

ON LIVING WITH
TELEVISION
AMY HOLDSWORTH



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CONSOLE-ING PASSIONS

TELEVISION AND CULTURAL POWER

Edited by Lynn Spigel

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AMY HOLDSWORTH

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Cover art: Watching tv before bed. Amy and Jessica Holdsworth,
ca. 1984.

For my family

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INTRODUCTION

Television has always been there for me. I have never lived without it and honestly find that prospect anxiety inducing. I admit to being immediately suspicious of those who don't have one in their home. When I moved to Glasgow in 2009, I drove up from Yorkshire the night before the moving van was due to arrive. Knowing the tenement flat I had rented would be bare, I packed my car with life's essentials: a kettle, tea bags, beer, crisps, and a small TV set. I ventured around the corner to a grocery store to buy a pint of milk but then quickly scurried back to the relative safety of my new home. I camped out in the front room that first night, alone and frankly terrified of the life decision I had made to leave my home and family for a new job, city, and country. So I got drunk, ate Monster Munch, and wrestled with a cable box in order to get a weak digital signal, and eventually settled in to watch *EastEnders* (figure Intro.1). Though I was in a new place, the experience was familiar. In 1998 the same TV set came with me to the University of Warwick when I started my undergraduate degree and moved into the residence halls. Rootes E50 was my designated cell, a small rectangular room with a single bed, a desk and chair, a couple of shelves, and a sink. It was the cheapest option on campus, which meant it did not have a bathroom. My dad and older sister, Jess, drove me down the motorway, and with each sign for the university we passed, the knot in my stomach would tighten. Taking advantage of our family Motability bus, I had packed it full, aiming to simply transfer my teenage bedroom to this new accommodation and to bring all that was familiar with me as an antidote to the blind fear and trepidation I felt. When we arrived, Jess, by that point an experienced student, helped me construct my home away from home. We put up posters and made the bed; we set up the stereo, TV, and VCR and located

FIGURE INTRO.1
First night in Turnberry
Road, Glasgow,
August 2009.



the communal kitchen; and when it was all unpacked, it was time for them to leave. Alone and immediately stricken with homesickness, I switched on the TV and opened a beer.

In 2004 I returned to Warwick to start my PhD. The experience was uncannily similar, and though the room was bigger there was still no private bathroom. The university housing office had given me a room in a former nursing home that now housed around twenty postgraduate students. I'd left the terraced house in the West Yorkshire village we grew up in, where I'd settled in with Jess and our cat for the last three years, to begin the next stage of an academic career that I had dreamed of since I was a child watching Inspector Morse stride around the hallowed halls of Oxford (the halls at Warwick were certainly less hallowed but fortunately less murderous). My dad and stepmother were in charge of crisis management, on this occasion rushing out to Argos to get me a TV cable when I realized I'd left it behind, resulting in a cross between a tantrum and a panic attack. I followed the same routine—we unpacked and said our goodbyes, and I turned on the TV and opened a beer before plucking up the courage to leave the room and meet my fellow residents.

There I was, and years later, here I am again. It is the summer of 2017 and I've arrived in Liverpool for a disability studies conference. I am older, I'm financially secure, I don't drink as much beer, and I don't do communal bathrooms. I find myself checking into a hall of residence on the Liverpool Hope University campus. The rectangular room is bare and austere, with a single bed, a desk and chair, a couple of shelves, and a private shower (I'm not sure if I'm going up in the world or coming down). I am rushed by a series of feelings as the anxiety and homesickness of those previous experiences loop themselves around who I am now. I set about making the room more palatable. I drape a scarf over the fluorescent light, plug in my laptop, and connect to the university Wi-Fi. I click on the livestream of BBC One through the iPlayer. *EastEnders* is playing. I haven't watched it in years, but the familiar sights and sounds of Albert Square spill into the drab room and immediately make me feel more at home.

THIS IS NOT AN unfamiliar story. Television in this account emerges as both a companion to the everyday and a way of managing crisis and transition. It speaks to the kinds of "ontological security" that forms of broadcasting have been imagined to provide and of a viewer who is well rehearsed in this particular cultural practice.¹ It may not tell us much about the text of television,

but it alludes to a set of text-based experiences that are durational (the long-running soap opera, for instance) and iterative (a pattern of retreat and return that is captured in my own academic comings and goings). It also speaks to a series of continuities and discontinuities in both my life in general and my life with television. I recently turned forty, and my life (so far) might easily be split in two: my formative years as analog and adult years as digital. It's not that simple, though, as my own sense of self, like television's technologies, continues to loop, layer, and multiply, and I still insist on using VHS tapes in my lectures. This is a story that reminds us of the materiality of television and its ability to transform space and of the way it is used in these recurring scenes to turn an unfamiliar space into a home. As an object and a medium, it has been seen to connect the near and far, home and away, over space but also over time. In this instance it also acts as a meaningful object or locus around which my own multiple selves are summoned—as undergrad, postgrad, early career, and midcareer academic—reminding me of the opportunities and sacrifices that have accompanied each stage. It is also a story that, like the soap opera itself, is ongoing and incomplete.

In a 2006 essay John Caughie asks the following question: “When we as academics and intellectuals write about television, who do we think we are?”² While the question alludes to the anxious place of television studies within the academy, it is prompted by an observation of the ways in which the reflections of different scholars on their own histories, experiences, and engagements with television underpin their critical responses.³ This is perhaps not unique to the film and television studies scholar: for instance, as educational theorist Wolff-Michael Roth argues, “Because we are the products of the world that we attempt to describe, our auto/biographies and our scholarly works are deeply integrated.”⁴ But what might an autobiography of television look like? This work might take the form of an individual's viewing history or an account of specific televisual moments that have punctuated a life story. Literary scholars and critics have certainly produced plentiful accounts of individual reading histories and particular acts of rereading. Alison Waller categorizes these into “‘bibliomemoirs’ and ‘autobibliographies’: the former taking books read over a lifespan as a starting point for exploring a life history narrative and the latter employing autobiographical anecdote to illuminate certain texts or aspects of literature.”⁵ My own use of autobiography in this book utilizes both modes, tracing a lifelong relationship with television forms and cultures and using the personal as a *way in* to specific television texts and experiences. I have written elsewhere about the idea of a television autobiography to refer to the memories, references, and associations that are built up

across a life lived alongside television. This should be seen not simply as the accumulation of an archive of televisual sounds and images but as a knotting together of our on- and offscreen lives. The autobiographical emerges, I argue, as a way in which to unravel some of these knots and to explore those experiences of intimacy, familiarity, repetition, and duration that have come to characterize television. An autobiographical focus, then, can tell us not only something specific *about* television but also something more general about *living with* television—about (not) growing up and growing old at a particular time and in a particular society.

Caughie's question and discussion that follows attends to the generational differences in having or having not "grown up" with television: scholars who remember the arrival of television into their homes as an exciting novelty and those, like me, for whom it has always been there. I wonder about how we navigate, in both our scholarship and our teaching, a similar generational divide between those of us who "grew up" analog and the digital natives who supposedly now fill our classrooms. I refer to Caughie's question here because, intentionally or not, it is also one that appeals to a feminist approach I follow in this book, placing the stress on "situated knowledge," the value of experience and a recognition of the scholar as embodied and embedded in a particular culture.⁶ Clearly, asking *who* we are also requires us to reflect on the *when*, *where*, and *with whom* of television viewing as well. This means not just looking to the present but also attending to where we have been and, indeed, *who* we have been and how this informs our writing about television. As feminist literary theorist Liz Stanley writes in her advocacy of the term "auto/biography," we are all constituted by and connected to "a multiplicity of other people throughout [our] lives. No person is an island complete of itself."⁷ But we should also understand the autobiographical past as "peopled by a succession of selves as the writer grows, develops and changes."⁸

What I want to do is not just to consider the significance of the generation of television from which we emerge but also to recognize how our experiences as viewers continue and change over the life course: as children, teenagers, students, scholars, parents, carers, siblings, friends, (time) poor or rich, at home or away, in crisis and in the routines of the everyday, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. At Glasgow I often teach a core course called Television Analysis, and we begin the semester with examples of preschool television. As they are often bored and frustrated by the endless repetitions within *In the Night Garden* (CBeebies, 2007–9), I remind the students that "not all television is *for them*" and ask them to talk to older or younger family members or friends about the different ways they use and watch TV. I encour-

age them to reflect on how they watched when they were children themselves or how they might imagine using TV in the future as they move through the life course. There is plenty of scholarship that addresses the notion of “television in transition,” and while television has never been a technologically stable object, the pace of change brought about by digitization has amplified this line of inquiry. This research tends to focus on the effects of change on television technologies and industries, accounting for evolutions in patterns of consumption and the impact these have on production, form, and aesthetics. It is a line of argument that can often be teleological in impulse—TV is (apparently) getting better.⁹ While others have clearly teased out the implications for this line of inquiry in relation to questions of value and the legitimization of an object of study that has *always been there* for a small band of scholars, what I call attention to is an acknowledgment of the viewer or audience as also in constant transition. In her ethnography of television use by parents of young children, Ksenia Frolova, for example, argues that audiences are “often presented as a homogenous group,” with their “viewing practices studied in broad generic terms.”¹⁰ This relates directly to the value of particular demographics, audiences, and experiences to the industry and the academy. Those sections of society not seen to be “productive” or “autonomous” in socioeconomic terms, such as the very old and the very young, are often marginalized and neglected. In the UK, for example, our central public service broadcaster, the BBC, caught between austerity-era politics and neoliberal market forces and subjected to extensive budget cuts, recently made the controversial decision to abolish free TV licenses for people over the age of seventy-five. While concerns regarding neglect and social justice are implicit within this project, I am aware that I am writing from the vantage point of the “ideal” viewer— independent, healthy (relatively, anxiously), white, financially secure, gainfully employed, middle aged, and middle class—but what this book endeavors to trace are former and future selves encountered through the medium and the points of connection between subjectivities that might emerge in tracing the life lived with television. In an era of niche content and algorithmically targeted modes of address, is there a different way to use our own lives to think beyond our own immediate experiences?

While I privilege the term “autobiography” (converting to “auto/biography” in chapter 1 as it explores the relational aspects of televisual spectatorship through the story of my younger sister, Alice, and her use of Disney Home Video) the book adopts, at different stages, an autobiographical *and* an autoethnographic approach. The latter is not an uncommon strategy for studies of popular culture, though writing tends to focus on issues of representation

and the possibilities for identity construction, identification, and (mis)recognition: for example, how we use popular narratives and characters to make sense of or inform our own lives and relationships and the personal and political ramifications of how and where we do or don't see ourselves onscreen.¹¹ These are questions that emerge in my final chapter. However, for the purposes of this project I suggest that the combination of autoethnography as, in Roth's words, an "exploration of culture" and autobiography as a "pattern of life history"¹² makes it possible to follow cultural practices that are often everyday, invisible, and ephemeral while also establishing, through memory and reflection, a sense of these experiences over time.¹³

Obviously, time is complicated—and philosophers and theorists have been wrestling with it for centuries. Writing this book to a deadline, I am also acutely aware of how time can dictate, determine, and regulate our lives and bodies. Elizabeth Freeman's notion of "chrononormativity" describes the emergence of "properly temporalized bodies" that cohere with linear, teleological, state-sponsored timelines of the heteronormative life course. The institution of marriage, the accumulation of health and wealth, and the practice of childrearing enact a "sequence of socioeconomically 'productive' moments" that determine "what it means to have a life at all."¹⁴ Theorists from a number of academic traditions have sought to unsettle and disrupt this sequential logic and its ramifications for thinking about the personhood of those who exist outside a dominant temporal order and its cultural script, including, though not limited to, children, the elderly, queer people, the "childless," and the chronically ill and/or disabled. Freeman also reminds us that "having a life entails the ability to narrate it not only in these state-sanctioned terms but also in a novelistic framework: as event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations."¹⁵ My experience of a life lived is more "televisual" in its narrative framework: looping, repetitive, banal, catastrophic, messy, and incomplete. This is not a project that focuses on the use of television at different "ages and stages" (these are developmental terms that I challenge both in this book and elsewhere); rather, in something like the critical equivalent of a reverse tracking shot or a dolly zoom, it focuses in while pulling back to reveal a series of patterns that emerge both in time—in the loops and routines of the everyday—and over time—in the durational aspects of television. The patterns I recognize are textual—characteristics of television's formal and narrative features—and experiential—the result of a life lived alongside television as both a visual medium and a material object.

Ultimately, what I want to suggest is how television itself, and our atten-

tion to its micro and macro temporalities and textualities, has the potential to offer a vehicle through which to challenge, in Jackie Stacey and Janet Wolff's words, "the modern imperatives towards linearity and sequence [that] promise an orderly sense of directional flow."¹⁶ As domestic object, text, and experience, television has a much greater capacity for temporal complexity than the unidirectional "flow" metaphor suggests. "Complexity" has itself become a central and somewhat contentious term within television studies over the last decade. Employed by Jason Mittell to describe a high-end narrative mode characterized by puzzle shows such as *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10), the term has been subject to critique due to the hierarchies of cultural value it constructs by placing one subset of television (and, by extension, one subset of viewers) over another.¹⁷ The poet Claire Schwartz, however, writes that "to hold complexity is to have many possible sites of connection."¹⁸ Within this sense of the term I imagine television as a fragmented surface on which different times and spaces, bodies and worlds come together and depart, and a meeting point at which I find myself again and again.

Television in and over Time

Theories of time have been, like me, preoccupied with models, forms, and patterns as ways of characterizing our experience of the world. It was in Rita Felski's *Doing Time*, though, that the patterns I recognized in television emerged most clearly. Felski's approach is to challenge an existing and gendered binary between models of time as either linear or cyclical. Broadly speaking, a linear model of time (or the "arrow of time") is the time of history, evolution, and progress and symbolically associated with masculine, industrial, and Western cultures. Cyclical time, on the other hand, is characterized by repetition, the everyday, the feminine, and the natural world. For theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, cyclical time is also anathematic to the idea of progress and a "sign of women's enslavement in the ordinary."¹⁹ Felski is writing against a masculine intellectual tradition that devalues both the everyday and those subjects and objects associated with it: "Everyday life," she writes, is a term "deployed by intellectuals to describe a nonintellectual relationship to the world. For Lukács and Heidegger, for example, the everyday is synonymous with an inauthentic, gray, aesthetically impoverished existence."²⁰ As the rich traditions of feminist television scholarship have taught us, the terrain of the everyday, and time as routine and repetition, is also that of television, and it has struggled with and against the same associations.

Felski's work offers us a way out of this binary thinking that continues to

reproduce gendered hierarchies of social and cultural value by dismantling the division between cyclical and linear time and instead recognizing both as central to social life.²¹ This means challenging the perception that “cyclical time is a uniquely female province”²²—a notion that underpinned early feminist scholarship: for instance, the work of Tania Modleski and others on the housewife and the soap opera. Gendered experiences of the televisual everyday are not the central frame of this book, and while I acknowledge how they underline my own experiences and my critical approach, it is Felski’s conceptualization of everyday time that I wish to foreground. For Felski, “The temporality of everyday life is internally complex; it combines repetition and linearity, recurrence with forward movement. The everyday cannot be opposed to the realm of history, but is rather the very means by which history is actualized and made real.”²³ What emerges here is a series of loops: in the repetitions of our everyday (sleeping, eating, washing, caring) and over time (generational cycles, modes of inheritance, losses and recuperations). The textual aspects of television itself are also completely loopy: the running gag, the recurring joke, the before and after and before and after, the previously on and coming up, the remakes and reboots and resets, the templates and formats, the recaps and highlights, the maverick detective and the female victim, the monsters of the week and the big bads.²⁴ One of the central aims of my project is to see how these loops overlap and intersect, where they might unfold in unison, and where the threads can get tangled.

Felski’s model of everyday time as “recurrence with forward movement” is also suggestive of an iterative pattern that has come to characterize the textuality and the experience of television. Iteration is, to employ the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, “the repetition of an action or process (implying frequency or long continuance); repeated performance.”²⁵ In this sense, iteration defines television in its operation as a storytelling medium, but the mathematical application of iteration is equally important. From a mathematical perspective, iteration as a repetitive process is done with the aim of approaching a desired goal, target, or result, but the process remains open-ended, where the results of one iteration are used as the starting point for the next iteration.²⁶ From this perspective, television is understood as a kind of folded media with a nonlinearity that is, once again, akin to a process of spiraling, looping, or doubling—continually moving backward and forward. The process here is, like the most recent celebrations of television’s serial characteristics, cumulative, distinguished by an iterative process of repetition that is “lived” over time. Television iteration is therefore not simply a textual but also a temporal and spatial experience.