

---UNCORRECTED DRAFT---

Critical Response: *Genre and Television*

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Jason Mittell's *Genre and Television* is a clear attempt to legitimize, and, more importantly, systematize the study of television after years of marginality within the academy. Given television's place as arguably the most popular of media, its uneasy place within academic departments, scattered across communication, film, American studies, English and cultural studies, is bemusing. While television has been studied for over thirty years, it has yet to cohere into a discipline the way film and English have. Mittell succeeds in setting an agenda and rubric for television scholars, giving blueprints for what sources to use and how to conceptualize their work. If he is at fault for anything, it may be too much ambition: his accounts of various genres are so full of well-researched information that they do not talk to each other and offer little conceptual coherence beyond the fact they all place meaning outside the text.

Mittell identifies what he sees as the problem: the text. The focus on "the text" is a remnant of film and English studies, which have argued successfully for close readings of novels and feature-length films. Television as text, however, is another matter. For one, unlike novels and films, television shows are not bounded: there are premieres but endings vary from show to show. Most importantly, however, television shows lack clear authors. While modern-day TV, increasingly cinematic in style and literary in narrative – a result of competition with cable networks – has begun to recognize its auteurs (Joss Whedon, Shondra Rhimes, Aaron Sorkin, David E. Kelley, Aaron Ball, David Simon), their collective productions still represent a tiny fraction of what is seen across channels.

Industry practices of audience measurement and marketing are still deeply embedded in the process of show-making, making auteur theories clumsy when applied to TV. Mittell puts it best himself: "...television resists clear authorial definition, with an episodic style of programming and production practices that are even more collaborative than for film, problematizing the authorship models that are evoked in film and literary genre studies."

(xiii) Mittell gives other reasons why television studies can never film and literature studies, including that it has no pretensions (though, in a post-network era, this is changing) and it mixes narrative and non-narrative conventions, making a focus on fiction foolhardy.

Understanding Mittell's wariness of the text is crucial to understanding how he analyzes television. For Mittell, cultural discourses around television are more important than the text: he asks scholars to look at "discursive clusters" around television genres, how they are defined, interpreted and evaluated. (16-17) Thus we might look at what audiences and industries say about genres, what terms and definitions circulate around any given generic instance, and how specific cultural assumptions are linked to particular genres," Mittell says (13). Where can one find discursive clusters? Mittell gives us guides: "...production techniques, corporate structures, niche marketing, star personae, choices in sponsorship, marketing techniques, scheduling decisions, press releases, trade press accounts, interviews, behind-the-scenes documentaries, rejected programming, and network or channel identity." (25) Thus, Mittell hopes to expand television as cultural text, one created by an "industry," but an industry that manifests itself in production, audience, policy and history.

For his chapter on the quiz show, Mittell uses historical antecedents of the 1950s quiz shows at the center of scandals to show why the scandals happened and what it said about the genre. Here Mittell first looks at radio – many early television programs drew on radio for inspiration. The radio era established the quiz show as a genre that, in its most “culturally valuable” form, were “...spontaneous, ad-libbed, and featured unrehearsed, fair competition.” (36-37) While there were radio quiz shows based on less intellectual premises, the gold standard quiz show – and the ones without extensive FCC intervention – were those of “televised fair play. (32) Mittell’s contribution to television studies here is to suggest the meanings of genre lie, at times, in what precedes its creation, what helped to shape it. In the end, using audience letters to the FCC, policy decisions and rhetoric from the press, Mittell successfully explains why the quiz show scandals were deemed so important and so shocking. He does not answer the question: “what is the quiz show and what does it mean” in a trans-historical sense, but in a situated, uniquely historical way.

In his discussion of cartoons, Mittell focuses how corporate practices influences how genres are sold and received. In his exposition he emphasizes the importance in corporate marketing – how to reach the “right” audience through scheduling and channel identity – in the formation of genre, in ways that have little to do with the actual text. In the case of cartoons, many of the animated shorts first broadcast on television were originally screened in movie theaters as extras to feature films. Studios had in-house animation departments and screened the shorts as a way to woo people into studio-owned movie theaters. When the Supreme Court decided in 1948 to disallow the studios from owning theaters, they dropped the animation divisions, flooding the L.A. streets with out-

of-work animators and leaving a large library of cartoons in their wake. This narrative shows that originally cartoons were for adults, and it was only a legal and corporate decision that started their move to TV. The networks, following this adult-centered model, originally scheduled their cartoons in primetime and scheduled them all in one block. The shift in form altered how they were perceived (their childish nature was heightened), and soon the networks found they were more successful on Saturday mornings. It marked an early move of narrowcasting. Mittell contrasts this story with that of Cartoon Network, which began for similar reasons – the presence of a large, unused cartoon library – and decided to forgo the nuances of scheduling and market themselves as an entire brand: a 24-hour network for lovers of cartoons, a taste culture. It brought broadcasting – opening up the viewing of cartoons to as many people as possible – back into the discussion about how cartoons are consumed. Mittell is right to underscore the fallacy in assuming that the appeal of cartoons to children is only in the text (though, I would say, it is there). His analysis, in the way, supports his overall argument. However, while, once again, this chapter is rigorously researched and thorough, I do think Mittell missed an opportunity to bring a more meta-question: that, because of Cartoon Network and the broad range of cartoons today, is it even useful to think of cartoons as a genre? Yes, that is outside the scope of his book, but for cartoons especially, this question is particularly salient.

Despite his suspicions about focusing on the text, Mittell does dedicate a chapter to a kind of textual analysis. In this chapter, Mittell addresses the text, but through the prism of “poetics:” “...situating formal practices of media-making within explicit historical contexts of production and reception.” (122) Specifically he looks at *Dragnet*,

primarily the original 1950s show, to discuss how the show drew upon different genre categories to create its look and narrative. *Dragnet*, he argues, activated the generic categories of the “police show, documentary, *film noir*, and radio crime drama.” (124) From the radio crime drama era, two models of detectives emerged, the “realistic detective” and the “glamorous detective” (127). *Dragnet* took this dichotomy and married them, while sticking close to the former. From contemporaneous trend of semi-documentary film, *Dragnet* took from the most, using it as “..its primary generic influence, as the show actively drew upon the clustered assumptions of authenticity and truthfulness from this filmic source to further its own ideological ends.” (129) Its cooperation with the LAPD supported this trajectory. On the level of discourse, *Dragnet*’s discourse of authenticity (133) also derived from this tradition. In addition, on the level of character, the police in *Dragnet* had no personal lives and showed no emotion. The narrative, moreover, relies on a lack of future knowledge – we know what detective Friday knows – perceived as more realistic, both then and today. Lastly, from *film noir*, *Dragnet* took the notion of the “hard-boiled” detective, immoral bad guys, and its telefilm cinematography, with its high-contrast lighting. While this chapter certainly fits within Mittell’s thesis, it does lack some of the richness of this previous chapters; that being said, his strategy provides yet another model for television scholars.

To conclude, Mittell looks at “genre mixing” and the cultural discourses surrounding it. Mittell’s main point here is that genre mixing “...has the potential to foreground and activate generic categories in vital ways that ‘pure’ generic texts rarely do.” (155) Blending two genres together makes the “host genres” more noticeable. This chapter is not so much about “genre mixing” as genre, but rather examines the ways

genres circulate in order to nail down their cultural salience. To prove this, he again opens his analysis up to wide range of sources and perspectives, including “textual production, industrial decision-making, regulatory policy formation, critical analysis, audience reception, and broader cultural circulation.” (155) As an illustrative example, Mittell uses Aaron Sorkin’s *Sports Night* to show how the mixing of genres causes different parties to discuss the meanings of each genre. (158) What makes a comedy a comedy? *Sports Night*, a dramedy, started with a laugh track and an effort on the part of the networks to make it a sitcom. Of course it was not a sitcom in the “purest” sense (it’s interesting to speculate if *Sports Night* had been produced today, at a moment when networks are abandoning the laugh track, if it would have done better). Nevertheless Mittell focuses on *Soap* – soap opera and sitcom – and *The Simpsons* – cartoon and sitcom to prove his point. Mittell’s central point with *Soap* is that its mixing of sitcom and soap opera highlighted the excesses and moral ambiguities of those categories (especially soap operas) thereby drawing attention to itself and causing a stir. To antecedents paved the way for this: the soap opera, which before *Soap* was becoming increasingly interested in represented social issues, and the sitcom, which were either socially engaged or escapist, depending on the network. Frothier sitcoms like *Three Company*’s engaged in sex banter got away with through its escapist, shallow narrative. *Soap*’s social engagement – typified by its openly gay character, Jodie – and sexy camp were a caustic combination. *The Simpsons* meanwhile is such a clear mix of sitcom (family-oriented) and the cartoon it bears no exposition. The show dispelled with some conventions of the cartoon genre (the cartoon do not get crushed by anvils, for instance). While its mocking of the American family, coinciding with a broader televisual

deconstruction of the American family – i.e. the responses to the *Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* with *Roseanne* and *Married with Children* – clearly upset norms with sitcoms.

Mittell describes this process of parody and critique as a way for the show to broaden its audience as the first primetime cartoon on network television in a number of years at the time.

Using genre as a category for television research is helpful. Genre may in fact become the primary way scholars analyze television texts. Certainly, irrespective of genre, Mittell's focus on culture and discourse provides a clear roadmap to academics. The only criticism I would levy is Mittell's expansive view of research. His sources are so diverse and his points of entry into various genres so different it's hard to look how genre functions more broadly and across time and text. Mittell is, of course, not interested in generalizations. But something is lost without the ability to generalize. That being said, at a time when few models for establishing television research exist, Mittell makes an important contribution.