

Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past: Feminist TV History

“Theorizing Retextuality”

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Which texts are worthy of study? This simple question and the rationale behind it have underscored terrific research in media and cultural studies that challenges TV’s recent cultural legitimization, not least of which includes Michael Newman and Elana Levine’s *Legitimizing Television* as well as Derek Kompare’s *Rerun Nation*. In my work on the queer and feminist potential of (first-, second-, and SVOD-) syndicated television, this question necessarily guides me as I explore the current lives of shows like *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, *The Golden Girls*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *Roseanne*. But I’ve also had to grapple with the tentacles of that question: How long does textual value last and to what ends?

For example, were I to want to discuss audiences and feminism in 2016 (be it in an article or a classroom), it would seem logical to frame that discussion through the lens of a show like *Girls* or *UnReal* because those are contemporary texts that, problematically or not, make feminist appeals to audiences. Were I to want to do a cultural history project addressing feminism in the 1970s, analyzing the two-part 1972 abortion episodes of *Maude* would seem a reasonable choice because *Maude* was a text on television in that year. But were I to want to discuss feminism in 2016, it would seem illogical – or my credentials suspect – to use a show like *Roseanne* because it hasn’t been on the air in numerous years, right? In my experience, aside from all the other aspects of a text that might delegitimize it for study, I’ve also found that textual value in “contemporary projects” seems to be temporal – it expires – and the implications of that are significant.

It is not my project to suggest our field is lacking in historical research. We have a rich body of very celebrated scholarly work in broadcast history – cultural studies projects that explore a text through thorough investigations of its historical context. I argue, however, that contemporary projects and historical projects have become a sort of unspoken methodological dichotomy for our field and that has left only a very shaky tight rope between the two for me as a syndication scholar to walk as I strive to interpenetrate them.

Going back to my example, in part because it aired alongside the growing emergence of feminist media studies, *Roseanne* enjoyed robust academic scholarship in the years it was in production that dropped once off the air. The problem here, simply, is that it *didn’t* go off the air (in my local market, it aired 40 times in 16 different time slots on multiple channels this week). And indeed it would be fairly simple to demonstrate how it’s actually *still* in production (as new syndicators continuously decide how to edit episodes or even a show’s entire identity in order to appeal to possible new platforms and audiences, sometimes making *new* episodes or even new shows out of leftover quilt pieces).

For my project, theorizing what I’ve termed retextuality has been more of a utilitarian intervention than a philosophical one. Because we’ve now theorized “texts” to include aspects like audiences, flows, “meta”discourses, (super)texts, intertexts, and paratexts, I offer retextuality as a way of exploring the new lives of texts as distinct from their earlier manifestations. If, as is said of life, the phenomenon of a text is like a gathering of clouds which are scattered in death, then the retext is a new, yet different, formation of them. I offer three kinds of retextualization examples for this topic: Shows that have been significantly re-authored by producers or syndicators (as with sketch-comedy *Carol Burnett and Friends* being assembled from segments of the earlier variety *Carol Burnett Show*), shows that have been significantly re-authored by cultural events (2016’s *Cosby Show* is fundamentally different than 1988’s *Cosby Show*, as

several blogger's have pointed out), and shows that have been significantly re-authored by flow and platform identity (as when the "queer reading" of a show like *The Golden Girls* becomes its dominant interpretive framework as it "comes home" to Logo TV). Overall, the goal of my project is to challenge the historical/presentist dichotomy of our field and build a foundation upon which future scholars can make arguments about the purchase of an "older" text in the present moment. To do so is to provide a source for such future research that can circumvent an article's otherwise lengthy justification for text selection and/or the comments about it likely to be left by Reviewer #2.