argues that the influences of second-wave feminism on male identities have not yet been explored. She furthermore states that feminism is not the only factor to influence masculinity, as changes in generational identity have led to changes in audience as well as characters, with gay rights movements bringing further changes to gender scripts. Additionally, Lotz explains her framework for understanding post-second-wave masculinities as well as contextualising these characters, stating that there is not a single dominant masculinity but rather a variety of different masculinities are on offer on 21st century television.



Lotz consequently looks at how, in the realm of cable television, (male) characters have gained a more refined interiority and are allowed a gradual construction, leading to the rise of the male-centred series. Often offering problematic discussions of gender scripts, Lotz discusses how these ‘cable guys’ could be seen as giving a voice to anxieties faced by men in contemporary society, but she also shows how other series (*The Sopranos* in particular) feature as antecedents to these series by changing viewer expectations

for cable series. Consequently, Lotz discusses the commonalities and themes of these male-centred series. Looking at their portrayal in relation to work she notes there is a more accurate balance of presenting men that have or have not gone to college, as well as the ensuing socio-economic status of these characters, which often accounts for a site of struggle. In relation to home paternity appears an important aspect of their identity, with most men notably not being able to be the father they want to be. Often involved in 'companionate marriages' (p. 73), most men struggle with broken relationships. Finally, most of these men are characterised by problematic relationships with their fathers who they vehemently try to improve upon. There is, notably, a lack of gay male protagonists and a dominating whiteness of the characters, which Lotz attributes to being too much to deal with for these already troubled males. Concluding by arguing that these shows 'are meditations on what it is to be a straight white man, on what they do or feel they must do in the particular time of the beginning of the 21st century in the United States' (p. 79), Lotz acknowledges that both characters and audiences are confused by who these men are, thereby making their flawed decisions understandable. By recognising these male-centred series as portraying masculinity in crisis Lotz' work in this book forms a useful elaboration on Mittell's similar assertion (p. 253).

Where Mittell's discussion of these antiheroes focused largely on audience engagement with them, Lotz takes a different approach when further exploring these flawed men: she looks at how the struggles of anti-heroes relate to the real world, as well as analysing how and why these men have resorted to breaking the law to provide for their families. Acknowledging that these men do not so much blame women for their problems but rather the gender scripts in society, Lotz argues that their problems are 'structural and institutional' rather than the result of 'individual failing' (p. 88). Lotz divides the anti-heroes in two categories: 'any men' struggling with pride, ego, and responsibilities to family, and 'outlaws' struggling with legacies of dead fathers and trying to figure out how to be a men in post-second-wave society. Characters like Walter White resort to breaking the law out of desperation and narratives of these series navigate how these men deal with their crises. Interestingly then, Lotz notes that while 'any men' appear to be bent on breaking US laws to reach their goals, 'outlaws' appear to want to return to US law by abandoning the laws of their own subcultures. In the final two chapters Lotz examines male friendships and interactions with one another. In the 'homosocial enclave' men's interactions reveal

their struggles with the expectations of masculinity, and humour is used to police boundaries of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. More than workplace banter, these conversations occupy specially created story-time, not as a matter of driving the narrative forward, but of enabling character development. According to Lotz the value of the homosocial enclave lies in its making 'public what are otherwise acts of uncensored speech that allow a different vantage point on male anxieties and vulnerabilities' (p. 144). While these discourses reveal different masculinities they are by no means endorsing patriarchal structures. Following group friendships, Lotz takes a closer look at dyadic male intimacy. Different from the traditional buddy narratives that relied on patriarchal norms favouring work relationships over personal relationships, the dyadic hetero intimacy Lotz identifies in post-second-wave series is strongly influenced by feminist reconstructions of patriarchal norms. The narrative elements and attention to maintaining the relationships are similar to those often associated with heterosexual relationships. In this chapter Lotz discusses how these series variably challenge heteronormativity, while also showing how they work to lessen the gay panic that these intimate relationships may invite.

Much important work has been published on poetics (e.g. Bordwell 1989) and character engagement (Smith 1995) in film, but cognitive approaches to television remain underexplored. Mittell provides an essential framework for discussing complex television series, thereby proving the importance of formal analysis in understanding how complex storytelling works and how viewers go about understanding it. Discussions on Netflix and other online streaming services appear somewhat brief; it would have been interesting to see additional arguments on the influence and poetics of these highly popular television modes. Where previous scholarship has focused on researching minorities in television – women (e.g. Lotz 2006), African-Americans (e.g. Gray 2004), homosexuals (e.g. Chambers 2009; Becker 2006) – Lotz fills a gap in research by looking at men. Defining a new framework to investigate these 'feminist masculinities', she provides a well-researched account of the cultural and industrial changes that have brought about a shift in the portrayal of masculinities on television. One element worth further exploration is a discussion of how these masculinities function in relation to post-second-wave women, although Lotz does touch on this subject in the second chapter in particular.

These books connect in their discussions on gender, as both point towards a key element of complex series: they are not merely male-centred;

they break with patriarchal predecessors by telling stories of struggling men, navigating shifting masculinities in the era of post-second-wave feminism. They also point towards the relative lack of complex female protagonists (anti-heroes in particular), which they attribute to the industrial tendency to follow successful structures of previous (male-centred) series. Lotz even goes a step further by asking whether we are ready to see flawed female protagonists as ‘individuals and not as indictments of feminism’ (p. 192). This appears a valid concern, one that I have asked myself many times, but as the success of shows like *Homeland* (2011-), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-) has shown, this may be slowly changing. It certainly opens a door to future research, for which both Lotz and Mittell have provided important observations and frameworks.

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