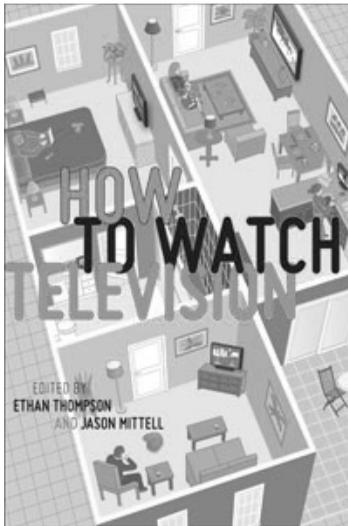


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Book Review: *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell



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How to Watch Television is an especially difficult book to characterize, as its essays on television reach in every conceivable direction. The collection is a generally well-balanced, wide-ranging if not always substantial meal in television criticism. The book is aimed at undergraduate students new to television studies, and covers many hot issues in media studies, such as comic book adaptations and product placement. The book has no cohesive argument, instead providing short, discrete articles on each of its forty topics. While this approach could prove dizzying to readers who attempt to consume this tome whole, it nevertheless provides a wealth of material for instructors looking to assign a reading on a given subject that will engage students without overwhelming them.

In order to provide some structure to its sprawling contents, the book is divided into five sections: aesthetics, representation, politics, industry, and practice. Each article is limited to about eight pages in length, and discusses its topic through the lens of a single television show. Suzanne Scott's article on fan communities and engagement, for example, uses *Battlestar Galactica*

as a case study, and Abigail De Kosnik explains soap opera narrative style through *One Life to Live*. Most of the televisual texts chosen to illustrate the author's arguments come from the past ten years, with a few outliers among accepted classics. This is a strategic choice by the authors, as the intended audience is far more likely to take an interest in articles on their favorite shows than articles on shows they have never seen or heard of. Heather Hendershot could have easily written about *Murphy Brown* rather than *Parks and Recreation*, but the latter is far more likely to appeal to the readership. Discussions of classic shows are related directly to current issues: Miranda J. Banks argues that *I Love Lucy*'s writer-producer Jess Oppenheimer can be considered an early predecessor of the modern showrunner.

These articles provide a good example of how to write a close textual analysis of a single show. It is easy to see how students struggling to write their first essay on television could look to this book for examples of how to develop an argument, or draw relevant textual examples. Highlights include delectable slices of film history such as Victoria

E. Johnson's article on the birth and brand-shaping of *Monday Night Football*, or analytical gems such as Michael Z. Newman's detailed and amusing article on how *Everyday Italian* crafts the persona of its celebrity host. However, the brevity of the essays has its drawbacks. As introductory articles, each piece must devote significant time to explaining basic concepts of media studies, as well as providing just enough critical context to inform the student without overwhelming him or her. The authors do an admirable job of condensing the most important nuggets of information into what space they have. But this is a significant burden for such concise articles, and often shifts their emphasis from critical engagement to general overview. Jeremy G. Butler's article on *Mad Men*'s visual style, for example, must first define *mise-en-scène*, discuss the premise of the show, its place in the filmic hierarchy (less expensive and prestigious than a feature film but more so than most other television), and explain its socio-historical setting. After all this, the analysis of the show's aesthetic choices is necessarily truncated, and feels more like a summary than a persuasive argument.

In addition, the marriage of each issue to a single show could lead students to assume that the mores of that the show serves as a microcosm of television as a whole. The topic of feminism on the small screen, for example, is tackled through *Grey's*

Anatomy's creation of a utopian space for career-minded women. There is little contextualization of the show within the larger representation of women on screen, leaving one discomfited at the thought of new students of the field concluding that television as a whole is a feminist space.

In the introduction, editors Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell refer to the book as an "An Owner's Manual to Television." (1) This is an apt metaphor, as the articles serve as useful and succinct discussions of many of the most important areas of television studies. On the whole, the book is interesting and informative, full of articles that students (undergraduate and even graduate) would enjoy reading, and could bring to class with ready-formed opinions for discussion. Yet, as an instructor, I think many of these articles would work best paired with other texts. Very few of these articles zoom out far enough to consider the nature of television as a medium, or its broader implications for today's media landscapes. It is not enough to focus exclusively on a series of small component of the medium; students must also gain an understanding of the bigger picture, otherwise they might leave their first television class with memories of many interesting discussions, but an indistinct understanding of the field's overarching concepts.

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