Uncomfortable Television analyzes post-millennial US television through the lens of discomfort and the affects associated with taking pleasure in shows whose protagonists are unlikeable, criminal, gross, abject, narcissistic, or otherwise generally unpleasant. Hunter Hargraves’s core argument is that post-millennial television “began to normalize discomfort during this time as a strategy of governmentality.”1 Twenty-first-century television, he argues, was designed to comfort, to instruct postwar American audiences on family structures and suburban living. Twenty-first century television dramatically shifted that affective address toward negative affects that Hargraves covers chapter by chapter: irritation, addiction, perversion, and White guilt.2 Training viewers to take pleasure in these “ugly feelings,” to borrow Sianne Ngai’s phrase, television enacts its governmentality, its role as a structure of cultural control, and accustoms audiences to enjoying feeling bad.3 This perversion of pleasure, Hargraves argues, is essential to surviving as a citizen in what is alternately titled late capitalism or neoliberal capitalism. This reimagining of the so-called affective theoretical turn in the humanities generally offers an interesting perspective on television studies as a field, an area of media studies Hargraves calls on to be more self-critical.

2. I capitalize White to call attention to it as a racialized category rather than a norm against which others are distinguished with capital letters. I follow other Whiteness scholars and the *Washington Post* style guide in this choice.
The two terms *late capitalism* and *neoliberal capitalism* form an essential backbone of the book’s arguments, and it is sometimes assumed that there is a preexisting shared idea of what those words mean. That gloss, however, potentially reinforces the point itself: that “systems of economic precarity and cultural instability”—to which it would be safe, I think, to add ecological crisis, a pandemic, and broad antagonism toward difference in the forms of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class—*feel* (to borrow the book’s focus on affect) so widely shared as to not require detailed enumeration or intense interrogation. This shared structure of feeling goes hand in hand with Hargraves’s acknowledgment of the inevitable messiness of periodization. To address that messiness in relation to his text selections, Hargraves usefully traces the several previous eras labeled television *golden ages* before settling into his analysis of early twenty-first-century “peak TV.”


*Uncomfortable Television* is organized into five chapters, with each tackling a particular uncomfortable affect: irritation, addiction (both the pleasures of watching addicted people and the pleasure of addiction to television itself), perversion (specifically of uncritical nostalgia), and White guilt. A concluding chapter then grapples with the misrecognition of viewing discomfort for political action in what Hargraves describes as “woke TV.” The initial chapters do much of the theoretical heavy lifting, situating the book in the trajectories of affect studies and the history of television studies as a field. The methodological push toward affect studies usefully recalls that emotions, pleasure, and viewers have been at the center of much feminist television studies since the field’s inception, albeit not necessarily under the moniker or with the vocabulary of affect studies as its own field of research.

Chapter 1 grounds its intervention within the now-prominent trend of affect studies within television studies. Moving specifically to irritation

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as a feeling experienced while viewing annoying characters, Hargraves asks readers to “embrace irritation as representation.”

The theoretical underpinning of the chapter covers affect versus emotion, the venerable TV studies stalwart Raymond Williams and his flow, as well as the politics of representation. Landing on Girls as its key case study, the chapter recounts the self-obsession of all the characters and their ultimate dislike even of one another, as reflected in two scene analyses of one of the four main girls, Shoshanna, finally offering unfiltered and deeply unflattering analyses of her so-called friends’ personalities. This “turning in on itself” of televisual representation—that is, Shoshanna in these moments is all of us irritated spectators—Hargraves argues, can also produce solidarity. Exposing the falsity of this friendship circle in Girls, then, disrupts easy identification with the characters and calls attention to “the way late capitalism shapes future generations.”

Chapter 2 tackles the “addicted spectator,” addressing both the viewer bingeeing serial TV and using reality TV addiction drama Intervention as its core text for analysis. The key argument here is that “scholars of television and popular culture take seriously the notion that television can function as a drug. . . . [T]elevision’s drug-like properties have become a critical mechanism of late capitalism’s constant pathologizing of cultural affect.”

The “narcoanalysis” offered throughout the chapter encourages critical evaluation of cultural discourses of spectatorship. The characterization of binge-watching as a quality TV practice perhaps leaves out the pre-streaming history of marathoning, or the distinctions made by critics and awarding bodies between shows to be consumed in one gulp of (degraded) pleasure and those quality dramas to be watched and re-watched with careful attention. The latter benefit from post-market technologies such as DVD and their accompanying commentary tracks, making them binge-worthy and “valoriz[ing] them as so-called good objects worthy of consumption” in Hargraves’s formulation. Nonetheless, the chapter offers an interesting relationship between addiction, whether to drugs or to television, and addiction’s relationship to free market capitalism taken to its inevitable conclusion.

Chapter 3 analyzes queer remix culture, arguing that work like the reformulation of toy-driven girl rock cartoon Jem and the Holograms into a satirical pro-abortion YouTube video series Jiz by video artist Sienna D’Enema perverts viewer nostalgia for the original program in productive and interesting ways. What makes Jiz “so dangerously offensive is less its provocative slurs and more the violence enacted on nostalgia,” Hargraves argues. In the post-millennial cultural moment overburdened with nostalgic TV and popular culture, this takes a refreshing new approach to understanding nostalgia media.

Chapter 4 is titled “The Spectator Plagued by White Guilt: On the Appropriative Intermediality of Quality TV.” Appropriative intermediality is an

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8. Hargraves, 56.
12. Hargraves, 118.
effective term that gets at the transference of cultural value in media industries dominated by content creation and transmedia adaptations rather than the single program as a unit of creation. Hargraves defines appropriative intermediality as “when one media form or discipline appropriates an art object belonging to a different media form through an active disavowal of that art object’s media specificity.”13 I take this to mean that The Wire, this chapter’s key text, so often described as novelistic, borrowed the cultural legitimacy of literature to be set up as something other than mere television and therefore worthy of elite audiences’ time. The White guilt portion of the title refers to “the discourse of The Wire . . . making audiences too comfortable with institutional Whiteness, shrouded by the veneer of golden, novelistic antiheroism.”14 It is not always clear where the guilt of the title comes into play; however, the argument is distinct and well supported that White people who publicly admire The Wire use it as a way to demonstrate their racial credibility or even anti-racism and therefore to alleviate the need for any social justice-oriented action.

The final chapter acts as both analysis and conclusion, arguing that “toward the later part of the 2010s, television and its audiences began to become aware of the debilitating effects of televisual discomfort: in short, that TV became woke.”15 Up to this point, the book has argued that uncomfortable television in the post-millennium or very early twenty-first century acculturated viewers to discomfort and educated those consumers to understand displeasure as pleasure. The final chapter moves more firmly into the next decade arguing that US cultural crises had become so hypervisible they simply could not be ignored. Woke TV is politically engaged television that, according to Hargraves, is misrecognized as political action.

Despite its clear and insightful textual analyses, Uncomfortable Television sometimes assumes a reader already immersed in the debates at hand. Similarly, an understanding of the precise definitions and implications of certain essential terms such as late or neoliberal capitalism is assumed, which risks supporting a popular cultural trend toward nebulous and therefore overwhelming crisis and despair. Ultimately though, perhaps that is the goal of a book ensconced in discomfort: to encourage readers to recognize the pleasure they take in viewing relations of displeasure. If television, as we television scholars take so much personal and professional value in asserting, is a powerful cultural tool of governmentality, then uncomfortable television may be training viewers in the distance, superiority, and potential apathy apparently required for the comfortable to survive in the crisis-laden twenty-first century.

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15. Hargraves, 164.