

BIRGIT DÄWES, ALEXANDRA GANSER, and NICOLE POPPENHAGEN, eds., *Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter GmbH Heidelberg, 2015), 358 pp.

Since the 1940s, television series have gradually become an experimental site to cross boundaries and break taboos in American culture. Contemporary American television series such as *House of Cards*, *Veep*, *The Wire*, *Cashing In*, *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, and *Hannibal* have started a new trend which no longer follows the cultural traditions and social expectations, and have constructed a new beginning in visualizing and depicting transgression on cultural, political, ethnical, and technological levels. Nowadays, American transgressive television series can be considered as important sources for the research on American television and popular culture. Current research on transgressive television not only negotiates its relations with American quality television serials and its cross-field connections with the big screen as well as the Internet, but also draws attention to the changes and developments that transgressive television series have made in presenting politics and crime in the changing cultural and technological contexts.

Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series is an up-to-date collection of sixteen essays presented at the conference "Transgressive Television: Politics, Crime, and Citizenship in Twenty-First-Century American TV Series" in Vienna (Däwes, Ganser, and Poppenhagen 9). The first section, "Paving Pathways," lays out the foundation for the analysis of contemporary American transgressive television series. Birgit Däwes's article "Transgressive Television: Preliminary Thoughts" addresses the transformations that American transgressive television series have made in recent years, not only in terms of plot and character complexity, but also in the transgression of the boundaries of "Self and Other," "genre" and "form," "reality and fiction" (24-26). By breaking cultural taboos with direct presentations of "violence, sex, and death," and putting the "position of politics" at the core, transgressive television serials have become "an ideal laboratory" of American culture and "an operational principle of border-crossing and intersection" to reflect socio-cultural

realities and to provide more possibilities for interpreting "cultural codes, norms," "values," and "transgressive identities" (24-28). In "The Countdown to Y2KTV and the Arrival of the New Serialists," Gary R. Edgerton gives an overview of the evolution of American television series from the Network Era and the Cable Era to the Digital Era, and discusses the "technological, commercial, and social" changes in the development of the American television industry, focusing on the "show-runner model" of David Chase's *The Sopranos* known for its transgression to cinematic presentations and its innovative market/customer-oriented model (36-40). As Edgerton points out, the development of a television series like *The Sopranos* has made television more "personalized, interactive, mobile, and on demand in the digital era" and has aimed towards a more "transformative," competitive, "innovative," and influential cultural and social status in the United States (48-49). In "Transgressive Serialization and the Serialization of Transgression at the U.S.-Canadian Border: *Twin Peaks*," Alexandra Ganser looks at the cultural history of American television series by viewing *Twin Peaks* as an example of "both a serialization of transgression and a transgression of traditional seriality" (55). She comments on *Twin Peaks*'s innovative characteristics, such as its "self-reflexivity" and "self-referentiality," its elements of parallels, binaries, and "doubles" in the plotline and characters, and "its characterization as a 'meta-series'" (59-75). Ganser identifies four features that make up the progress of contemporary American television series: the emergence of stable audiences, the increasing influence of television serial creators, the "technological transformations," and the status of television as "an international medium" (56-58).

The second section, "Representing Power: Formats of Political TV Series," consists of three articles which deal with the interrelationship between American transgressive television series and politics. In "The Politics of Time in *House of Cards*," Marjolaine Boutet sees the element of transgression in *House of Cards* in the "relations between journalists and politicians" and their relationship with the development of the time. She points out that the relationship between traditional journalism and *Journalism 2.0* with politics differ significantly from each other, concluding the crucial status of time in this show for generat-

ing a new serial structure and a different viewing experience (83-84). In "Another Scandal in Washington: How a Transgressive, Black Anti-Heroine Makes for New 'Quality TV,'" Simone Puff argues that the television series *Scandal* can be considered as an example of quality TV since this show allows manifold representations of gender identities and constructs a complicated and multi-layered Black anti-heroine who represents both "hero and villain" and is not constrained by stereotypical images (121-22). In the third article, "The Humane Face of Politics? Political Representations, Power Structures, and Gender Limitations in HBO's Political Comedy *Veep*," Dorothea Will shows "how HBO 'provides a forum for transgression' for *Veep*" by transgressing the borders of language and genre and breaking the traditional visualizations of the political world with exaggeration, irony and sarcasm in realistic presentations of political stories (127-29, 135-39).

The third section, "Normative Crossings: Institutions, Gender, and Ethnicity," includes five articles which mainly focus on the institutional, gender, and ethnic aspects of transgressive television. In "Institutions and Personal Conceptions of Reality in HBO's *The Wire*: Spatial Transgressions and Their Consequences," Fabius Mayland addresses the "spatial interpretation" of the transgressive elements and analyzes how different sites, such as "the orange couch" and "the detail's office," function as essential stations where "individuals" and "institutions" from "either side of the law" are restrained by their limitations—such as their "short-sightedness"—and thus further develop the conflict and transgression (145-62). Kimberly R. Moffitt's article, "The Portrayals of Black Motherhood in *The Wire*," draws attention to "black motherhood" in *The Wire* as "primetime television" by comparing the positive portrayals of "White femininity" and "White mothers" in American popular culture with the negative depiction of Black motherhood in *The Wire*, which indicates the stereotypical and limited characterizations of Black mothers as "anti-thesis of White mothers" in contemporary transgressive television series (166-77).

In "'Symbolic Annihilation' and Drive-By Misogyny: Women in Contemporary U.S.-American Television Series," Cornelia Klecker questions the presentation of female characters in contemporary American television series such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Good*

Wife, *Mad Men*, *Weeds*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Nurse Jackie*. She claims that many female characters are still "underrepresented," unequally portrayed, and stereotypically characterized, and concludes that the gender gap and gender inequality in "American prime-time television series" need to be urgently changed in the near future (179, 191-92). In "Secret Spheres from *Breaking Bad* to *The Americans*: The Politics of Secrecy, Masculinity, and Transgression in 21st-Century U.S. Television Drama," René Dietrich turns to the analysis of masculinity, particularly the complex representation of "male anti-heroes," and its relations with "gendered secrecy" (195, 213-14). According to Dietrich, this formation indicates transgression in popular culture as well as its ambivalent method of presenting transgression. The last article in this section "*Cashing In*: The 'Casino Indian' on Television" by Stephanie Scholz compares the stereotypical images of Native Americans in traditional television series of the past and recent television series, as, for example, the Native American series *Cashing In* which exhibits both "exotacist-positive" and "savagist-negative" stereotypical features of Native Americans (217-33). Scholz believes that the gradual development of Native American television series and the increase of Native American "audiences," "writers," "directors," and "producers" can contribute to changing cultural stereotypes towards Native Americans and also constitute Native American cultural traditions (234-38).

The fourth section "Transgression and Control: Serializing Crime" provides five articles on the representations of crime. In "No Longer Your Friendly Neighborhood Killer: Crime Shows and Seriality after *Dexter*," Karin Hoepker explores the "systemic diversification" in crime television shows, such as *Hannibal*, *The Following*, *True Detective*, and *Bates Motel*. They present the audiences with diverse and distinct characteristics that are connected to the genre of transgressive television by combining "the familiar and the innovative, sameness and difference, repetition and variation" (247-62). As Janina Rojek argues in "Crime, Control, and (Medical) Condition: The Illness Narratives of *The Sopranos*, *Boss*, and *Breaking Bad* as Boundary Transgression," the physical and psychological illnesses of the male protagonists, such as Tony Soprano, Tom Kane, and Walter White, indicate their transgression of the boundaries between "morality and immorality," "profes-

sional and private life,” and “masculinity/health and weakness/illness”; thus, they transgress the traditional portrayals of male anti-heroes, leaving no possibility for curing their illnesses but more possibilities for boundary transgression (267-68).

In “Death Art: Representations of Violence in NBC’s *Hannibal*,” Matthew Leroy interprets the aesthetic aspect of the series’ violence, which turns death into “an art form” and characterizes the murderer as an “artist” (298-99). Leroy also points out that the artistic representations of violence that are at the center in transgressive series like *Hannibal*, have blurred the boundary between “the good and bad, the hero and villain,” and have in a way changed the audiences’ perspectives and requirements regarding the “artistic performance” of crime and violence (299). In “NBC’s *Hannibal* and the Politics of Audience Engagement,” Felix Brinker presents *Hannibal* as “controversial” transgressive television in the Digital Age and sees the “aesthetics” of the show in picturing transgression. He then focuses on how the show’s complexity and uniqueness both in content and structure have encouraged the engagement of its viewers and have maximized the scope of its “fans,” or “Fannibals” (305, 322). In the last article “Dexter in Disguise: A Stylistic Approach to Verbal Camouflage in a Serial Killer Series,” Christoph Schubert conducts a “linguistic investigation of discourse,”

specifically of “the discursive strategies” that Dexter applies in order to hide his status as a criminal, concluding that although *Dexter* “transgresses crime show conventions,” the main character Dexter stays conventional and is limited to the “communicative conventions” of the series (329, 346-48).

Overall, *Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series* contributes significantly to the closing of a research gap with regard to contemporary American transgressive television series by offering diverse perspectives, ranging from theoretical background, historical development, production and market conditions, consumer analysis, technological innovation, to the interpretation of transgressive elements in such different fields as politics, gender, ethnicity, race, and crime. This collection discusses numerous influential and up-to-date American television series, addresses the most recent and important cultural transformations in the United States, and offers insightful perspectives on how to interpret the development of transgressive television series in terms of the most current changes and trends of American television series. Therefore, I believe that *Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series* is an informative and inspiring reference for all researchers interested in this topic.

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