

It's not TV. It's HBO

Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television

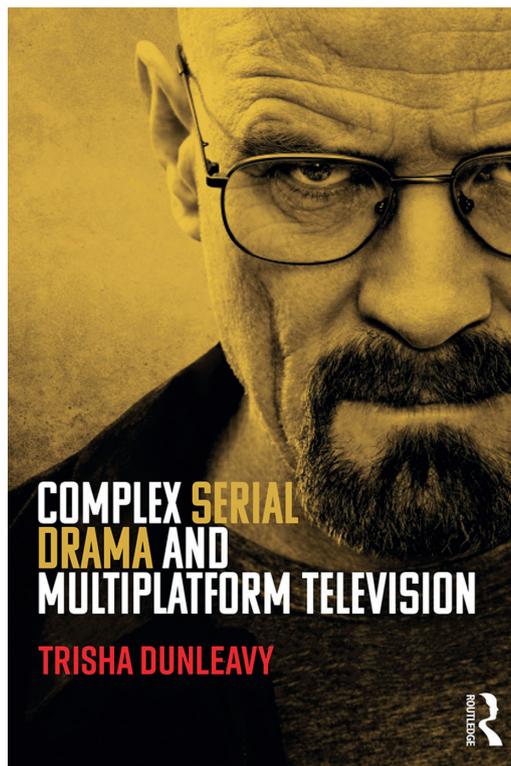
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Trisha Dunleavy's (2017) text *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* provides a densely argued account of the changing landscape of American television, mapping shifts in form and content against the alternative economic paradigms of contemporary television production. Each paradigm is associated

with a specific form: TVI refers to traditional American broadcast television, TVII is broadcast and cable, TV III is multiplatform television and the emerging fourth form is Internet Distributed Television (IDTV). All models 'remain extant' but the book focuses on multiplatform television, as it is during the multiplatform era that complex serial drama (CSD) emerges. There are five key chapters in the text. Chapter One traces the rise of complex serial drama on American cable television, and it is here that we are introduced to the key argument of the book, that complex serial dramas originate outside broadcast television. The remaining chapters work to substantiate this claim in various ways, highlighting the conservatism of traditional American broadcast television, addressing the emergence and formal legacy of American Quality Dramas (AQD), unpacking the creative dimensions of CSD

and the production context in which such creativity and innovation was made possible. The crucial player in the text is Home Box Office (HBO) and Dunleavy suggests that it is the alternative political economy of television production developed by HBO that led to the emergence of CSD. This model provided a template for

other non-broadcast networks (cable) to follow, albeit in a similar but not necessarily identical fashion. In fact, the now famous HBO tag-line, *It's not Television. It's HBO!* could stand as an apt summary for the content and arguments contained in this book.



Dunleavy, T (2017) *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. London: Routledge.

The Political Economy of Television Production

The emphasis placed upon the political economies of television production is important and refreshing, as it reminds us that the formal and aesthetic properties of televisual output are closely aligned with the economic and institutional frameworks that help shape that output. The classic example for Dunleavy is American broadcast television, whose output is driven by an economic model predicated upon the link between advertising revenue and ratings. This economic model produced a programming culture that the author suggests was "instinctively hostile to experimentation" (30) and risk averse. While American broadcast television was "universally watched", Dunleavy argues that it was also "widely reviled" (30), with exceptions made for 'quality' series such as *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983)

and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977). She goes on to suggest that the label 'Quality TV' "had an institutional under-pinning in network competition for revenue" (35), reminding the reader that the economics and aesthetics of television production are never far apart. While Dunleavy acknowledges the aesthetic

antecedents of complex seriality in shows such as *The Singing Detective* (BBC:1986) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), it is in the relationship between AQD and CSD that one may identify a key 'genetic' legacy and the text discusses the similarities and differences between each form. Dunleavy makes it clear that series such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *St Elsewhere* (1982-1988) were produced within the institutional confines of the American broadcast system but that such series "served different commercial objectives" (p30) to regular drama. NBC, in a 'desperate' attempt to increase their audience share and compete with the other networks, commissioned *Hill Street Blues*, the series that marks the advent of AQD. AQD cemented the importance of demographically targeted productions that could attract niche audiences with prestige advertising [1]; it was clear however, that such series, while formally innovative, did not substantively challenge the political economies of production associated with American television. For Dunleavy, this is a role reserved for the multiplatform era and the prescient ways in which HBO engaged with the changing political economy of television production.

HBO

Dunleavy details some key moments from the late 1970s onward where HBO astutely positioned itself in an increasingly competitive broadcast environment. She discusses HBO's challenge to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1977, its associated strategies to increase market share by targeting an 'upscale' cinema audience and its investment in and commitment to original programming. She suggests that the emergence of CSD "took a subscription-funded context, as one free from the influences of FCC content regulation as well as direct advertiser demands, to enable the all-important first step of permitting creative experimentation that made this type of TV drama possible" (p21). Dunleavy goes on to argue that the most significant changes in the American television landscape were seeded by HBO between 1997-2008. It is in this era that the "conceptual, formal and stylistic distinctive-ness" (p11) of complex serials emerge. HBO as a 'premium' cable channel was backed by Time Warner Inc (previously Time Inc) and this stable economic basis enabled HBO to take the unprec-edented step of self-financing their own productions. This bypassed the potential meddling of other investors as well as the edicts of the FCC and perhaps as crucially, provided the context for creative autonomy in the production of original programming. The text makes it clear that HBO ceded creative control to network commissioning executives and what would become known as 'showrunners', [2] the creative minds behind such series as *OZ* (Tom Fontana: 1997-2003); *The Sopranos* (David Chase: 1991-2007); *Six Feet Under* (Alan Ball: 2001-2005); *The Wire* (David Simon: 2002-2008) and *Deadwood* (David Milch: 2004-2006) et al. The crucial point for Dunleavy is that while complex serial dramas were a creative success, they were also a significant economic success. The critical success (important to HBO) of *The Sopranos* led to a 50% increase in subscriptions for HBO and Dunleavy goes

on to detail the significant profits garnered by HBO from the economic and aesthetic investment in complex seriality. Other basic cable channels (income from a mix of subscriber fees and advertising) began to mimic aspects of this mode of production, with FX, AMC and Showtime going on to produce CSD such as, *The Shield* (2002-2008), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Dexter* (2006-13) respectively.



HBO's *The Sopranos* received critical acclaim, garnering 21 Emmys and 5 Golden Globes, from Rolling Stones.

Aesthetics of Complex Seriality

Dunleavy's account of the aesthetic qualities of CSD shares some similarities with Mittell's 2015 text on *Complex Television*. Mittell ranges across the American television landscape, finding narrative complexity in the output of cable networks and the nooks and crannies of broadcast television. In contrast, Dunleavy's origins story is firmly rooted in the alternative political economies of multiplatform television with an accompanying focus on the innovative and creative dimensions of this output. Her analysis details the ways in which HBO actively utilised practices associated with 'high art' to distinguish their output from the AQD that preceded complex seriality. These efforts were based on a general recognition that the conventions of AQD had become part of the 'regular' landscape of television by the 2000s and perhaps were not enough to ensure subscribers and profitability in an increasingly competitive environment. Dunleavy outlines the ways in which the form and content of CSD owe much to the conceptual and formal qualities of modernism. Some of the key features associated with modernist techniques used within complex seriality include conceptual originality, series with a point of view and narrative complexity. Complex serials utilise many of the following narrative techniques: specific over-arching stories, [3] non-linearity, hybridity, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, the use of Brechtian devices, [4] a focus on flawed or transgressive characters, and so on. The focus on such characters encourages a form of moral relativism, often inviting the viewer to align with villainous characters more likely to be the targets of opprobrium in traditional broadcast television. [5] In addition, the diversity in setting and milieu associated with CSD lends itself to 'individuated' contexts and singular narratives [6], this shift in focus appears to have fulfilled an audience desire

for more complex and challenging storytelling. This is evidenced by viewers deep investment in the narrative output of CSD, an investment encouraged by both the form and content of CSD. In addition, Dunleavy suggests that subscription-funded and on-demand services create a more direct economic relationship between the producers and viewers and this “first order commodity relation” (p20) perhaps reinforces the viewers greater investment in such dramas.

The aesthetic dimensions of CSD are supported and supplemented by high-end production values that include generous budgets, increased production time, shooting on location, often on film. All these techniques mirror aspects of cinematic production and while CSD is not cinema, CSD has been described as ‘cinematic television’. Dunleavy contests aspects of this description, primarily due to the differences in form, but the author acknowledges that the boundaries between cinema and the techniques of ‘cinematic tv’ have become increasingly blurred, a situation that is likely to increase in the era of IDTV. What is clear is that these techniques and the associated cachet attached to ‘high-end’ cinema were also utilised by HBO to deepen their aesthetic style and distinguish the channel’s output from ‘normal’ tv. The channel worked to suggest an affinity between showrunners and the auteur, as well as cultivate the aura associated with such productions. Both concepts [7] are associated with forms of ‘high culture’ and Dunleavy stresses the importance of such links for distinguishing and selling CSD. Dunleavy does not construct an argument ‘for’ this mode of storytelling against that of ‘normal’ television; instead her book highlights that CSD are complex and innovative series, but they also are economically successful and have a ‘lucrative afterlife’ in the wider landscape of broadcasting. As such, the text is invested in mapping the relationship between this alternative mode of production and its associated televisual output, addressing the wider context in which CSD became achievable.

Conclusion

This review has focused on the key arguments within *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television* but there are a range of other concepts discussed within the text that the reader may consider in their own encounter with the book. These concepts build upon the issues discussed above and speak largely to the depth of meaning generated by the aesthetic properties of CSD. Dunleavy’s analysis is considered and insightful, but perhaps there is room for further nuance in this account of complex seriality. Questions may be raised about the emergence of moral complexity and its association with CSD. John Sumser in his 1996 text on *Morality and Social Order in Television Crime Drama*, discusses the transitions he detects within crime dramas in the 1990s, highlighting the downgrading of the ‘hero’ and the emergence of a situational ethics in series such as *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999) (a precursor to CSD) and *Law and Order* (1990-2010) an exemplar of American broadcast television. The analysis by Sumser suggests that a more specific discussion of the generic

elements of CSD would refine and deepen aspects of this analysis, particularly since many successful CSD are crime dramas. Finally, there is a television series that barely merits a mention in the history of complex television or complex seriality, *Babylon 5* (1993-1998). Dunleavy references it in passing, but the series has many of the formal properties of CSD. The series was largely written, created and produced by J.M. Straczynski, it had an over-arching five-year narrative arc, and the narrative included flashbacks, flash-forwards and dream sequences. It had several complex characters, and it was perhaps the first series to develop an extra-textual, creator/viewer on-line relationship. As it is a ‘space opera’ produced on a limited budget and shown in syndication, it does not readily fit into an antecedent/origins tale. Its limited presence in the history and emergence of complex television reinforces the continuing significance of genre, distinction and value in accounting for and understanding the narrative landscape of ‘quality’ television.

[1] Although Dunleavy challenges the suggestion that *Hill Street Blues* suffered from poor ratings.

[2] Many of whom had experienced the constraints of traditional American broadcast television.

[3] Which discourages forms of casual viewing, a trait more likely with episodic television.

[4] Devices developed by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). They are intended to disrupt narrative flow and draw attention to the constructed nature of the narrative. The techniques are used to alienate and distance the viewer from the narrative and are utilised to encourage critical engagement by the audience/viewer.

[5] A.N. Garcia (2016) discusses the wider implications of this shift in his edited text *Emotions in Contemporary Television Series*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[6] Moving away from the police station, the hospital, the courtroom, the forensic lab, these type of settings are amenable to the production of long-term episodic series.

[7] An auteur is a film director with a signature theme or style and is considered the ‘author’ of the work. The concept has been utilised to create cultural distinctions between cinema as ‘art and cinema as mass culture. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) discusses the auratic qualities of art in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935). Its use in the context of CSD speaks to the cultivation of processes of distinction that occur within the cultural realm more broadly. HBO’s tag-line *Its not tv. Its HBO* exemplifies this tendency.

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