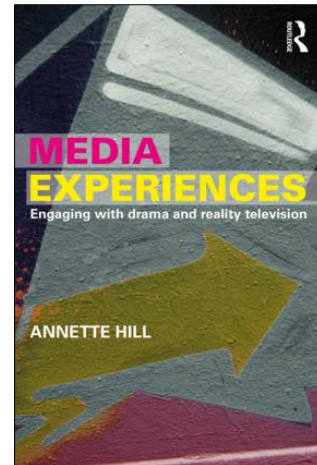


Annette Hill, **Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2019, 224 pp., \$150.00 (hardcover), \$39.95 (paperback).

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Annette Hill's **Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television** is, in many ways, a hybrid project. Not only does it explore both drama and reality TV, two genres that are often discussed separately, but it also occupies a border space between production and audience research. *Media Experiences* represents a collaboration between industry professionals and media scholars. This mixture of academia and industry, audience and production, is key to Hill's project; she stresses the value of listening to and respecting all stakeholders in the media dialectic, and this listening ethos permeates the text.



A key contribution of Hill's book is in the scope of the research she undertakes. Aside from this work, Hill notes, "few studies . . . offer an all-around picture of production, genre and text, and cultures of viewing" (p. 15). One recent example is Bondebjerg and colleagues (2017), but their work focuses specifically on European television drama, whereas Hill also includes reality television. Likewise, existing works on reality TV (e.g., Andrejevic, 2004; Kavka, 2012) or on audience studies (e.g., Carpentier, Schrøder, & Hallett, 2014; Napoli, 2011) tend to concentrate on one genre or on one side of the production-audience divide. Hill is invested in bridging those gaps, not only to provide scholars with a more detailed picture of the media landscape, but also to help content producers gain a richer, more qualitative understanding of audience engagement.

In Hill's first two chapters, she explains the nature of her project and introduces her central metaphor of pathways to media engagement. She envisions "roaming audiences," who traverse the media landscape with "an emergent sense of rights" (p. 3) to engage with media when, where, and how they see fit, often in patterns that disrupt the traditional expectations of producers and broadcasters. A key concern for industry is the ability to measure audience attention, but Hill notes that the traditional metrics of overnight and plus-seven ratings, even with the addition of contemporary social media analytics, capture only limited dimensions of audience engagement. She offers qualitative academic research as an opportunity for industry professionals to understand audiences in more nuanced ways; her concept of "engagement as cultural resonance" helps to reveal the reasons behind a show's success, and treats audiences as people rather than numbers.

To explore audience engagement and the concept of roaming, Hill uses the transnational crime drama known alternatively as *Bron* (Swedish), *Broen* (Danish), and *The Bridge*. In chapter 3, she details audience practices of "pathmaking" as they roam between different media platforms, viewing locations, and temporal viewing patterns (e.g., live viewing, catch-up, binge-watching) to engage with *Bron*. Hill connects these audience practices to "the old ways of footpaths that were imagined as 'worldly,' that is to say open to all, in countries such as Britain and Sweden" (p. 36). She demonstrates that audiences find ways around restrictions and forge new paths of engagement despite the practical limitations on viewing created by broadcast

schedules, regional boundaries, and commercialization. Later, in chapter 5, Hill returns to *Bron/Broen/The Bridge* and delves into both production and audience interviews, demonstrating the “creative and emotional labour [that] help to shape audience engagement with this drama” (p. 93) and the deep cultural resonance that drives fans to become pathmakers, creating their own engagement patterns.

The failure of traditional industry metrics to fully capture audience engagement is exemplified in Hill’s case studies of two other programs, the reality TV competition *Got to Dance* and the conspiracy drama *Utopia*. Hill discusses *Got to Dance* in chapters 4 and 7 and *Utopia* in chapter 6; both shows were ultimately canceled, Hill suggests, in part because of industry’s inability to productively measure and respond to audience engagement. In the case of *Utopia*, the show’s lackluster domestic ratings brought production to an end, to the distress of a large and passionate transnational fan base. Hill’s audience research revealed that many viewers, who gravitated to the show in part because of its global conspiracy thriller narrative, either lived in countries where the show was censored and unavailable via legal broadcast, or simply avoided legal distribution channels for personal or ideological reasons. Traditional ratings did not capture the engagement of audiences who watched via illegal or informal means, underscoring Hill’s argument that industry professionals can benefit from qualitative academic research concerning their audiences.

In the case of *Got to Dance*, producers framed the show as authentic, prizing amateur contestants’ “passion for dance” rather than the “faux participation” of rival reality talent shows (p. 64), and dedicated audiences and aspiring participants alike embedded the show in their lives. However, when later seasons began to lose that sense of authenticity, broadcasters made sweeping changes to the show’s schedule and format that prioritized short-term ratings over the interests of long-time, dedicated audiences, leading to a sharp drop-off in viewers and ultimately, cancellation. This unfortunate end for *Got to Dance* is presented in contrast to the success of *MasterChef Denmark* (discussed in chapter 8), a local variation of the *MasterChef* format that demonstrated its understanding of Danish audiences through the integration of local food customs and pro-social values.

A theme that runs through Hill’s work is making visible the spectrum of labor that supports and co-creates television experiences. While the labor of production crews, audience members, reality contestants, and contestants’ supporters at home is interwoven with Hill’s arguments throughout the book, she devotes the entirety of chapter 9 to the largely invisible labor of warm-up acts, “a paradoxical profession that trains entertainers to not be the star of the show” (p. 164). This is a significant contribution to existing critical research that exposes invisible, undervalued, or unpaid labor in the reality television genre; warm-up acts are understudied compared to the scholarship that exists on production crews, on-screen contestants or participants, and family supporters (e.g., Andrejevic, 2011; Grazian, 2010; Jost, 2011; Winant, 2014).

Hill’s 10th chapter, a recapitulation of the audience-as-pathfinder metaphor, emphasizes the importance of listening to all parties involved in television’s dialectic of engagement: producers, directors, creators, writers, crew, live audiences, home audiences, illegal/informal audiences, reality contestants, contestants’ home support networks, and warm-up acts for live tapings. She concludes with a final example of live viewing parties for *RuPaul’s Drag Race* held in a Copenhagen gay bar, emphasizing that audiences create their own pathways to engagement, and that these pathways can then be adopted and reintegrated into

distribution models by media industries. Hill's insights suggest that producers should explore the paths that audiences make themselves, rather than trying to force viewership into a predetermined mold.

Although *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television* offers key insights into contemporary practices of roaming audiences, the spectrum of labor that co-creates television experiences, and the inadequacy of traditional ratings metrics for capturing audience engagement, the book would benefit from a more cohesive organizational strategy. The arrangement of chapters 3–9 seems haphazard; each chapter clearly concerns one of Hall's four key media texts (*Got to Dance*, *Utopia*, *MasterChef*, and *Bron/Broen/The Bridge*), but multiple chapters on *Got to Dance* and *Bron* are scattered throughout the text rather than organized together into sections. This strategy could be effective if the theoretical aims of these chapters were more clearly distinguished from each other, but chapters concerning the same text often develop similar ideas. The result is an argument that wanders back and forth between its key points, crisscrossing and doubling back on itself in a reflection of Hall's central topographical metaphor. I found it necessary to become a "pathfinder" myself, charting a new organizational path in order to engage with this text.

While *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television* does require some organizational pathfinding on the part of the reader, it effectively accomplishes its aim of bringing together audience and production, drama engagement and reality TV engagement. The case studies highlighting the gaps between traditional TV ratings and qualitative research on audience engagement demonstrate the need for Hall's theoretical work. This book will prove enlightening to industry professionals and media studies scholars alike.

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