International Journal of Communication 19(2025), Book Review 790–793 1932–8036/2025BKR0009

Hunter Hargraves, **Uncomfortable Television**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023, 254 pp., $26.95 (paperback).

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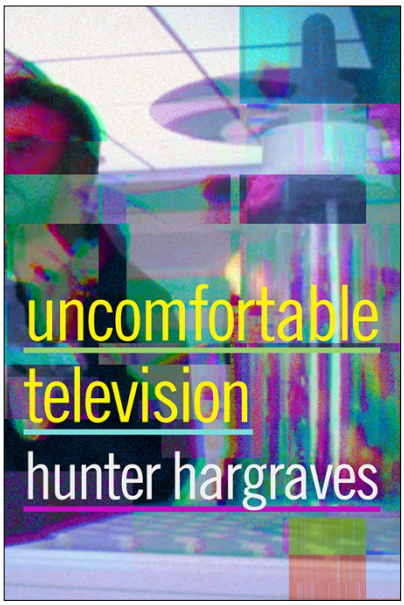

"For the uglies." With these sharp words, Hunter Hargraves opens **Uncomfortable Television**, a dedication that, beyond appearing as an affectionate and ironic greeting, serves as a true manifesto of intent. In a book exploring the affect of discomfort in postmillennial American television, this dedication foreshadows, with a personal touch, the research method the author adopts: an intimate, involved—indeed, we might say *participatory*—approach while maintaining a rigorously critical stance. Just as a scholar disseminates research results to peers, Hargraves seeks to make himself visible within his work, positioning himself in relation to the reader and offering an honest perspective that guarantees the integrity of the entire reflection. This approach does not undermine the objectivity of his analyses; rather, it strengthens them, allowing readers to understand who is writing, how he relates to the materials, and, very effectively, why television discomfort deserves such a central role in contemporary cultural critique.

A medium that has uniquely interpreted and narrated the cultural, political, and economic processes, television analyzed by Hargraves belongs to the complex turning point of the new millennium, characterized by the transition to digital, Internet expansion and new platforms but focusing especially on a rarely addressed aspect: discomfort, understood as a key affect of American television culture in the first two decades of the new century. In *Uncomfortable Television*, Hargraves employs a solid theoretical approach, exploring how the television medium has been able to transform discomfort into a form of spectator pleasure and, at the same time, a tool for adapting to the precariousness of late capitalism.

The book's central thesis is as clear as it is provocative: American television, starting in the early 2000s, makes discomfort a recurring narrative element and transforms this tool into a strategy of *governmentality*—a term Hargraves borrows from Foucault, describing "the way that the state governs and manages populations at a distance through various social institutions" (p. 1). Television programs like *Louie* (FX, 2010–2015, p. 2), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013, p. 122), or extreme reality shows function, the author argues, as devices through which audiences are educated to coexist with economic precariousness, social instability, and individual alienation. This process is intrinsically linked to neoliberal logic, which transforms individuals into solitary, disciplined consumers and recalls both avant-garde Marxist theories like Debord's (1967) The *Society of the Spectacle* or Marcuse's (1964) *One-Dimensional Man* and other contemporary reflections—consider *Feedback: Television Against Democracy* (Joselit, 2007), which similarly

highlights how television aesthetics and strategies can both reinforce and subvert contemporary power dynamics.

This process of transforming discomfort into a tool of ideological normalization finds a striking counterpart in Hargraves' analysis of televisual remix, particularly in *Jiz* (2009–2016, p. 90), Sienna D'Enema's profane reworking of *Jem and the Holograms* (syndication, 1985–1988, p. 89). By distorting the original's nostalgic innocence, *Jiz* unsettles viewers, forcing them to confront their sentimental attachments while exposing the ideological frameworks embedded in the source material. Hargraves argues that *Jiz* "is a perverted text that in turn perverts the memories of Jem fans" (p. 119). This example underscores how postmillennial television destabilizes familiar pleasures, aligning with neoliberal strategies of individualization and self-regulation while simultaneously offering moments of critical subversion.

Frequently cited is Fredric Jameson, whose reflections on postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm of late capitalism Hargraves revisits. He specifically references *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson, 1991), a key text in which Jameson analyzes aesthetic saturation and ideological integration in late-capitalist culture, here used to demonstrate how postmillennial television has absorbed and transformed discomfort into a narrative tool and spectator pleasure. This perspective is further enriched through dialogue with Linda Williams' (2014) *On The Wire*, where she explores the representational and critical dynamics of "quality television" through *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008, p. 122), a cornerstone series in Hargraves' discussion of postmillennial television. The reflection also engages Stuart Hall's famous *encoding/decoding* model from *Culture, Media, Language* (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1980), referenced to highlight how spectators' affective and interpretive responses are inextricably tied to their social and ideological positions.

The author's decision to make his critical and personal voice visible emerges particularly effectively in his reflections on irony and irritation, themes addressed with an almost playful awareness. His ability to articulate a complex yet accessible discourse is revealed both in his deep theoretical analysis and in the way he translates discomfort into a shared experience with the reader. It is as if Hargraves, in a typically postmillennial gesture, positions himself alongside the reader, traversing the uncomfortable territories of contemporary television together, or as *Jiz* does with *Jem* by distorting familiar comforts and demanding a confrontation with the ideological frameworks embedded in nostalgic media. Just as *Jiz* unsettles its audience by turning *Jem and the Holograms* into a profane, dissonant experience, Hargraves positions himself as a guide who both participates in and critiques the affective dynamics of discomfort. This dual approach—intimate yet rigorously analytical—allows the reader to navigate television's uneasy pleasures without reducing them to mere consumption. By maintaining this balance, the author invites us to interrogate our own complicity as viewers in a neoliberal cultural landscape that commodifies unease, turning discomfort into both a source of critical reflection and a subtle form of control.

A significant turning point in Hargraves' argument is, indeed, his interrogation of television consumption modes in neoliberal culture. The shift from a family audience to individualized viewing—enabled by DVR technology, streaming, and narrowcasting logic—has radically changed television's role: no longer a source of familial reassurance but a medium capable of provoking and normalizing unease. As

the author notes, these changes have encouraged the proliferation of segmented content, aimed at spectators confronting uncomfortable themes and affects individually. In short, postmillennial television replaces immediate pleasure with irony and discomfort, inviting the viewer to reflect critically on their social position.

Hargraves further expands his critique by examining less celebrated genres, such as *recovery television*. Shows like *Intervention* (p. 58) or *Hoarders* (p. 70) (both A&E) exploit discomfort to establish a morally "superior" spectator position, serving as both a pretext for binge watching and, paradoxically, a vehicle for television addiction. As Hargraves observes, this genre derives its pleasure from the act of recognizing and diagnosing others' failures, all while reinforcing the illusion of control over one's own excesses. Although—as the author himself acknowledges—this may evoke traditional moral critiques, such as the Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry, it provides a sharp examination of how televisual voyeurism aligns with neoliberal logics of self-discipline and individual responsibility.

Another fundamental reflection is devoted to "quality television" and its relationship with intermediality. Hargraves observes how the prestige of series belonging to what is considered the last golden age—from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007, p. 122) to *The Wire*—has been constructed through rhetoric that disavows television in favor of a "cinematic" or "novelistic" narrative. This "appropriative intermediality," as the author defines it, elevates dramatic series to the status of "high art" while simultaneously dissociating them from feminized, stigmatized soap operas. In this context, discomfort assumes a legitimizing function: the invitation to confront disturbing themes is perceived as an indicator of realism and authenticity reserved for a cultured and selective audience.

The analysis of irritation as a spectator response is particularly effective. Hargraves examines *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017, p. 31), a series provoking ambivalent reactions of identification and critical detachment toward its narcissistic, privileged characters. As the author observes, *Girls* reflects a generational discomfort that irritates both for its representational excess ("too White, too privileged, too selfish, and too willfully ignorant," p. 30) and its insufficiency, being incapable of representing "authentic diversity." This double movement—trolling the viewer and offering them a distorted mirror—demonstrates how postmillennial television plays with cultural expectations, producing pleasure that is simultaneously provocative and uncomfortable.

Hargraves' book speaks directly to those who, in one way or another, feel marginalized or out of place in the television and cultural context of today, inviting them to view television not merely as entertainment but as an affective battlefield where discomfort becomes a tool for critical reflection. These aspects demand an involved approach from the author, who therefore does not simply observe this phenomenon but experiences it. *Uncomfortable Television* is an excellent example of analysis capable of placing the reader in a critical—and ultimately metatextual—condition: *uncomfortable* is both the television the book discusses and the state in which the viewer-reader finds themselves, seeking a better position to sit in their chair while reading, as well as a new perspective for confronting and resisting the cultural and economic logics of neoliberalism.

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