

I first want to thank Martin for asking me to be a respondent. My teaching here at Goucher has largely steered towards film, so it's nice to reconnect with television as part of this panel, especially at this moment of Peak TV. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share not just my thoughts on his highly impressive book but also some of my own relatively recent writing on television that intersects with Martin's thinking. Though I hadn't yet encountered Martin's work nor he mine, upon arriving at Goucher a year and a half ago, we found, fortuitously enough, that we had both already been contemplating contemporary television and the importance within it of **family** – though where I had registered it on the micro level in just two shows, *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black* (about which I'll say more), Martin had seized on this centrality of family at a macro level and perceptively found it to be the structuring principle of what he names “new television,” with newness holding a double meaning, as both a new aesthetic mode and as one prioritizing natality – which itself signifies not just literal offspring but figurative rebirth in terms of individual, familial, and political renewal and possibility.

In so doing, Martin establishes both a continuity with and a departure from “old television,” which has, of course, from its earliest years been orientated around more or less traditional families, from sitcoms like *The Honeymooners* to Westerns like *Bonanza* to soaps like *Peyton Place*. Among what we might call “new old television,” the network half-hour dramedy, family remains the bulwark even as it is updated as a *Modern Family*, more *Black-ish* or *Fresh off the Boat*. Yet shows that make space for alternative family formations may nevertheless encode a troubling agenda, as evidenced by ABC's *Roseanne* revival appearing to be a platform for giving voice to and justifying Trump supporters – a mercenary ploy on the network's part that has paid off handsomely, but seems more likely to further divide than unite.

Family has also been crucial to the only other televisual mode to challenge the reign of new television, a mode which television scholar Jason Mittell sees as actually providing the competitive force that pushed contemporary television storytelling to blend serial and episodic forms in what has come to be known as “complex TV.” I’m referring to so-called reality television, for which “the show that changed everything” was MTV’s *The Real World*, which artificially constructed a pseudo-family of telegenic young people coaxed and increasingly coerced into interpersonal dynamics that rarely seemed to resemble “real world” challenges. *Survivor* organized its competitors into “tribes,” the family writ large, while *The Apprentice* put its contestants under the thumb of a bullying patriarch who cultivated conflict. The elaborate construction of a fraudulent “realness” on such shows, as any number of commentators has noted, paved the way for our current situation, in which a significant segment of the populace has decided that the entertainment value of watching a family of grifters loot the republic is adequate recompense for the destruction of democratic norms and institutions. New television sets the depth and texture of its representation of family against the fake “realness” of reality TV, even if at this moment, it is hard to remain optimistic about the political efficacy of that corrective.

So where family has consistently provided television its narrative structure, it alternatively functions to cordon off or open up political possibility. Whereas episodic television might be viewed as inherently conservative for its ultimate containment of ideological conflict within a concluding restoration of the status quo, I would point to **seriality** of the sort new television mobilizes as one key to the potentiality Martin gestures at. On this note, and as an example of my own focus as a scholar on the representative and discursive possibilities for and of screening queerness, allow me to look back to my first foray into television studies, when I was turning my dissertation into what would become my first book, *The B Word: Bisexuality in*

Contemporary Film and Television. What drove me to incorporate television into my study was my recognition that bisexuality poses a conundrum for screen representation, for the reason that unless a character explicitly identifies as bisexual, they fall prey to the assumption of “straight until proven otherwise” or else are presumed to be either straight or gay based on their current partner. Serial television, I find, offers bisexuality enhanced potential for representational legibility in that it allows for more open-ended, ongoing narratives able to accommodate the always-becoming temporality of sexuality. In her book *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*, Amy Villarejo also points to seriality’s importance for creating what she terms “density” for recurring characters that is conducive to conveying queer storylines in which “familiarity is essential to enlisting understanding and sympathy” (90). Analogously, as Martin’s case study *The Wire* exhibits so cogently, seriality allows for the type of expansive narrative investigation of complex systemic barriers rather than more simply (and simplistically) resolved individual tensions. Seriality can thus enable the representation of complexity, whether the complexity of individual desire or the complexity of social systems.

Another site for enhanced bisexual representability to which I devote a chapter-length discussion is art cinema, on account of its embrace, alongside sexual frankness, of **ambiguity** – rendering art cinema, I argue, amenable to articulating more fully the complexities and contingencies informing libidinal logic and the rules of attraction. I was reminded of these sexual and political potentialities by what Martin is describing as new television’s merging of televisual seriality and art cinema. Martin’s regard for new television as serious works of art needs no substantiating where I’m concerned, and I would continue in this vein to venture that new television provides both a new designation and a new “home” for art cinema to take refuge in as the infrastructure that supports it (consistently chiefly of public arts funding, boutique studio

divisions, and art house cinemas) become ever more strained and confined to alternative circuits such as film festivals and streaming platforms, themselves increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship or outright ownership.

To address these potentialities and realities, I take up where Martin leaves off, in quoting in his Conclusion Lee Edelman's *No Future*, still the most brazen work to emerge from queer theory's anti-assimilationist defiance of gay family values and "it gets better" rhetoric espoused within the logic of homonormativity – in Lisa Duggan's coinage, "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them" (2002: 179). In his provocative polemic, Edelman disparages the figure of the Child with his critique of reproductive futurism, the doctrine that idealizes childhood innocence and rejects those not seeking to live for or define themselves against the future. In viewing family and natality in terms of entrapment rather than empowerment, Edelman invokes historian John D'Emilio's reading, in his landmark essay "Capitalism and Gay Identity," of family as complicit in capitalism's system of exploitative, alienated labor for serving as its compensatory refuge as well as its reproductive engine. As Martin points out, to unilaterally condemn futurity, the figure of the child, and reproduction is to reproduce their hegemonic associations. Yet the capitalist underpinnings that structure family's working seem impervious to what Martin notes as the breakdown of normative authority – that which serves as catalyst for new television's negotiations around family and nation. For it seems that patriarchal-political authority has been reconsolidated in and wielded by capitalism's global corporation, which has appropriated for its own ends the utopian rhetoric of creative autonomy, indie TV, and participatory media that attends the critical celebration of Peak TV.

So I continue to suspect that the valorization of the ostensibly enlightened post-nuclear family serves to shore up neoliberal structures and further their project of producing model consumer citizens. As hegemonic ideological frameworks develop to allow for “new family” values compatible with capitalist neoliberalism, what will need ever more repression is the capitalism-serving basis for familial structures and relations. So in assessing new television’s familial representations and meanings, it seems critical to distinguish between a neo-traditional family – one that accommodates such configurations as single-parent households and same-sex marriage as means to ultimately preserve hegemonic strongholds – and genuinely alternative forms of kinship that support D’Emilio’s call for “structures and programs that will help to dissolve the boundaries that isolate the family” (475). Were we to recuperate Edelman’s polemic as a call for reorienting futurity and natality in resistance rather than in service to these hegemons, what is restored is that which Martin extolls: the “family as site for potential political renewal” (6).

Given this imperative for new television to defamiliarize and disrupt hegemonic constructions and uses of family, it is fitting that the show that Martin and many others have rightfully anointed as the turning point from old to new television, *Twin Peaks*, exposed the idyllic American family and bucolic small town as pervaded by sexual and economic exploitation respectively. An additional much-noted turning point in new television’s trajectory, *The Sopranos* features another nuclear family façade belied by its murderous inversion of the American Dream. Queer cultural theorist Jack Halberstam singles out a more recent show, Jill Soloway’s *Transparent*, for its “brutally realistic appraisal of the fucked up family,” commenting that “one of [its] greatest contributions...lies in its willingness to expose the rotten core of American family life” (*Bully Bloggers* 1/7/14). As I argue in my writing on the show, however

paradoxically produced by that behemoth of corporate self-interest Amazon, *Transparent* divorces the family sitcom from mythologies of capitalism first by confronting rather than disavowing the transactional nature of family relations and second by rendering similarly “transparent” the repressed sexual and emotional energies that shape the Pfefferman family dynamics and those of all normative families under capitalism. In resisting the capitalist imperative to “do it for the family,” protagonist Maura’s gender transitioning and the other family members’ subsequent revelations and self-reinventions initiate a disruption that works to realize that which Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner conceive in their seminal article “Sex in Public” as queer world-making, constituted by “kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple formation, to property, or to the nation” (558).

Martin’s book has invited me to reconsider another such queer family about whom I’ve written within this constellation of new television. *Orange Is the New Black*, the Netflix show Jenji Kohan created after finishing the Showtime series *Weeds* (to which Martin devotes a chapter of his book), also bears the distinctive marker of new television, in which, as Martin notes, “The family is the *telos* toward which the show and its characters [move]” (128). While new television’s investment in natality in the literal sense is hindered here by this being a show set in a women’s prison – a space with diminished opportunities for experiencing biological motherhood – the personal and political rebirth that *Orange* depicts is generated through the prison family, another such oppositional mode of affiliation with queer world making potential. Martin’s understanding of new television as a critique of modernity and the existential “deep boredom” that late capitalism produces finds its apotheosis in the prison industrial complex that is *Orange*’s milieu. I was reminded of the tension between what Martin describes as “the life of the gangster as a response to the dilemma(s) of modernity and... desires for a family” (156)

when reflecting back on season four's storyline of protagonist Piper Kernal's rise and fall as overlord of her prison-panty enterprise Felonious Spunk and the ill-fated alliance with white supremacists that leaves her temporarily alienated from her prison family. Yet another self-destructive brush with gangster life in season two, this time by the prison's Russian-American matriarch Red, is resolved with a scene in which the improvised family is reunited. Even accounting for the limited range of hair dyes available at commissary, the similarly red-haired, fair-skinned women gathered around the table for Red's peace offering meal suggest that their family ties are indistinguishable from biological resemblance. As the apology Red proceeds to make segues into a vow to chief confidante Norma, Red's words take on the shadings of a queer marriage proposal:

[SHOW CLIP: I'm willing to make this more of a **democracy**; I just want my family back...My dear Norma, you've been by my side for many years. You're my best friend. You've stood by me, listened to me, plucked the hair that grows from that weird mole on the back of my arm. I've missed you so much. Thank you for giving me another chance.]

When mute Norma nods her assent, their "daughters" looking on as witnesses, the queer family is consecrated. As this scene indicates, *Orange Is the New Black*, like *Weeds* before it, is optimistic and humanistic, rather than individualistic, in portraying personal and political transformation as the result of social relations configured through alternative familial and economic structures.

I'm also interested in thinking through how the exhibition and reception contexts of new television serve to model alternatives to neoliberal conformity. Here again, queer theory, most notably the work of Elizabeth Freeman, proves illuminating for its interrogation of time as a social construct in service to both heteronormativity and capitalism. Chrononormativity,

Freeman argues, binds us to conformist subject positions and regulates our bodies toward maximum productivity and reproductivity. Gary Needham posits television as one such regulatory device, when before the emergence of time-shifting technologies television's fixed programming operated to "schedule normativity" through the "temporal coordination of the nuclear family," by gendering daytime programming feminine, designating prime-time hours for family viewing, and relegating to the wee hours content for the marginal audience of the single and childless (2009: 145). One could point as well to the feature length film's emergence due to the available daily leisure time of a free-wage laborer; both TV and film were scheduled with an eye to molding good families and good workers. Has such normativizing dispensed with the supposedly liberating advent of time-shifting? Though each new season of queer-themed *Orange Is the New Black* is dropped all at once in June, Pride month, the "gaze" and the "gays" appear to have shifted from communal viewing to solitary bingeing. Television has also become less entrenched within the home and less anchored to the televisual apparatus, having migrated to cordless mobility and personal screens that may enable individual and political solipsism. As in D'Emilio's conception of family as providing emotional rescue from capitalist alienation, does the immersive (indeed addictive) spectatorship that new television encourages keep us hermetically subsumed? Even if one embraces social media's potential as a virtual water cooler and counterpublic sphere, cultural dialogue and community formation around contemporary television may well be hindered by its proliferation – with 487 scripted series aired in 2017, it's increasingly rare that we're watching the same thing, much less watching it at the same time. Conversations are more likely to be shut down than opened up, given the vigilance one must exercise to avoid spoilers (at which a *Portlandia* skit pokes fun). And, as TV critic Sonny Bunch suggests, we are less likely to re-watch shows in the post-syndication age, given the onslaught of

new series spilling down the pipeline; not only will this undermine television's common cultural currency, it could also compromise its newfound complexity, that which not only rewards re-watching with its layered jokes and Rube Goldberg-like plot construction, but also permits the political potential Martin recognizes in new television ("Overload," 2018).

To return to *Orange Is the New Black*, that series' prison family challenges what our punitive rather than rehabilitative system of incarceration dictates: rather than killing time, they queer time, producing what Elizabeth Freeman describes as "new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical...forms of time on which both a patriarchal generationality and a maternalized middle-class domesticity"—and, I would add, a neoliberal capitalist economy—"lean on for their meaning," with the result being one "of transformation rather than of shared victimhood." (*Time Binds*, 10, 46, 49). Negotiating Martin's own hopeful celebration of new television's "paeans to possibility" with my own perhaps more measured sense of these recent trends prompts me to reflect on the conception of "TV as escape," which one could perceive as either escape from or escape to. It is compelling to consider how the political potential of the re-envisioned family within new television parallels and yet diverges from a similar impulse in the contemporary U.S. film industry's own doubling down on what's known as the "family film." Whether *Star Wars* or Pixar, Hollywood's raison d'être since the 1980s has been films geared towards children of all ages (a fitting turn of phrase, given the arrested development they enable through their fantasies of heroic individualism and American exceptionalism). Where Hollywood commercial cinema shores up fantasies of family and nation as redemptive and uncompromised, new television ruptures these illusions.

In closing, and with an all-too-apt reference to another type of improvised family, one very much in need of support, I give you this *Saturday Night Live* parody promo:

[CLIP <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMpRJwP5y9Q>]

The joke turns, in the first instance, on the breakdown of genres, in which domestic melodrama and comedy seem no longer distinguishable (at least at awards time). But that generic breakdown parallels two additional breakdowns, the breakdown of the family and the breakdown of the academy, both institutions that once seemed central to the promise that each succeeding generation would live a better life than the one before, a promise now in ruins. In both cases, the situation is sufficiently dire that we don't know whether to laugh or cry.