
Programming Reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian Television is a sorely needed anthology of critical essays on contemporary home-grown television. As editors Zoë Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos note in their introduction, discourse on Canadian television has been dominated largely by discussions of cultural policies and communications frameworks. The 16 chapters that compose Programming Reality are a departure from this tradition; while retaining a strong emphasis on and awareness of the insights and importance of political economy perspectives on Canada’s television landscape, these essays situate television texts deliberately in their social and cultural contexts as well. The result is a collection that integrates content- and audience-centred approaches into dialogues about Canadian television and showcases a cadre of home-grown scholars who are contributing to this critical shift.

Programming Reality’s ample array of approaches and arguments is bound together by a core focus on the nebulous concept of “realism,” as its contributors explore the permutations and multiple resonances of reality-based programming. Canadian media have had a long and often lock-step engagement with realist strategies, aesthetics, and storylines, predating the recent explosion of reality TV in the American market. As Druick and Kotsopoulos suggest, however, this trend provides a productive opportunity to “reconsider the complex mediation of reality that television performs within the Canadian context” (p. 1). In marking the intersections of realism with televisual, economic, generic, and national discourses, this volume both expands existing definitions of reality TV and pushes the boundaries of what we think of as “realism.”

Some subjects are familiar elements of the debate, such as the various Degrassi series, lauded regularly for their realistic representations of youth and claimed as Canadian as a result; here, Michele Byers contends that our understand-
ing of how the franchise mobilizes this trope is “rooted in the types of stories it has chosen to tell and the way it has told them, as well as the characters through which they have been told” (p. 199). Glen Lowry makes a similar observation about CBC’s hit *Da Vinci’s Inquest*. Lowry outlines how, through the program’s initial attention to the specificity of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and its storylines about missing women, *Da Vinci’s Inquest* became a “vehicle for primetime viewers to identify and imagine alternatives to serious social ills” (p. 356). These two chapters thus attend to how aesthetic codes and social relevancy perpetuate a sense of “reality” refracted through a sense of national consciousness.

As a whole, however, *Programming Reality* does not offer any totalizing understanding of realism, nor does it aim to. Its contributions are grouped thematically, indicating instead the kinds of narratives that arise when traversing the lines between fact and fiction. The first section, “Narrating Nation,” investigates through specific case studies and textual analyses how Canadian television creates and contributes to national narratives and identities. Some, such as Julie Rak’s consideration of *The Greatest Canadian*, raise questions about how the market populism of reality programming may be eroding civic discourse, as modes of address shift from citizen to consumer. In “Making Citizens,” the second section, the goals and influences of public policy on Canadian television come to the forefront. Essays such as Katarzyna Rukszto’s “History as Edutainment,” about the popular *Heritage Minutes*, work through how Canadian television’s mandate to do social good is enacted in texts that straddle both reality and fiction and what kinds of citizens are represented—and forgotten—in the process.

The last group of essays, in “Mapping Geographies,” addresses the locality of Canadian television, offering insights into the ways that representations of the country’s urban areas can forge relationships between audiences, spaces, and places. Sarah Matheson’s contribution on Global’s *Train 48* engages with the kinds of communal messages that emerge as the series soapi ly chronicles a group of commuters’ daily travels between work and home. The program collapses and deliberately frames public and private narratives into the structure of everyday life, creating “the sense that these characters’ lives unfold within a larger public sphere, as they engage with some of the same issues and events affecting viewers’ own lives. It situates personal dramas within the context of a shared public world” (p. 296). Matheson also highlights *Train 48’s* shoe-string budget, as the program’s “innovative” approach was conditioned in part by its tight finances. A consistent concern with production contexts and constraints cuts across *Programming Reality*’s thematic sections, making clear that at times degrees of “realism” are dictated by economic imperatives. As Byers discusses, series such as *Canadian Idol* are re-worked templates imported from other countries, attempts to cash in on proven formulas in an era of continually shrinking subsidies, and the CRTC’s expanded definitions of priority programming.

The continual recourse to embedding Canadian television within discourses of cultural policy arises in large part from *Programming Reality*’s focus on English-Canadian television programming. These series’ French-Canadian counterparts are, on average, more successful in achieving both their financial and cultural objectives; as the editors remind us, “where the top twenty shows in
English-language Canada are usually made in the US with the occasional exception, the top twenty programs in Quebec are French-language ones made in Canada” (p. 2). English-Canadian television is thus marked by different anxieties, and this anthology sketches out some of the most pressing. In this way, too, *Programming Reality* is a valuable tool for research and teaching on recent Canadian popular culture. Whether used in its entirety or dipped into for individual essays, this collection offers a range of timely, accessible, and diverse interpretations of Canadian television’s negotiations of televisual and national realities, and it charts future directions for critical, engaged scholarship on what it means to be as Canadian as possible, under the circumstances.

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