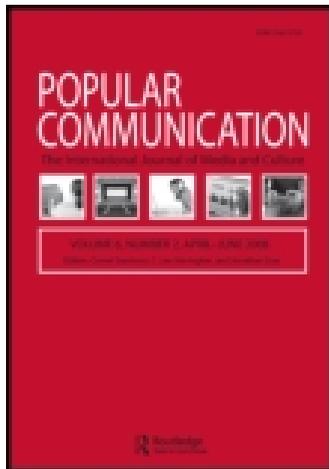


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Television in Transition: The Life and Afterlife of the Narrative Action Hero, by Shawn Shimpach

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BOOK REVIEWS

Introduction

The titles reviewed in this section belong to a recent wave of monographs and edited collections on television's contemporary "identity crisis." Like many of the books that fall within this fast-growing category, each addresses the vexed question of what has television become following more than two decades of media convergence, regulatory reform, and institutional upheaval. To be sure, questions about television's identity are not a recent phenomenon but rather have surrounded the medium throughout its history. Within the academy, these questions have most frequently surfaced in the form of debates over television's ontology and specifically over the degree to which its forms and functions are or are not determined by its technologies. Outside of scholarly contexts, a similar set of debates over television's identity has unfolded across policy documents, press reports, advertisements, and the television industry's own "deep texts." For much of television's history these lines of inquiry progressed in parallel to one another. Over the last decade, however, they have begun to converge. The three titles reviewed in this section are representative of the productive dialogues presently taking place between scholars of media and communication, industry workers, policymakers, and journalists. In this respect, they are not merely books about television in the age of media convergence; they are likewise products of the convergence of two rich traditions of theoretical practice.

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Television in Transition: The Life and Afterlife of the Narrative Action Hero. By Shawn Shimpach. Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, ISBN 9781405185363, 256 pages, \$94.95 (cloth); ISBN 9781405185356, 256 pages, \$36.95 (paper).

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Shawn Shimpach's *Television in Transition* is a timely and original study of the complex industrial and textual dynamics of contemporary television production. Focusing specifically on "TVIII" (a term that denotes the current "third age" of television, which Shimpach defines as

beginning around the early to mid 1990s), the book complements a growing body of research on the industrial, technological, and economic transformations of this period, including most notably Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson's *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (2004) and Amanda D. Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2007). But while much of the scholarship on TVIII has treated industry and text as discrete objects of study, or else has emphasized one above the other, Shimpach provides a balanced analysis that offers perspectives on both of these aspects of the medium.

The transition that television has faced over the past 15–20 years has been complex and multifaceted. As new distribution technologies such as TiVo and the DVD boxset have extended the reach, the life, and the afterlife of the medium, the very definition of what now constitutes “television” has been called into question. For Shimpach, this reconfiguration of television’s spatio-temporal parameters has profound consequences not only for the ways that programming circulates and is consumed but also for the ways that narratives are constructed. In examining the relationship between the industry and its texts, Shimpach focuses his analysis on one of television’s most enduring figures, the male action hero. He singles out such iconic characters as Duncan MacLeod of *Highlander: The Series*, Clark Kent/Superman of *Smallville*, Jack Bauer of *24*, and The Doctor of *Doctor Who* for special consideration. Shimpach’s rationale for taking such an approach is that these particular heroes embody (and thus reveal) aspects of television’s spatio-temporal transition—some are immortal, some travel effortlessly through time and space, while others are temporally confined. While this emphasis on the action hero limits his analysis to the hour-long primetime drama, there are enough generic, institutional, and textual differences to allow Shimpach to explore a range of other TVIII-related issues, including transnational and transmedia distribution, generic hybridity, series and serial narration, and corporate synergy and branding.

Prior to these case studies, however, Shimpach offers useful contextual information. In chapter one he describes the industrial shifts that constitute television’s recent transition, paying particular attention to the development of new media technologies which, he argues, have resulted in contemporary television’s spatial saturation (available anywhere) and temporal ubiquity (available anytime). Chapters two and three provide a rationale for Shimpach’s emphasis on the action hero and a discussion of the ways in which viewers attend to television, respectively.

The following four chapters develop these ideas through a combination of industrial and close textual analysis. In chapter four, Shimpach uses *Highlander: The Series*, an early example of an international co-production, to illustrate the increasingly transnational design of television programming. As he points out, the series’ debut in 1992 coincided with legislative changes that encouraged international collaboration by offering financial incentives such as tax breaks for film and television production. Shimpach argues that this model of international co-production, in which the financial risk is spread across a number of different countries, is not without its drawbacks. To qualify as “domestic” in Canada and France, *Highlander* had to balance the cultural and industrial requirements of both countries. In addition to highlighting the series’ extended spatial presence (filmed in Vancouver, set in an unspecified North American city, and punctuated by the protagonists’ unfettered global mobility), Shimpach draws an interesting parallel between Duncan MacLeod’s immortality and that of contemporary television series, which continue to circulate between platforms long after their initial broadcasts.

In chapter five, Shimpach argues that in the context of multichannel expansion and increasing corporate synergy, branding has emerged as a key industrial logic of TVIII. To illustrate he describes how *Smallville* factored in the brand strategy of The WB, a fledgling network seeking

to expand its viewership. The WB's efforts to broaden the appeal of *Smallville* took many forms, for instance, by mixing episodic and serial elements and by combining aspects of the romance, comedy, action, and teen drama genres. Ultimately, by offering something for everyone, The WB was able to attract a "coalition" viewership as opposed to a "mass" audience.

Chapter six takes a somewhat broader approach to television in transition, discussing the institutional and political contexts of spy drama *24*. Shimpach notes how in the immediate wake of 9/11 the series took on a special resonance for U.S. viewers. Following this brief digression, he returns to the mode of industrial-textual analysis developed in his previous chapters. Specifically, he argues that the series is exemplary of a key temporal feature of TVIII in which there is a "relentlessness of time, of narrative, forcing endurance and spatial mobility" (p. 150). While he links *24*'s narrative mode to some of the broader shifts in television culture, Shimpach claims that the series' real-time conceit can also be understood within the context of FOX network's proclivity for "stunting"—a programming strategy that involves the production of special, one-off episodes intended to attract larger audiences. As the youngest of the major U.S. networks, FOX relied on "stunting" to differentiate itself from its more well-established competitors. "Stunting" has remained a core programming strategy for the network, and continues to shape the narratives of its programming.

Chapter seven shifts focus to examine the potential impact of television's recent transition on public service broadcasters. Focusing on the series *Doctor Who*, Shimpach describes how the fragmentation of audiences has been especially problematic for the BBC. He argues that the return (or "regeneration") of The Doctor can be understood in the context of legislative revisions that require the BBC to make itself more relevant locally and globally. In its efforts to encourage "collective viewing" amongst members of an increasingly "fragmented public" (p. 160), the BBC employed strategies similar to those used by the producers of *Highlander* and the WB, including "generic recombination," episodic and serial storylines, and transnational/transmedia distribution. Like Duncan MacLeod, Clark Kent, and Jack Bauer, The Doctor personifies for Shimpach the new spatio-temporal mobilities of contemporary television.

Television in Transition highlights a number of significant connections between the texts and contexts of TVIII. Rather than provide a deterministic account of the ways that technologies, institutions, or economics shape television narratives, Shimpach offers a more nuanced consideration of the reciprocal interplay between these various elements. Although the key case studies are carefully chosen, with each highlighting a different aspect of the contemporary television industry, earlier parts of the book (particularly the sections devoted to reviewing theories of white masculinity) feel somewhat extraneous to the core argument. Like the industry it examines, *Television in Transition*'s thesis is multifaceted, but Shimpach does an excellent job in guiding the reader through the new narratives and spatio-temporal configurations of TVIII.

Television as Digital Media. Edited by James Bennett and Niki Strange. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, ISBN 9780822349105, 389 pages, \$25.95 (paper).

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James Bennett and Niki Strange's edited collection *Television as Digital Media* makes an important intervention within discussions of television's relationship to digital culture. It does so in