

***American Mass Incarceration
and Post-Network Quality Television,*
by Lee A. Flamand. Amsterdam University
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Harrison Patten

The mass expansion and racialisation of the American carceral system began in the late 1970s, took root in the 1980s, and had become a cultural fact within the American way of life by the 1990s. The 1994 Crime Bill, the largest U.S. crime bill to date, was championed by the, at the time, democratic senator Joe Biden and ultimately passed—Hillary Clinton’s now notorious comments on urban “super predators” on the senate floor was made in defence of this bill. An American turning their TV to the news in the 1990s would see images of sensationalised urban violence and overtly racialised stories—the beating of Rodney King or the OJ Simpson trial for example—within a cultural landscape housing the world’s largest incarcerated population. Alongside this, in the late 1990s Americans could choose instead to tune into new “quality” television shows differentiated by their critical approach to American subject matter. Lee A. Flamand begins his ambitious new book, *American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television*, at the intersection of these two components of American life, arguing that it is through “critical interventions into the crisis of incarceration,” that a “wave of post-network era American television series established their ‘quality’ credentials” (7). Flamand’s book, broadly, does not stray from this premise. Rather, it traces the development of this connection through time, exploring and problematising the capabilities of “quality” television shows to critique racialised mass incarceration.

The book is divided into five chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion. While the chapters are interconnected thematically, each chapter can be read individually as its own argument. The first chapter serves as a media and carceral history, outlining the development of mass incarceration in the US and explaining what Flamand describes as the shift towards “punitive realism” within media depictions of the prison (29). Chapters Two, Three, and Four are each dedicated to specific TV shows—*OZ* (Tom Fontana, 1997–2003), *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–08), and *Orange is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, 2013–19) respectively. The final chapter looks at Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* (2016) and her series *Queen Sugar* (2016–22). While researchers interested in these specific works would benefit from reading a single chapter, it is necessary to read the work in its entirety to understand the eventual conclusion of Flamand’s argument on “quality” TV’s difficulty escaping the commercialising impulses of the capitalist media apparatus it originated from and how this hampers its attempts to critique mass incarceration. It is also worth noting that there is a distinct optimism—whose origins are explained

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in the conclusion—in the opening chapters that wanes throughout the work and concludes with Flamand’s quite cynical final words that if “quality” television is going to escape its melodramatic roots and do more than entertain, “American television and its audiences will have to aspire to be something else entirely” (280).

In the chapter dedicated to HBO’s *OZ*, Flamand argues that the show gained its “quality” credentials through its sense of realism. This realism, for Flamand, is connected not to a depiction of the realities of prison life but is rather the result of an exploitation of the “structurally constitutive distance between the geographic, institutional, and social position of its most likely viewers”, to cater to an upper-class, mostly white, audience ready to believe they are seeing something indicative of the reality of incarceration (60). Flamand outlines the way that this distance did not give way to fundamental critiques of the prison itself, but rather that *OZ* grew more bizarre in attempts to cling to this specific sense of realism predicated on suburban feelings of unreality and fears of criminality. This can be understood by looking at both *OZ* and the prison as dependent on, “a perverse, overbearing, endless descent into the dark oblivion, the narrative abyss of its own (in)humanity” (95). The descent allowed for the continuation of the show, serving to “shore up HBO’s desire to differentiate itself” (99). Ultimately, this led to *OZ* abandoning its initial sense of realism in favour of what Flamand calls a “bizarre realism” indicative of the show’s ultimate failure to escape the consumerist impulses of market-based television production, wherein the subject matter is often increasingly sensationalised. The argument for “bizarre realism” is compelling, relying primarily on a reading of *OZ*’s characters following looping story arches of redemption and defeat both as gothic tale and as ideologically correspondent with a trend of commercialising suburban fears of lower-class criminality.

The chapter on *The Wire* follows a similar trajectory, albeit tracking sociology’s disciplinary relationship to *The Wire* rather than realism. Flamand looks to, “tease out the mutual investments, shared entanglements, and problematic double dealings of popular culture on the one hand and academic sociology on the other in an age of neoliberal abandonment and mass incarceration” (111). These shared neoliberal entanglements are expanded through examinations of surveillance and social realism, positioning sociologists’ interest in *The Wire* as underlining a basic component of academic sociology: its privileged drive towards narratives to explain social structures. Flamand argues that while *The Wire* looks to critique failing structures of neoliberalism, it does this through its, “ostensibly ‘superior’ knowledge of urban sociology” (161). This leads, ultimately, to viewers of *The Wire* being flattered, “into thinking of themselves as armchair sociologists”, and as academic sociology becoming, “a key cultural activity through which social reality is (re)produced” (162). The reliance on the same exclusionary knowledge bases as sociology ultimately renders *The Wire*, for Flamand, as recreating, “the self-same capitalistic commercial structures it aims to critique” (162). Through this, Flamand argues that while mass incarceration within *The Wire* acts as a looming backdrop and normalised end-place for those trapped in the web of failing neoliberal institutions, it simultaneously remains out-of-sight for the audience, ultimately mirroring the prison’s cultural location for an American suburban audience unlikely to be incarcerated.

With the concept of the armchair sociologist in the suburbs still in mind, Flamand examines the ability of Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black* to function as activism—an explicit goal of the show’s creator Jenji Kohan. This activism is viewed through two fundamental lenses: Netflix’s

algorithmic consumer model and the show's political messaging. Flamand zeros in on the show's clear move towards empathising with the prisoners as compared to *OZ*, although he likewise pays due mind to the fact that this is initially done by the entrance of the suburbs into the prison via the initial protagonist Piper (177). The origin of this empathy appears twofold, coming from both a political space and also the Netflix consumer model of data-driven production focusing on increasingly niche interests of subscribers (171). In this way, Flamand provides a truly compelling perspective of *Orange is the New Black* having a well-intentioned move towards activism—and political awareness generally—that incidentally works towards the creation of a “taste for prisons”, undermining its potential as activism (167).

Unlike Netflix, the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), which produced Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar*, does not decouple “presumed tastes and viewing habits from pre-determined demographic markers”, instead focusing primarily on “the consumption patterns of women, and women of color in particular” (226). Nevertheless, Flamand argues that with this more classical approach to audience targeting, *Queen Sugar* ultimately fails to escape from the “problematic traditions of American melodramatic storytelling” (224). A key argument Flamand puts forth on the problem with melodramatic (specifically American) depictions of racialised mass incarceration is that it turns victimisation into a virtue through “Manichean divisions of good and evil over those of Black and white” (239). This, for Flamand, limits the show's critical capabilities. For Flamand, it is not DuVernay's work that spawns this impulse, as he argues earlier in the chapter that the violence in *13th* does not normalise depictions of violence against Black male bodies and is instead a critically compelling recompositing of American racial history. Rather, Flamand argues that *Queen Sugar* fails because the “visceral rage [melodrama] summons forth and the relentless tug it exerts on our heartstrings are instead the very proof that we continue to live out that ongoing nightmare from which history cannot seem to rouse itself” (263). Thus, *Queen Sugar*'s melodramatic sensationalism ultimately cannot transcend “the sins of American history”, despite its clear attempts (264).

The conclusion of Flamand's book serves both as the conclusion to his investigation of the capabilities of American “quality” television to show mass incarceration, and as an account of the author's decreasing enthusiasm regarding their social-justice capabilities. Indeed, Flamand puts forth an interesting argument in his conclusion that the media landscape itself is becoming more carceral in that it has “generated the opportunity for social media users and TV viewers alike to self-police their own media consumption, box themselves within algorithmically facilitated filter bubbles, and even create their own alternative realities as they barricade themselves inside of digital echo-chambers” (276). This, Flamand fears, begs the question “to what degree the increased targeting of particular niche markets has not had the effect of fortifying the walls erected between demographic and interest-based groups rather than breaking them down?” (276). The work, while certainly finishing on a pessimistic note, ends by putting forth a fear that its central argument appears to validate. That is, how can media born out of the neoliberal impulse of American consumer capitalism, marked by ever-increasing individualisation, critique mass incarceration in a manner Americans would be ready to hear?

References

Orange is the New Black. Created by Jenji Kohan, Netflix, 2013–19.

OZ. Created by Tom Fontana, Home Box Office (HBO), 1997–2003.

Queen Sugar. Created by Ava DuVernay, Oprah Winfrey Network, 2016–22.

13th. Directed by Ava DuVernay, Netflix, 2016.

The Wire. Created by David Simon, Home Box Office (HBO), 2002–08.

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Harrison Patten is a doctoral candidate at Université Paris Cité under the guidance of Martine Beugnet and Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun. His ongoing dissertation focuses on visual representations of the American penitentiary after the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s. His overarching research project centers on media depictions of state power over the human body.