Hunter Hargraves, *Uncomfortable Television*

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REFERENCES


1 Whether we see twenty-first-century television as the end of television or a new golden age, it is hard to deny that there is something different about television programming in the new millennium. In *Uncomfortable Television*, Hunter Hargraves offers one explanation for what that something different may be. In this book, Hargraves examines what he calls “postmillenium American television,” or the period from the early 2000s until the late 2010s. Specifically, he is interested in the ways that American television programming during this time transitioned away from the comforting narratives that dominated twentieth-century network television to embrace “uncomfortable” or discomforting narratives. These new uncomfortable narratives included more sex, violence, and unlikable anti-heroes and marked a striking divergence from the “family-friendly” programming of the past (2). This new approach to television programming was made possible, Hargraves argues, because of a number of cultural, technological, and industrial changes in the production of television, including the rise of reality television, the emergence of streaming platforms and digital distribution models, and the increased ability to both comment on and participate in communities surrounding television content via the Internet (2).

2 However, rather than simply arguing that changes to technology and the television industry ushered in an era of edgier television programming, Hargraves uses these shifts to illustrate television’s larger and ongoing function as a normalizer of hegemonic power structures. For Hargraves, the “discomfort” of postmillennial American television functions to reinforce and uphold the ideological values of
neoliberalism and late-capitalism (1). Essentially, Hargraves argues that postmillennial American television works to “transform feelings of discomfort into feelings of pleasure” (1), thus providing viewers with a framework for positively interpreting the anxieties and uncertainties inherent in neoliberal culture. To make this argument, Hargraves draws from affect theory to explore how the discomfort of postmillennial American television invokes “affective reactions within audiences...[that] help them make sense of the present” (7). One of Hargraves’ primary interventions with this book is to demonstrate how affect theory can allow us to better understand how spectators interact with television content. According to Hargraves, television has an “affective complexity” or “affective intertextuality” that comes from the fact that it is an incredibly intertextual medium made up of dozens of different segments and programs that flow together (39).

To explore the affective complexity of postmillennial American television, Hargraves focuses on a number of case studies that demonstrate how discomfort manifests in ways that reinforce neoliberal values. Notably, each of these case studies revolves around specific television genres, including auteur comedies, reality television, police procedurals, fan-produced satire, and prestige dramas (20). Within these genres, Hargraves employs close-readings of programs that demonstrate how the “viewer expectations” regarding those specific genres have changed in postmillennial American television “to highlight the formal and industrial mechanisms that produce and script viewer affect” (21). This structure provides readers with a number of distinct, but interconnected, examples demonstrating how discomfort functions differently across these genres even as its primary function remains the same: to normalize neoliberal ideological values.

For example, in his first chapter, Hargraves uses an analysis of the HBO comedy series Girls to demonstrate how the show’s representation (as too white, too privileged, and lacking “authentic” diversity) irritates critics into writing critical think pieces and reviews. However, this irritation doesn’t prompt actual political action or provide solutions to the problem of meaningful representation that invokes it (52). This juxtaposition between the affective reactions postmillennial television invokes and its political impotence is echoed in other chapters as well. Chapter 2 examines how reality television programs focused on addiction, such as Intervention, provide viewers with an uncomfortable spectacle of addiction that allows them to disidentify with their own addictions, including watching television (60). Chapter 3 looks at how fan-produced remixes can queer television content even as they encourage fans to generate new media content for consumption with no payment for their labor (90). And Chapter 4 examines how the narratives of cultural value inherent in deeming anti-hero-driven dramas like The Wire as “novelistic” or “prestige” television undermine the ways these programs frequently hinge on both male power and white supremacy (123). With these chapters, Hargraves points to the many moments where discomfort works to undermine any radical potential that television has for resisting hegemonic power structures.

Hargraves ends the book with a reflection on how, in the latter half of the 2010s, television’s relationship with discomfort changed once again. While the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century saw postmillennial American television using discomfort to render the anxieties of late capitalism into pleasure, the next few years—with the election of Donald Trump and the rise of Peak TV—mark a period where
Americans have “become aware of the debilitating effects of televisual discomfort” (164). This “woke spectatorship,” Hargraves argues, means that viewers watching a television program are motivated by that program’s representation to “feel an investment in social justice” (165). While Hargraves acknowledges the limitations of “Woke TV” and “woke spectatorship” (167), he retains a sense of optimism about the potential of discomfort as a form of resistance that might be difficult for some readers to identify with. What Hargraves does make clear, however, is that postmillennial American television has entered a new stage and the larger implications of that transition are not yet clear.

Overall, Uncomfortable Television provides television, performance, and American studies scholars and graduate students with an interesting and insightful look into how televisual affect is mobilized in postmillennial American television to normalize neoliberal values. Throughout the text, Hargraves demonstrates the value of considering performance and affect when thinking about how television functions to uphold preexisting power structures. Additionally, Hargraves’ attention to the historical, technological, and industrial factors that shaped postmillennial television’s uncomfortable narratives, as well as his close-readings of individual texts, provides readers with a compelling illustration of the complex constellation of components that provide a framework for the affective and ideological functions of television.