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Review of Toni, P. (2019) Figures of time: affect and the television of preemption

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The practice of watching serial products, therefore, does not limit the possible paths of reflection and analysis triggered by the narratives animating them. The ability to interpret the contemporary world through the mirror of fiction is seen as a necessity regarding the opportunities that the future may unfold. Behind this practice, Lynch shows us a path of thinking taking shape and arising from an in-depth study of serials, accompanied by the voices of the many philosophers that are mentioned in the various chapters of the book; it is a path that moves under the surface of the texts and much of the sense of a story is produced through the many layers of meaning that are summoned through the ongoing exercise of thinking itself. Only in this way is it possible to produce unprecedented connections between features of the stories and the scenarios of reality. Although *Between Habit and Thought* undoubtedly presents elements of interest and originality, at times the philosophical speculation runs the risk of prevailing over the ability to bring out the specificities and intrinsic qualities of the serial as a television phenomenon. This is, nevertheless, a book which will be of much interest to those already engaged with philosophical approaches to television analysis.

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Author biography

Antonella Mascio is Associate Professor at University of Bologna (Italy), where she teaches courses on Media and Cultural Processes. Her main research interests are media studies, with a focus on television series and audiences including research on fandom, fashion and celebrity culture, nostalgia studies. She has published articles in scientific journals and books focused on: virtual communities, TV series and their audiences, media, and fashion. She is member of several editorial boards, including *PopJunctions* (HenryJenkinsproject: <http://henryjenkins.org/>).

Toni Pape, *Figures of Time: Affect and the Television of Preemption*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019; 224 pp. ISBN 9781478003731 £44 (hbk), 9781478004035 £22.99 (pbk)

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The bright-pink teddy bear that floats into the frame during the opening scene of *Breaking Bad*'s second season (2009) is an ominous fragment of the future. The viewer's experience of every subsequent episode of the television series' second season will be infused with this initial foreboding vision. What has happened? What *will* happen? When and how will bad luck strike protagonist Walter White, American family father and high school teacher-turned-criminal? The shots of the damaged toy loop the narrative through the future, thereby pulling the serial story to a presumed cataclysmic ending that will never arrive. This narrative loop through the future, Toni Pape states, is television's new refrain.

Figures of Time is, Pape explains at the end of the introduction, 'an attempt to take the arsenal of contemporary television and turn it into ethico-aesthetic sparklers' (p. 37). In his monograph, he explores the aesthetic force of pre-emptive narratives in contemporary TV series—with *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), *Damages* (2007-12), *Flashforward* (2009-2010) and *Life on Mars* (2006-7) as pre-eminent examples that together form Pape's corpus of analysis. The proliferation of pre-emptive narratives in TV series, or, more broadly, of heterogeneous temporalities in contemporary narrative cinema and television, has not been left unnoted by television and media scholars. However, instead of following Todd McGowan's influential suggestion that the anachronisms, loops, repetitions and crossing timelines that characterize narrative films in the digital era take us 'out of time' and make moving images 'atemporal' (2011), Pape convincingly argues that nonlinear timelines take us *into time* rather than out of it: 'quirky temporalities speak not to a dismissal of "real" time but, quite the contrary, to a serious engagement with time as an aesthetic, political, and ethical problem' (p. 18).

By relating the aesthetic experience of non-linear televisual time to political and social as well as ethical concerns, Pape's project exceeds earlier studies of TV series which aimed at mapping (or staking out) the narrative specificity of serial television, and therefore tended to address non-linear forms of time predominantly as elements of the complex narrativity that typifies contemporary TV series according to leading scholars such as Jason Mittell (2015), Michael Newman (2006) and Paul Booth (2010). *Figures of Time* takes aesthetic experience—defined as the perceptual dynamics and intensities of sensation—as its starting point to develop a concept of televisual time, and asks: What does television *do*? What is it capable of today? What are the new social and political potentials of contemporary TV? How does it form a vector of subjectivation that inflects our individual and collective existence?

In its move beyond pinpointing formal narrative qualities, the book never fully discards narrative, though, nor does it do away with the method of close reading. Yet, narrative is read closely in a different way; it is approached with different questions: questions that pertain to narrative as *operation*, rather than as *representation*. Pape's main inquiries are not in the first place: How do these narratives represent the future? What meaning does the future have in these stories? but rather: What kinds of aesthetic experiences does the narrative loop through the future activate? What kinds of movements—of perception, of thought—does this narrative move enable or foreclose on this side, our side, of the screen?

Pape delves into these questions by way of two important methodological ‘moves.’ First of all, drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Pape thinks television as a machinic assemblage of heterogeneous elements (technical, social, political, ethical) that co-compose our lived experience of TV. Pape’s analyses of the lived experience of television as machinic assemblage start out with very tethered questions: ‘What is seen, heard and felt through a program’s images and sound? What exactly comes into sensation? How does this experience come into existence? How exactly does it engage the body?’ (p. 16).

Pape answers these questions through a second ‘methodological move.’ Grounded in Deleuze’s concept of the figure, *Figures of Time* proposes a method of figural analysis: ‘a method for studying the procedural modulation of affective forces running through moving image narratives’ (26). This entails ‘thinking TV’s serial movements through time as an abstract shape slowly but directly crafted unto sensation’ (p. 25). The figures of time under analysis, then, are *effects* or *events* produced in the encounter between the formal elements and rhetorical strategies of moving images and the viewer. The temporal figures of preemption that Pape focusses on are read as forms that make something felt. They produce ‘pathic, non-discursive’ knowledge (p. 26).

With the help of film and media philosophies by Deleuze, Bergson, Gins and Arakawa, to name only a few, Pape demonstrates the political implications of this knowledge by discussing how pre-emptive narratives in TV series intersect with wider political ecologies of fear, neoliberalism and control. By disrupting our sense of temporal orientation, by creating a sense of an unforeclosed future, or by drawing attention to the potential of the now, figures of time in television series can effectuate *tentative attention* to the stirrings of the world. On the one hand, Pape contends, this tentative attention meets the demands of our contemporary neoliberal society for control that comes with ever-shifting and increasing requirements. On the other hand, television series such as those he analyses can function as training ground for rechanneling the demands of the control society and for inflecting aspects of attention so as to produce modes of (sparkling!) ethico-aesthetic engagement. To conclude,

‘The invitation to dance the dance of attention needs to be considered.

Shall we?’ (Pape, 2019: 71)

Yes, please.

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Author biography

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