Book Review of *Canadian Television: Text and Context* by Marian Bredin, Scott Henderson, and Sarah A. Matheson, ed. Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2012.

By Malisa Kurtz

Television critic, John Doyle, notes in his forward to *Canadian Television* that “the study of television is a rare arena in which journalism and scholarship meet with ease” (viii). Indeed, any study of television requires a necessarily interdisciplinary approach. Canadian television programming, for instance, is not only diverse in genre and narrative, it is also an industry which faces specific economic and socio-political challenges. Because television engages with these multiple social frameworks, John Ellis contends that television is important, because it can “enable[e] viewers to work through the major public and private concerns of their society” (74). As current scholarship makes clear, Canadian television is still an under-theorized yet significant area of study which traverses the fields of communication and media studies, popular culture, and political economy.

Canadian Television: Text and Context reflects the dynamic interdisciplinary work currently underway in Canadian television studies. The collection gathers research on television that is often dispersed amidst more “established” academic disciplines, such as communication studies. The editors note that such an endeavour expresses what they see as “a new maturity in both Canadian television and in Canadian television studies” (15). As part of this new maturity, the collection represents a move away from the already abundant literature on nationalism and media in Canada, shifting its focus instead towards examining Canadian television as a significant field of study in its own right. As the editors explain, “This book seeks to explore Canadian television within the realm of television studies, as opposed to being a book about Canadian national identity that happens to have television as its focus” (15). *Canadian*

Television: Text and Context, therefore, performs the important work of revealing how Canadian television texts and practices might reveal new insights into questions regarding Aboriginal public broadcasting (as per Marian Bredin's chapter), youth agency and identity (Michele Byers), and cultural diversity and representation in popular culture (Sarah A. Matheson). While individual chapters inevitably include discussions about national identity, as a whole the collection reveals how Canadian television studies provide a unique point of entry for studying the impact of television on society.

The collection's introduction summarizes major developments in the study of Canadian television from the foundational work of scholars such as Mary Jane Miller, Marc Raboy, and Richard Collins, while also addressing the development of more recent studies such as Zoë Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos's *Programming Reality* (2008) and Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan's *Canadian Television Today* (2006). Furthermore, the editors provide a clear outline of the three thematic approaches that frame the collection's sections: the first section introduces the material challenges and historical development of Canadian television studies; the second section examines the various contexts of television production in Canada, considering, for example, the "star system" in Canada; and the third and final section analyzes specific Canadian television content.

In the first section of the collection, Mary Jane Miller reflects on her early work in television studies, providing a synopsis of some of the challenges that many scholars in the field continue to face today. Such challenges include the preservation of programming from the CBC as well private broadcasters, the limited accessibility to such materials for scholars, and the potential for new internet and database technologies that might circumvent limitations in preservation and accessibility. As Jennifer Vanderburgh points out in the following chapter, however, much of the older, archival material on Canadian television which is central to understanding the historical development of television remains lost, deteriorating in archives, or limited in access for non-commercial uses.

The second section on "Contexts of Television Production in Canada" focuses specifically on the social and cultural context of television. Liz Czach's essay examines the "Canadian star system," which she argues has primarily "been developed and sustained through

television” (65) rather than film. Czach argues that in the Canadian context where film has failed to produce a major star system, television has fostered a host of recognizable and wide-ranging Canadian personalities including the *Trailer Park Boys* (Bubbles, Ricky, and Julian, etc.), George Stroumboulopoulos, Peter Mansbridge, and David Suzuki, to name but a few. Thus, Czach contends, Canadian television stars might best be understood following Richard deCordova’s notion of the “picture personality.” In her chapter, Marian Bredin “explores the political economy of Aboriginal television” (73), examining the effects of policy, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, and specific programs on the development of Aboriginal television production. Concluding the section, Kyle Asquith addresses the “hypercommercialism” of YTV’s youth programming, making visible the pervasive (and invasive) reach of neoliberal ideologies. Asquith argues that it is important to recognize such hypercommercialism and its impact on children’s programming, media literacy, and youth development.

The collection’s final group of essays focus on specific texts and how they negotiate representing social identities and public discourse. For example, Michele Byers’s chapter focuses on television series which target Canadian youth, and how youth television can both construct and challenge the “mythic idea of Canadianness in which ‘Canadian’ is a unified subject position” (130). Similarly, Derek Foster’s essay examines the “rhetorical power” (149) of reality TV programming in Canada, and its potential to engage “media citizens” (143). Foster argues for the value of discourse generated by and around reality TV programming in Canada, demonstrating that shows considered “non-nationalistic” may still perform important broadcasting services by fostering important public dialogue about such topics as media policy, funding, representation, and identity. In her chapter, Sarah Matheson discusses *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, arguing that the series utilizes the formulaic nature of genre—namely, sitcom comedy—to “normalize” cultural representations which are frequently presented as “exotic” and “othered.” Matheson highlights the show’s potential to “successfully [challenge] dominant representations of Muslims on television and effectively uses the culture clash narrative to reinforce themes of cooperation and compromise” (170). Following Matheson, Scott Henderson’s essay on Jerry Ciccoritti’s biopic *Shania: a life in Eight Albums* considers the importance of televisual style, structure, and content in Ciccoritti’s work as it contributes to his ability “to provide what can be described as a more Canadian perspective or subjectivity” (189). Henderson contends that Ciccoritti’s biopic, like much of his work on television, reorients

Shania Twain's stardom to situate her within the context of her upbringing in Canada, restoring a sense of cultural nationalism to Twain's global identity.

Canadian Television is an excellent collection of essays which contribute to the study of television by demonstrating how a specific socio-cultural context can help illuminate the multi-faceted nature of television. The volume's editors are associate professors in the department of Communications, Popular Culture and Film at Brock University, and the contributors come from a wide range of scholarly backgrounds. Such diversity is reflected in the volume's interdisciplinarity, a strength that advances their work in Canadian television studies. Their volume exemplifies the current breadth of the field, providing a comprehensive overview of current studies as well as highlighting potential areas for future study in Canadian television. Accessible and well-written, *Canadian Television* would benefit senior scholars and classrooms alike, particularly in the fields of communications, popular culture, history, journalism, and Canadian studies.

Work Cited

Ellis, John. *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: IB Tauris, 2000.

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