

Amanda D. Lotz, **After Mass Media: Storytelling for Microaudiences in the Twenty-First Century**, New York: New York University Press, 2025, 256 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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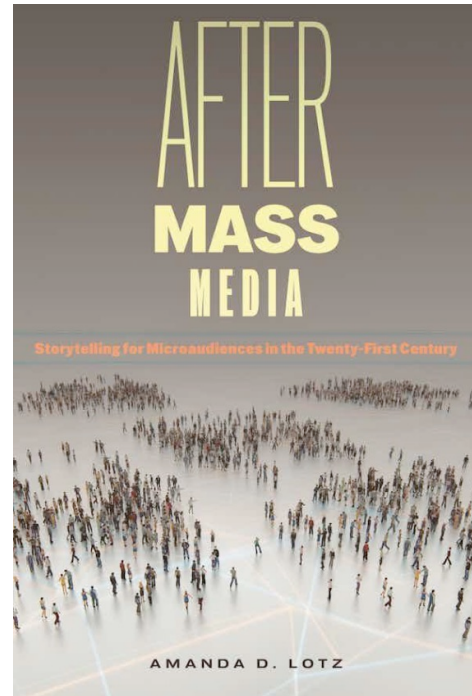
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Perhaps the most radical change in the media system has been the shift from broadcasting to digital age systems, impacting television production, distribution, and reception. During the latter part of the 20th century, academia produced a wealth of high-quality research on this medium. In the world of streaming platforms, audience fragmentation, and the proliferation of formats, everything has changed; yet the concepts of academic television analysis (e.g., related to audiences, genres, and programming) largely remain those generated for the broadcasting system.

Professor Amanda D. Lotz, an expert in television studies, sets out in **After Mass Media: Storytelling for Microaudiences in the Twenty-First Century** to update this conceptual framework to address a television landscape that is completely different from the era when television was the queen. “The change is now too profound, and those mass culture ideas require updating for the twenty-first-century experience” (p. 9), she asserts. The first question raised by the study of contemporary television is to what extent what happens on streaming platforms is still television. For some approaches, the most distinctive feature of television is live broadcasting (Ellis, 2002). Focusing on fiction makes it easier for Lotz to compare fiction on traditional television networks with that on current platforms, as well as to bring together in one place industrial and cultural issues that were previously clearly separated between film and television and are now combined in streaming.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the production, distribution, and consumption of television fiction in the 21st century, full of examples and data charts. It does so from an interdisciplinary approach that combines concepts of media management with concepts of critical media studies (e.g., the discussion about globalization, international, and national production). To this end, she utilizes an adaptation of a construct by David Bordwell: the mode of industrial practice, which is defined as “the mandate of the system as well as the economic features and technological conditions that prioritize textual features seeking different goals” (p. 13), showing her intention to relate the characteristics of the media business to textual properties.

Going beyond the limitations of television fiction studies that focus either on textual analysis or on industrial aspects as separate fields of research, here the economic, technological, and cultural dimensions appear interconnected. For each aspect addressed—distribution, industrial practices, series production,



formats, the blurring between film and television industries, the cultural role, and personal relevance of television fiction—the discussion proceeds along a synchronic axis, describing the current ecosystem of the industry, and a diachronic axis, observing its evolution.

The first premise that underlies this book is the shift from global hits and mass “monoculture” to “microhits” and “microaudiences.” “Between 1980 and 2020, the percentage of homes with television that tuned to the most watched drama or comedy fell from 34.5 percent to 10.1 percent” (p. 3), the text notes regarding the U.S. market, where the study clearly focuses. A major hit may be just that for a microaudience, yet remain unknown in a different environment. The emergence of micro-audiences is common throughout the media system. A comparison with research on other media would show how this phenomenon coexists with high audience ratings in the world of the Internet (Webster, 2016) and “monoculture” phenomena in areas such as pop music (e.g., Taylor Swift [Spanos, 2024]).

Microaudience is the cross-cutting concept the author uses to map the current reality of the television fiction industry. The goal is to establish a new vocabulary better suited for both its study and management. To do so, the author argues that “a modest first step is banishing terms as imprecise as ‘niche’ and distinguishing among its use to categorize (a) audience size, (b) modes of industrial operation, and (c) textual or narrative features” (p. 11). The creation of industrial conditions that allow stories that were once niche on television to be not only viable but the norm today is one of the most important changes that has taken place in the last 25 years.

The author then describes the three contextual changes she considers most important in the evolution of television fiction, the first being the conversion of the “edgy” into the norm. Unlike niche, “edgy” is defined through narrative attributes: a preference for the unusual over the familiar, ambiguity over clear resolution, ambivalent characters as opposed to Manichean ones, and the incorporation of themes that challenge social norms. The opposite of an “edgy” product would not be one aimed at the mass market but rather a conventional one. “Familiar content” is content that viewers can recognize as belonging to a genre, a more predictable story, similar to those already seen on television. Therefore, “the main contextual change identified here is the erosion of mass audiences for cinematic stories toward a norm of micro-audiences” (p. 18).

The second-order contextual change is the shift from national to transnational audiences—with regard to both who views the stories and the audience imagined by the industry. An economy of product abundance, audience diversification, and far-reaching distribution technologies requires a transnational audience scale. Three strategies have been developed by the industry to internationalize content: the licensing of programs to foreign markets; international joint ventures and co-productions (which pool resources, expand market reach, and address a multiterritory audience); and format sales that enable customization for foreign markets.

The third-order contextual change derives from the reduction in the temporality of screen cultures. On-demand technologies have displaced the demand for punctual delivery that once structured the consumption of series. This has transformed consumption habits, incorporating, for example, binge-

watching. In fact, since 2020, Nielsen's Gauge, which measures the time spent consuming content on platforms, has replaced the mere number of subscribers as a market indicator.

The most interesting aspect of the book is the connection between industrial practices and storytelling. For example, internationalization promotes new narrative formats. The "classic narrative" exhibits narrative characteristics clearly aligned with a broad transnational industrial strategy. For example, "The Crown is certainly a show placed in the UK; however, its development leads it to be best understood as an international story" (p. 50). This format is more universal and, therefore, more exportable.

Along with that, co-productions designed for international audiences have enabled the development of "spectacular series," which use uncommon features and usually pursue objectives other than achieving high audience ratings, like surrounding attention. Rare in mass television, subscription-funded systems have also allowed for the proliferation of "character study series" that "tend to tell smaller, personal, and uncommon stories that might be best distinguished as meditations on the existential reality of a character" (p. 59), also well suited for personalized recommendations.

One of the issues relevant to both the industry and cultural studies is the representation of the nation in the context of international audiovisual production. In this area, we also need a more sophisticated and specific vocabulary to identify the criteria by which a local production can be representative of its country of origin, since much cultural policy and the framework used by industry executives still relies on the concept of local production. The author proposes the notion of "cultural specificity," which includes aspects of narrative in conjunction with setting, to ground stories in a particular place. As can be seen, this concept also connects industrial dimensions with narrative ones.

A strong assumption runs throughout the book: "Screen stories still do important work in each home and relative to each viewer, even if they rarely gather the scale of viewers that they once did." However, studying how this occurs in the digital context requires extensive audience ethnographies that are yet to be carried out. Toward the end, *After Mass Media* engages with the tradition of critical media studies. The book then takes on a more personal and intimate tone. The fragmentation of audiences and the abundance of internationally distributed fiction require us to think about the shared experience of consuming fiction from parameters other than the idea of a mass of geographically co-located viewers who watch simultaneously. While the fictional stories provided by this new television system may not generate mass audiences, they do generate feelings of belonging, world traveling, and resonance, which are particularly relevant today.

After Mass Media represents a significant step forward in updating television fiction studies for the era of streaming platforms, integrating industrial and cultural dimensions. Among the dimensions analyzed, technology (affordances, algorithms, devices, etc.) remains the least developed. A dialogue with media ecology and evolution theories (Scolari, 2023) could enrich this aspect. Finally, questions about media's impact on our understanding of reality suggest the need to relate Lotz's findings on television fiction to emerging research on nonfiction content across digital platforms.

References

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