The introduction to Canadian Television: Text and Context, a volume in Wilfrid Laurier’s Film and Media Studies series, is indicative of how far Canadian television scholarship has progressed; and indeed, its level of sophistication is remarkable. The contents of the collection demonstrate an enormous diversity of scope and a maturation of analysis that is refreshing and exciting.

The introduction provides an excellent review of Canadian television history with much deserved mention of stellar academics such as Mary Jane Miller and Paul Rutherford. Virtually every significant book published in relation to Canadian television is described, with just the right amount of focus on seminal authors, such as Richard Collins. A quirky foreword by Globe and Mail columnist John Doyle precedes the introduction, while the other side contains a memoir-like, nostalgia-tinged piece by Mary Jane Miller, which captures the evolution of Canadian television criticism and analysis quite accurately.

Much of the first third of the book deals with collective memory and, in particular, the problems with keeping the public archive alive. A companion piece to Miller’s is Jennifer Vander Burgh’s, which raises some interesting issues regarding copyright laws, including the fact that most professors and institutions skirt around copyright in order to show certain programs, especially those from the CBC. Those who choose to abide by copyright legislation very often end up not showing “significant” programs. Sadly, problems with access seem insurmountable given ownership issues, technology, and even pettiness. The storage and repository of the so-called national television archive are both enormously problematic.

The second part of the book begins with Liz Czach’s essay on the difference between a television personality and a film star, which raises some provocative concepts. Whereas once the categorizations would have been somewhat finite, much has changed thanks to technology, which then allows for both the fragmentation and reorientation of formerly defined categories. In contemporary terms, there is more flexibility in moving between the two media—note Paul Gross and Fred Ewanuk.

Marian Bredin’s piece on the APTN is a wonderfully cogent assessment of the Aboriginal Network, complete with a short history and commentary on obstacles and challenges facing the indigenous network. This selection is one that should be mandatory reading on most Canadian media and television courses. The fact that APTN, being a hybrid type of network—as such, being all things to all viewers—must negotiate a myriad of obstacles, makes its existence remarkable yet continuously precarious.

Kyle Asquith’s discourse on the “hypercommercialism of YTV” is a strong examination on the rampant impact of program length commercials, which have become essential parts of the communication sphere and, in some cases, have morphed into the bulk of the offerings on many networks. While a bit too dependent on David Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 38 (1)
Buckingham in certain places, the essay highlights a number of significant features, including the outright acknowledgement of the profit motive involved in children's shows featured on the network, the totalizing embrace of marketing tactics in delivering segmented youth and viewers, and the important ability for these networks to go beyond TV into multimedia arenas, including online venues to reach youth audiences. Corporate sponsorship in a variety of pretexts is not only rampant but a defacto form of wallpaper, literally blending into the background of in-house shows and product placements. The synergistic strategies involved allow for a sophisticated merging that, Asquith makes quite clear, is at the heart of both the success and, from a critical media approach, the reality and danger.

The final section of the book attempts to integrate a number of ideas on nationalism, beginning with Michelle Byers' examination of elements of “Canadianess” as depicted in a number of shows, with a specific focus on the various incarnations of the Degrassi series. For her analysis, Byers uses youth and race as interpreted and subdivided into three overarching themes. This approach seems to be in keeping with much of how Canadian broadcasting approaches youth media—although this is in contrast to the previous essay—as well as in how it “projects” itself to the world. At the same time, it also seems to permeate so many storylines of so many episodes of the various shows under examination. The results are not always polished and often come across as cumbersome.

Derek Foster's essay re-contextualizes the age-old dichotomies that surround the role and the dilemma facing the CBC, but through the prism of reality TV. This is a novel approach on an essential factor inherent in Canadian television and broadcasting discourse since the 1950s. Foster poses an interesting paradigm from which to examine the unique role of the CBC—as national public broadcaster—and the essay allows for a fresh and fascinating series of illuminations. Reality television, and in particular, American reality television, when shown on Canada's national network, “tasked with documenting the nation,” pushes buttons in every conceivable direction. The essay touches on many facets of contention and brings to the fore the conflicting, problematic, and mandated issues that have to be reconciled. All of this must be considered within the rubric of nationalism and the role of the CBC. This is an excellent and thought-provoking essay that is a testament to the high level of scholarship now being generated in Canada.

The essay on Little Mosque on the Prairie by Sarah Matheson delves into the role that television, and in particular, television comedy, plays in engaging with “popular discourses about cultural diversity and national identity.” Journalists and critics were quick to cast the show as a barometer for Canadian multiculturalism, something that does not always add up. Focusing in on how Little Mosque fits into CBC's mandate, the show also attempts to negotiate the post-911 world, complete with the complexities and controversies of citizenship and diversity. Significantly, the show attempts a “bridging” between “anxieties” of “social integration” and creates “a functional fantasy of unity.” Subjected to unprecedented levels of media attention, Little Mosque's producers and creator(s) went out of their way to highlight that the show was a comedy and not a political satire. By positioning the show as a situation comedy, it was felt that they could give focus to the “ordinary” and the “normal” variants of Muslims “just living,”
as opposed to the extremes most often depicted in the media. This trajectory, as Matheson rightly concludes, has the effect of “restricting the complexity with which it is able to engage with the questions of difference that are posted throughout the program” (p. 169).

Scott Henderson’s concluding essay is a testament to just how far the programming, and the concomitant scholarship, of Canadian television have come. There is a body of research and theory to draw on and this is utilized effectively in an examination of work that is now abundant and diverse. The analysis of Jerry Ciccoritti’s biopics is an excellent example of how sophisticated the world of Canadian television analysis has become.

This work is accessible to undergraduates and laudable for its scope of content. It shows more than the “maturation” of Canadian television studies, but as well, the elegance and diversity of the discipline.

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