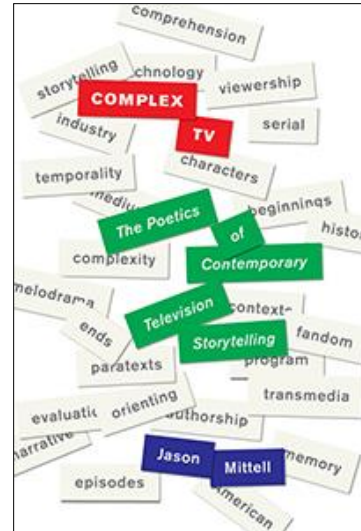


Jason Mittell, **Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015, 416 pp., \$27.00 (paperback).

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Even before Marshall McLuhan (1964/2003) theorized the idea that “the medium is the message” (p. 17), scholars and audiences alike had been grappling with the limits and potentials of the medium in communication. With **Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling**, author Jason Mittell provides an insightful and complex examination of the evolving nature of television as a home for storyworlds. For nearly two decades, Mittell (e.g., 2001, 2006, 2010) has made a name for himself as an expert on television narrative. In this book, Mittell extends his previous work and investigates some new dimensions of television storytelling. *Complex TV* goes beyond the stories themselves to try to provide insight into the many factors that influence the serial narratives produced for small screens. From his unique approach to his clear and understandable writing, Mittell has created a scholarly volume for both the fan and the academic. Starting internally with the production and creation of television stories and building to the many forms of circulation that impact those stories, Mittell provides a fairly comprehensive look at the creation, formation, life, and dissemination of television stories in our current media climate.



Recent scholarship on storyworlds has explored the complexity of storytelling in a polymediated age. Ever since Jenkins (2006) outlined the concept of “transmedia storytelling” (p. 95), scholars and practitioners alike have been trying to fully understand storytelling across media. Scholars such as Wolf (2012) have examined how worlds are built, while creators such as Phillips (2012) have tried to create best practices for the next generation. At one point, Scolari (2009) attempted to clarify the many ways scholars have approached these “cross media” and “multiplatform” stories, but the interest in and the language used to critique them has only continued to grow and evolve. In this landscape, one might question the need for a book specifically focused on a single medium. However, Mittell clearly proves that his focus is justified. According to Ryan (2014), “The choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, and why they are told” (p. 25). Mittell provides unique insights into each of these dimensions of television while examining television’s place in relation to transmedia contexts.

Central to Mittell’s examination is his approach: poetics. According to him, “This book is not on analyzing meanings as conveyed by television narratives. Instead, I aim to explore how such meanings are given expressive possibility through the form of televised stories, analyzing how such content is conveyed via storytelling” (p. 4). For Mittell, his poetic method is not bound by text. He argues that the production process is essential to understanding the storyworlds that are being created and circulated. For

instance, his chapter on authorship examines the complexities of the role of producer/showrunner as well as notions of a writer's room and the language of story creation. As can be seen in the rise in prominence of showrunners such as Shonda Rhimes, Joss Whedon, Vince Gilligan, and Jenji Kohan, the role of storyteller has become deeply enmeshed with public understanding of the stories themselves. Mittell highlights these practices and explores the discursive impact they have had on both the production and circulation of these worlds. This integrated look at production and content treat television content as work in process that is continually evolving based on factors both internal and external to the storyworld.

Part of the success of this volume comes from Mittell's willingness to position himself as a "participant-observer" (p. 7) who fuses studies of process, structure, and discourse. One cannot escape this book without a clear understanding of how big a fan of *Lost* Mittell was, but his embrace of his subjectivity provides valuable insights that cannot come from any other type of subject-position. In practice, this means analyzing programs such as *Lost* for both the world created by showrunners Lindelof and Cuse for the television "mothership" as well as probing Mittell's own experiences of discussion forums, video games, and other online content, some of which no longer exists online. Combining commentary by the creators and producers of *Lost* alongside his own experience and fandom, Mittell's examination of the role of serial television as a basis for transmedia storytelling shows how the economic constraints of television limit the storytelling potential of television paratexts to substantively contribute to the storyworld while providing the reader with insight into the narrative rationality that existed in those external contributions. In the end, Mittell's approach, along with his focus on television, proves to be a strength of his analysis of transmedia content as well.

This volume is essential for those exploring the relationship between medium and storytelling, especially for those interested in television. However, beyond his extensive look at television as a context for narrative, Mittell also asks readers to think about their role in the process of academic publication. By crowdsourcing his ideas for 15 months before publishing his final draft, Mittell creates questions about the practices of academic publishing and our responsibility to the discourses that we seek to critique. In that vein, given the substantial theorizing and critical evaluation being conducted, this book is an accessible read. It could serve as a valuable contribution in a graduate and/or an undergraduate seminar on media criticism. Ultimately, if you are a media scholar, a media consumer, or somewhere in between, there are valuable insights for you in this book.

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