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How To Watch Television

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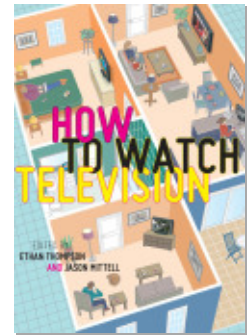
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Introduction

An Owner's Manual for Television

ETHAN THOMPSON AND JASON MITTELL

Imagine that you just purchased a brand new television, and inside the box, along with the remote, the Styrofoam packaging, and various cables, was this book: *How to Watch Television*. Would you bother to open the cellophane wrapper and read it? Sure, you might scan through the “quick start” guide for help with the connections, and the new remote control may take some getting used to, but who needs instructions for how to *watch* what's on screen? Do-it-yourself manuals abound for virtually every topic, but TV content is overwhelmingly regarded as self-explanatory, as most people assume that we all just know how to watch television. We disagree. Thus, this is your owner's manual for how to watch TV.

First, a word of warning: this particular manual is not designed to tell you what to watch or not watch. Nor does it speak with a singular voice or seek to produce a consensus about what is “good” and what is “bad” on all those channels. In other words, the forty writers who contribute critical essays don't all agree on how to watch television. Despite the hundreds of years of cumulative TV-watching and dozens of advanced degrees among them, you can rest assured that, in many cases, they would disagree vehemently about the merits of one TV show versus another. This collection draws upon the insight of so many different people because there are so many different ways to watch TV and so much TV to watch. To be sure, the writers of many of these essays might “like” or “dislike” the programs they write about—sometimes passionately so. But we are all concerned more with thinking critically about television than with proclaiming its artistic or moral merits (or lack thereof). This book collects a variety of essays and presents them as different ways of watching, methods for *looking at* or *making sense of* television, not just issuing broad value judgments. This is what good criticism does—it applies a model of thinking to a text in order to expand our understanding and experience of it. In our book, those “texts,” a term scholars use to refer to any cultural work, regardless of its medium, are specific television programs. Too often, people assume that the goal of criticism is to judge a creative work as

either “good” or “bad” and provide some rudimentary explanation why. Let us call this the “thumbs up/down” model of criticism. This model is useful if one is skimming television listings for something to pass the time, but not so useful if one wishes to think about and understand what’s in those listings.

The “thumbs up/down” model reduces criticism to a simple physical gesture, possibly accented by a grunt. In contrast, we want to open up a text to different readings, broaden our experience of a text and the pleasures it may produce, and offer a new way to think about that text. Criticism should expand a text, rather than reduce it, and it is seldom concerned with simplistic good or bad judgments. In fact, most of the contributors to this volume would feel uncomfortable if they were forced to issue such a judgment on the programs they write about with a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” icon next to the title of each essay. While most of the authors do provide some judgment of the relative worth of the program they analyze, those evaluations are always more complicated than a simple up or down verdict. One of the ironies of media criticism is that the individual who is probably more responsible than anyone else for the popularity of the “thumbs up/down” model is Roger Ebert, one of America’s most thoughtful, articulate film critics from the 1960s until his death in 2013. Yet it was a succession of television shows starring Ebert and fellow critic Gene Siskel—first *Sneak Previews* (PBS, 1975–1982), then *At the Movies* (syndicated, 1982–1986) and *Siskel & Ebert* (syndicated, 1986–1999)—that popularized “thumbs up/down” criticism. How can we reconcile the fact that Ebert, an insightful critic and compelling writer, could also have helped reduce criticism to the simplest of physical gestures?

The answer, of course, is that Ebert didn’t do it; a television program did, and television criticism can help us to understand why. If we examine the structure of these programs, we can see the usefulness of the “thumbs up/down” gimmick. Film, television, theater, and book reviews all have a long history in popular newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting, following the common model of making a value judgment and providing the reasons for that judgment. Sometimes the judgment is a vague endorsement of the work owing to particular qualities, while other times it is quantified—“3 out of 5 stars,” for example. But in all those cases there are typically clear rationales, with the “stars” or “thumbs” providing a quick reference and reason to read further. There were movie critics on TV before *Sneak Previews*, but this program’s innovative structure featured two critics discussing a number of films, with one critic introducing a clip and launching a conversation or debate about the film’s merits. The “thumbs” metric provided a jumping off point for discussion, and guaranteed that the two had something concrete to agree or disagree about with a reliable and consistent structure for each review. At the end of each episode, the hosts recapped their judgments on each film, giving viewers a shorthand reminder to consider the next time they

themselves were “at the movies.” While “thumbs up/down” might be a reductive form of media criticism, it made for entertaining and sometimes useful TV, creating film criticism uniquely suited for the television medium. By looking at the various Siskel & Ebert TV shows and thinking about how “thumbs up/down” might have “fit” with the television medium, we can understand that program and appreciate it beyond whatever effect it might have had on narrowing the public’s expectations about what media criticism does.

It is notable that while there have been television shows focused on film criticism and book criticism (like C-SPAN’s *Book TV*), there has never been a TV program focused on television criticism. In fact, television criticism has an unusual history within popular media—traditionally, television reviews were published in newspapers upon the debut of a show if at all, rather than dealing with an ongoing series as episodes aired. Magazines like *The New Yorker* or *Newsweek* might run pieces analyzing an ongoing series, but not with any comprehensive structure or commitment to covering a series as it unfolds over time. The rise of online criticism in the twenty-first century has drastically changed the terrain of television criticism, as sites like *The A.V. Club* and *HitFix*, as well as the online versions of print magazines like *Time* and *Hollywood Reporter*, feature regular coverage of many series, reviewing weekly episodes of new shows and returning to classic television series with critical coverage to inspire re-watching them. Noel Murray’s series “A Very Special Episode” at *The A.V. Club* is an example of such “classic television” criticism, featuring this tagline: “Sometimes a single TV episode can exemplify the spirit of its time and the properties that make television a unique medium.” This book shares that critical outlook, and an expanded version of Murray’s essay on “The Interview,” a *M*A*S*H* episode, is included in this book.

Despite the rise in robust television criticism in popular online sites, academics have been less involved in such discussions of the medium. While the histories of academic fields like literary studies, film studies, art history, and music include many critical analyses of specific works, television studies as a field features far less criticism of specific programs. In part this is due to the series nature of most television, as the boundaries of a “text” are much more fluid when discussing a program that might extend across months, years, or even decades. Additionally, television studies emerged as an academic field in the 1980s and 1990s under the rubric of Anglo-American cultural studies, an approach that emphasizes contexts over texts, and thus much of television scholarship is focused on understanding the industrial, regulatory, and reception contexts of the medium more than critical analyses of specific programs. Books examining a particular program do exist, but critical works in television studies more typically focus on a format or genre (reality TV), a decade (the 1960s), or a methodology or area of study (industry

studies). There are exceptions to this, of course; online academic journals like *FlowTV* often feature short critical essays on particular TV series. But we believe that there is a crucial role for television scholars to use our expertise about the medium's history, aesthetics, structures, and cultural importance to provide critical analyses of specific programs. Additionally, we want to see scholars writing for audiences broader than just other scholars, so we have commissioned shorter essays than typically found in an academic journal or book, and asked that they be written accessibly for students and a general readership.

While there is no single method employed by the dozens of authors found in this volume, most essays can be described as examples of *textual analysis*. The shared approach assumes that there is something to be discovered by carefully examining a cultural work, or “text”—in the case of this book's topic, that means watching a television program closely. In some cases, the text might be a single episode or two; in others, the essay looks more broadly at a particular series, or multiple programs connected by a key thread. But in each case, the author uses a “close watching” of a program to make a broader argument about television and its relation to other cultural forces, ranging from representations of particular identities to economic conditions of production and distribution. The goal of such textual analysis is to connect the program to its broader contexts, and make an argument about the text's cultural significance, thus providing a model for how you can watch television with a critical eye—and write your own works of television criticism.

A piece of television criticism, like the ones modeled in the rest of this book, can have a wide range of goals. Certainly all the book's authors believe that watching television is an important and pervasive facet of modern culture, and that taking time to analyze programming is a vital critical act. Some authors are more invested in understanding television as a specific medium, with industrial and regulatory systems that shape its programming, and its own unique formal system of visual and aural communication that forge TV's modes of storytelling and representation across a number of genres. Others regard television more as a window to broader social issues, whether by establishing norms of identity categories like gender or race or by framing political agendas and perspectives. These are not opposing perspectives, as television critics can think about the interplay between the medium itself and its broader context—indeed, every essay in this book hopes to shine a light on something about television itself as well as something broader within our culture, as we believe that knowing how to watch TV is a crucial skill for anyone living in our media-saturated world.

Of course, for many people reading this book, the idea of “watching television” might seem like an anachronism or a fossil from the previous century—what with so many electronic gadgets and “new media” surrounding us these days, why single

out television? Television can seem to be an object from another era, quaint in its simplicity and functions. Such a response is the product of a very limited notion of what “television” is, and indeed, if you do think of TV as just a piece of furniture around which the family gathers each night, then there is something potentially outdated about television. However, television is (and always has been) more than just furniture, and now in our era of convergence among different technologies and cultural forms, there is more TV than ever. New or emergent forms of television work alongside the residual or “old,” and it’s important to remember that the majority of viewers still do most of their watching on traditional television sets. If we define the word “television” literally down to its Latin roots, it is often translated as “remote seeing.” By thinking about television not as furniture but as “remote seeing” (and hearing) of sounds and moving images from a distant time or place, we can recognize that so many of our new media interactions are new kinds of television that we integrate into our lives alongside the familiar and pleasurable uses of TV we’ve known for so long.

Rather than radically reconfiguring our uses of media culture, new technologies and media forms emerge and find a place among and alongside those forms that already exist; a medium might ebb and flow in popularity, but seldom disappears altogether. And one of the most important aspects of all forms of media engagement, whether watching on a television set or mobile phone, is that these forms of engagement become part of our everyday lives, adapting to our geographical, technological, and personal contexts. Moreover, while new technologies might enable some to claim that they do not watch television, we believe that people who say they don’t watch TV are either lying or deluding themselves. TV is everywhere in our culture and on many different screens, as we often watch television programs on our computers, or play videogames on our televisions. People who say they don’t watch TV are usually suggesting they don’t watch *those* kinds of TV shows that they assume less sophisticated viewers watch uncritically. But even as it gets reconfigured in the digital era, television is still America’s dominant mass medium, impacting nearly everyone.

A brief anecdote about the dual editors’ own media consumption practices while writing this introduction point to the role of television and other technologies in contemporary life. One of the editors of this book (Ethan) began writing the first draft of this introduction while watching a professional football game live via satellite television at a ranch in rural south Texas. The other editor (Jason) was at that very time travelling by train with his family across Europe, where they were watching Looney Tunes cartoons on an iPad. Ethan was watching a program via the latest digital high-definition TV technology, but in a highly traditional way—live broadcast to a mass audience sharing the same act of “remote seeing.” Certainly one of the great pleasures of watching televised sports, which

remains one of the most popular and prevalent forms of television today, is the sense of communal participation in an event as it occurs, shared by viewers both within the same room and across the globe; this experience depends on liveness, even at the cost of watching commercials and boring bits that modern technologies like DVRs can easily bypass. As a fan, Ethan watches for the sense of participation in what is happening at the time—a case of old-fashioned remote seeing enabled by new technologies.

Jason's experience is quite different, but still falls under the general category of "watching TV." As his kids watched Looney Tunes on a European train, they embraced one of television's longstanding primary functions: allowing children to see things beyond their personal experiences. This literally was "remote seeing," as his kids were watching something from a distant time and place: Looney Tunes were created as animated shorts screened in American movie theaters from the 1930s to 1950s, but they thrived throughout the second half of the twentieth century as a staple of kids' TV, and more recently through numerous DVD releases. Shifting these classic cartoons to an iPad enables a mobile viewing experience that trades the imagined community of the television schedule for the convenience of on-demand, self-programmed media consumption. While technically there is no "television" involved in watching cinematic cartoons on a mobile digital device, we believe that the cultural practices and formal elements established via decades of television viewing carry over to these new technologies, making watching TV a more prevalent and diverse practice in the contemporary era of media convergence.

These brief descriptions of watching television foreground our diverse viewing contexts, which help make watching TV such a multifaceted cultural practice—we multitask, watch on a range of screens in unusual places, and experience television programming across timeframes spanning from live to decades-old, and spatial locations from rural Texas to European trains and beyond. The rest of the book focuses less on specific viewing practices, and more on how we can use our expertise as media scholars to understand the programming that we might encounter in such diverse contexts. This is the goal of any form of criticism: to provide insight into a text, not to proclaim a singular "correct" interpretation. Indeed, there is no such "correct" interpretation, any more than there is a "correct" way to watch a football game or cartoon.

The essays in this book cover a representative sampling of major approaches to television criticism, and they are quite different from one another in terms of the TV they analyze and their methods of analysis. However, they do share some basic assumptions that are worth highlighting:

1. TV is complicated. This can mean many different things. Sometimes the text itself is formulaic, yet its pleasures are complicated. Other times, the

narrative of a TV program doesn't present a clear plot, yet attempting to puzzle out the story is a fundamental pleasure. Sometimes where a program comes from is complicated—the question of who created and is responsible for it can, for example, be less than straightforward. Or perhaps the meanings expressed by a show are complicated, presenting contradictions and diverse perspectives than can be interpreted. The bottom line is that television criticism seeks to understand and explain TV, no matter how simple or complex it might seem at first glance.

2. To understand TV, you need to watch TV. This might seem obvious, but there is a tradition of critics writing about television (usually to condemn it) without actually taking the time to watch much of it, or even to specify what TV texts they are criticizing. Judgments like these tend to be common amongst politicians, pundits, and anyone else looking to use television as a convenient “bad object” to make a point. Understanding TV requires more, though—and more than just watching TV, too. That is, some types of television require particular viewing practices to really understand them, such as the long-term viewing of serials and series, or the contextualized viewing of remakes or historically nostalgic programming.
3. Nobody watches the same TV. We watch a wide variety of programs, and even in those cases when we watch the same programs, we often watch them in vastly different contexts. Television is still a mass medium experienced by millions, but the specific experience of watching television is far from universal. While television in a previous generation was more shared, with events like the moon landing or the finale of *M*A*S*H* drawing the attention of a majority of Americans, even then our experiences of watching television were diverse, as viewers often think quite differently about the same texts.
4. Criticism is not the same as evaluation. You don't have to like (or dislike) a particular television program to think and write critically about it, and our goal is not to issue a thumb up or down. However, evaluative reactions to a text can be a useful way to get started thinking critically about television, as you attempt to figure out what you are reacting to (or against). Many of these essays foreground their authors' own evaluative reactions to programs that they love or hate (or even feel ambivalent about), but in every case, the critic finds his or her particular program interesting. Exploring what makes it so is a worthy goal for television criticism.

What follows in this book is a set of critical analyses that model how we might watch a particular television program that we find interesting. The programs represented are widely diverse and even eclectic, including undisputed classics,

contemporary hits, and a few that you might not have heard of before. They cover a range of genres, from cooking shows to cartoons, sports to soap operas, and they span the medium's entire history. Even so, we do not claim to be comprehensive—there are countless other programs that might be the subject of such works of television criticism. We have focused primarily on American television, or in a few cases how non-American programming is seen in an American context, although given the pervasive reach of American television throughout the globe, we hope that international readers will find these critical works helpful as well. The authors are media scholars with a range of expertise, experiences, and backgrounds, offering a wide range of viewpoints that might highlight different ways of watching TV. Each essay starts with a brief overview of its content, and ends with some suggestions for further reading to delve deeper into the relevant topic and approach.

Each of these critical essays can be read on its own, in any order. We encourage readers to go straight to a particular program or approach that interests them. However, we have organized the book into five major areas to assist readers looking for essays that speak to particular issues or approaches, as well as instructors seeking to assign essays in relation to particular topics. Essays in the first section, "TV Form," consider aesthetics, analyzing visual and sound style, production techniques, and narrative structure, and showing how television style is crucial to understanding television content. The essays in "TV Representations" focus on television as a site of cultural representation of different groups and identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Although many essays in the book are politically concerned, those in the "TV Politics" section look more explicitly at public affairs, government, and national and global boundaries in both fiction and factual programs. In "TV Industry," essays focus on economics, production, and regulation in historical and contemporary television culture. Those in "TV Practices" consider television in the context of everyday life, and the ways in which engagement with television texts carries across media and technologies. In the contemporary digital convergence era, it is increasingly important to think beyond a single television screen into a multiplication of media and devices.

Finally, while most owners' manuals get filed away and forgotten or thrown in the recycling bin unread, we hope this one will enjoy a more enduring presence. This book, the essays inside it, and the critical methods the authors employ, all seek to expand the ways you think about television. If the book itself doesn't earn a spot next to your remote control, we have no doubt that some essay inside it will form a lasting impression. Perhaps it will provoke you to think differently about a program you love (or hate), or it will make you a fan of a program you had never seen or even heard of before. Better yet, we hope *How to Watch Television* will prompt you to think critically and apply the methods you've read about

in your own original way, while discussing or writing about a program of your own choosing. That is how this owners' manual can prove to be more permanent than others: as you flip through the channels, and especially when you stop to view a particular program, we hope that you cannot help but think critically about the television that you watch.

FURTHER READING

Butler, Jeremy G. *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Gray, Jonathan, and Amanda D. Lotz. *Television Studies*. Boston: Polity, 2011.

Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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