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Amanda D. Lotz, **Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014, 240 pp., $22.69 (paperback).

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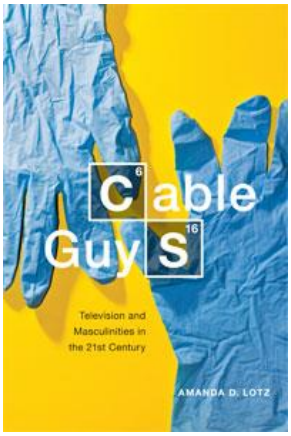

Leading feminist media and television scholar Amanda D. Lotz's work is chiefly dedicated to the complex intersections of the industries and identities that emerge in American postfeminist and postnetwork eras. Her previous monographs, *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2006) and *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York University Press, 2007), offered multifaceted breakdowns of both the television industry and women in the early 21st century. Lotz subsequently delivered rich investigations of televisual representations of contemporary women of the postnetwork era, contingent upon the dynamics of its female characters' relationship with personal and professional life balances, friendship, romantic partnerships, motherhood, and more.

Lotz's most recent effort, ***Cable Guys: Television Masculinities in the 21st Century***, incorporates a familiar methodology utilizing media industries alongside cultural and socioeconomic factors, yet it shifts to representations of men rather than women. As she explains in her first chapter, "Understanding Men on Television," televisual analysis of male characters and their relationship to masculinity is a previously underexplored area of feminist television criticism. This has largely been because masculinities in the network era were uncomplicated and straightforward, much like gender roles were in American society before women began to demand rights equal to those of their male counterparts.

This is why Lotz chooses to use second-wave feminism and its goals, and to some extent, its accomplishments, to make sense of the shifts in representations of male-driven television of the 21st century. She explains, "To be clear, in acknowledging the success of second-wave feminism, I do not mean to suggest that it ended patriarchy or that feminism's work is now done" (p. 25). However, second-wave feminist action indeed proves to be the dominant factor in these societal changes seen off- and on-screen for the contemporary American man. In the past, Lotz and others used "postfeminism" as a term to describe the late 1990s and early 2000s initial acknowledgment and subsequent undermining of the gains of second-wave feminism. This led to a retreat to traditional gender roles and expressions of femininity and a de-polticization of gender politics and dynamics. Lotz elaborates on her choice:

> I locate the origins of the complicated negotiations of masculinities and manhood in the series considered here in second-wave feminism and its outcomes. I very deliberately do not use the frame of "postfeminism"—a term I now find too fraught with contradictory meanings to be useful—and also dismiss the assertion that these gender relations are characteristic of "third-wave feminism." The challenge to patriarchal masculinities

> evident in many aspects of the series is more clearly an outcome of second-wave activism—albeit long in fruition—than a result of more nascent feminist generations of their endeavors, which makes "post-second-wave" my preferred terminology. (p. 23)

The next chapter, "Trying to Man Up: Struggling with Contemporary Masculinities in Cable's Male-Centered Serials," delves into what will arguably become the defining genre of early 21st-century cable television: the male-centered serial. First, with Lotz's emphasis on cable programming over network, she taps into the critically successful prestige drama dominated by long-form narratives, complex storytelling, heightened character development, and a lack of closure. This eschews the neatly episodic, plot-driven series of the network era that begin and end a story within a span of 30 minutes. Lotz addresses that these cable serials deal with leading men with dubious morals rather than traditional heroes and that the length of a series also encompasses the entirety of a man's life. As other feminist television scholars have already noted, the dominant prestige cable drama is, as a genre, essentially a soap opera, a traditionally maligned form of TV previously demeaned as women's programming. Higher production values, life-or-death cliffhangers and other high-stakes situations, sex and violence, and action- or gangster-oriented content for MA audience rating have on the surface masked its connections with the soap opera, yet the tendency toward the serialized marks this very shift in televisual storytelling. And the change in the dominant genre already denotes the influence of women-centered genres on men's programming.

Rather than using the term "antihero," Lotz prefers the less problematic and more concise "flawed protagonist" to describe characters from the 14 cable drama male-centered serials she identifies, from HBO's *The Sopranos* to FX's *Sons of Anarchy* to AMC's *Breaking Bad*. In a short span, Lotz provides fascinating insight on what unites and separates nine of these series. She considers the negotiations of masculinities in these male serials. Patriarchal masculinity is aligned with an older generation's conception of a father figure as a financial provider but emotionally detached from his wife and children. The contrast to this is second-wave masculinity, one in which a flawed male protagonist grapples with attempting to be a provider to his family while also being a good husband, at some level, and a good father, to a much greater extent. Lotz shows that, like their female counterparts, characters ranging from *Bad*'s Walter White to *Hung*'s Ray Drecker have trouble balancing a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life.

Upon providing an ample description of the male serial and its primary components, the third chapter, "Any Men and Outlaws: The Unbearable Burden of the Straight White Man," touches on the two central archetypes in this TV genre. Again, Lotz contends that the changes these men face in contrast to previous TV protagonists is "attributed to a world being changed by women's demands" (p. 88.) She later cites historian Stephanie Coontz's coined term "masculine mystique" as a 21st-century counterpart to Betty Friedan's 1960s "feminine mystique." According to popular discourse, both modern women and men are in a crisis, escalated by the demands of society, to excel in all areas of life, and, ultimately, as Anne Marie Slaughter wrote in her controversial 2012 "Women Still Can't Have it All" piece in *The Atlantic*, women can never "have it all," succeed in all areas they wish to, at least not all at once.

Unlike much of the popular press on these widely successful male serials that have further elevated the place of television as a "quality" medium, both Coontz and Lotz are cognizant of straight

white men in America as a continuously privileged population. Unlike laudatory reviews and think pieces on the intellectualism behind *Bad* and *Sopranos*, Lotz, like other feminists, struggles to find what is so revolutionary about a privileged male's ego gone explosive. In this chapter, Lotz does, however, unfold how the "any man" figure and outlaw become victims of their own circumstances, particularly when it comes to understanding the US recession that surrounds these cable series. In *Hung*, Drecker, a former high school jock, is a washed up, recently divorced middle-aged gym teacher living in Detroit, a city that itself embodies economic decline. When he needs money for his home, to provide for his children, and to regain any sense of accomplishment, he resorts to a life of prostitution.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the male serial of the 21st century thus far is *Bad*'s White, a brilliant chemist who became a lower-class high school teacher with a stagnant home life. He holds a PhD, yet works at a car wash part time, where his teenage students taunt him. In the series pilot, White is diagnosed with fatal lung cancer, although he was never a smoker, and soon decides to make high-quality meth in order to pay for his treatment and leave an inheritance for his family to thrive on when he dies. When White becomes absorbed in the power and thrill of the meth world, and is long in remission from his disease, the series centers on the flawed protagonist's obsession with his own ego. White contrasts with the motorcycle gang family on *Anarchy*, which provides a long-form narrative of familiar outlaw figures. Feminism, and the climate of the recession, have placed the every man and outlaw in similar binds based on the newfound struggles of the duality of the provider and father.

The next two chapters shift from the individual in the male-driven serial to the ensemble series, starting with the televisual take on the ensemble bromances prevalent in Judd Apatow films. In "Where Men Can Be Men: The Homosocial Enclave and Jocular Policing of Masculinity," Lotz gives new insights on the performance and self-surveillance of heteronormative masculinity. This kind of programming also marks a comedic turn from the hyper-dramatic, with HBO's *Entourage* and FX's *The League* as prime examples. In the past, series like *Sex and the City* have been analyzed based on a sense of hierarchy among best friends grounded on success due to general attractiveness, income, romantic partner, and marital status. On some level, these male-driven series also utilize a similar hierarchy, which Lotz details. As comedies often do not receive the same critical analysis as dramas, her work in this area is particularly intriguing when considering men's relationship with gender roles and expectations. It makes much sense that ensembles are prevalent in a post-second-wave era, when women are focusing more on their careers and getting married and having children later in life, and when the male parent is often expected to be an equal to the mother figure. These factors largely contribute both to men's internal crises once married and to the challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities and also promote a fluid stage of delayed maturity, almost resembling a second adolescence.

In chapter 5, "Dynamic Duos: Hetero Intimacy and the New Male Friendship," Lotz draws on the work of Ron Becker, one of the more frequently cited scholars in the book, and his work on "queer straight masculinity." That is, while the white heteronormative males in buddy series are not outright homophobic, and while they encompass few openly gay characters as protagonists, the acceptance of gay men has contributed to a "destabilized heteronormativity." Lotz also draws on Robin Wood's previous analysis on buddy films to lay the foundation for series such as *Scrubs*, *Psych*, *Boston Legal,* and even *Nip/Tuck*, drawing similarities of "the journey, the marginalization of women, the absence of home, the male love

story, the presence of an explicitly homosexual character, and death" (p. 153). This does not translate fully to all of the buddy series, yet this chapter opens up new potentials for challenging traditional heternormativity in American culture. One cannot help but think of the strides of HBO's *Lookin*g, a series that premiered in January 2014 and focuses on a close group of male gay friends in San Francisco.

In Lotz's conclusion, she frankly confesses to her readers that, in 2011, she experienced a series of panic attacks when the popular press caught on to the same trends of male-dominated cable programming. However, her book accomplishes an unprecedented and rich overview of these series and how they convey American society's attitudes toward traditional, and not traditional, gender expectations for the male contemporary. Lotz addresses how second-wave feminism, a movement dominated by white upper-middle-class women, has impacted representations of white upper-middle-class men in popular programming, appealing to this niche audience so instrumental to prestige programming. Hollowed stereotypes of hegemonic masculinities and femininities indeed often run rampant on the most popular network TV programming, yet niche cable also runs the risk of narrowing its focus in the interests of its core audience. This becomes a matter of finances—upper-middle-class Americans can afford to pay more for their cable bundle and subscriptions to HBO and Showtime. Recent popular press pieces that illustrate how feminism has pervaded through mainstream culture and celebrity identity, amplified by Sarah Banet-Weiser's recent work on the idea of "popular feminism," provides further evaluation of the complex, perhaps truly unprecedented, role feminism plays in today's Western culture.

As Lotz and other television scholars have addressed, cable television has been geared toward white, heteronormative, upper-middle-class male audiences. Therefore much of the programming is focused on its target demographic. An academic monograph takes several years' worth of research, writing, and editing, and Lotz's *Cable Guys* picks up from her last book in 2007 and provides insight into one of the most defining characteristics of television of the past eight years. While 2014 and 2015 are suggested to be the years that signal a death knell to the narrow white televisual landscape, these kinds of serials and series are far from long gone. However, given the recent discourse simply within the last couple years on the representations of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class in American programming, the next wave of dominant trends can likely be a response to the subject matter of *Cable Guys*, and Lotz will likely be at the forefront of this discussion.