

***Consumerism on TV: Popular Media from the 1950s to the Present***, Alison Hulme, 2015,  
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In the twentieth century, the development of consumer society in the West was inextricably bound up with the development of television, and the medium continues to be a key site where the culture of consumerism impacts upon and even becomes part of our subjectivities. This is one of the central claims of the new edited collection *Consumerism on TV: Popular Media from the 1950s to the Present*, which presents original chapters on the multiple, complex and historically shifting relationships between television and consumption from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary moment. In the preface, the editor Alison Hulme argues that there is ‘a psychology of consumption built into the very fabric of much popular television in the twenty-first century’ (xiv), and it is this complex intertwinement that the diverse range of chapters seeks to interrogate. It is not just the representations of consumerism *on* television screens that the collection is concerned with, but also how the very modes of television continue to shape thinking around consumption and subjectivity.

In terms of genre, the book’s focus is primarily on dramatic fictions, comedies, reality and lifestyle television – in this way it reflects the ways in which ideologies of consumerism have been most strongly associated with these ‘market-driven’ genres, rather than (for example) the more ‘civic’ genres of news and documentary. The opening chapter by Susan Nacey sets up some of the key frameworks within which television’s relationship to consumer society has been understood. Entitled ‘Blurring fiction with reality: American television and consumerism in the 1950s’, it situates the widespread take-up of television in the post-war United States in a wider context of changes in housing policy; the

suburbanization of space; attendant new forms of lifestyle, identity and belonging; and – importantly – the ways that the medium successfully breached the home-as-sanctuary ideal that had hitherto served as a barrier to commercialization of the domestic sphere. For Nacey, television was ‘undoubtedly the 1950s product which best represented the crowning expression of societal advancement and which also proved the perfect tool for manufacturers’ psychological manoeuvrings’ (5). As such, television was instrumental in the embedding of consumerism in notions of democracy and modernity.

Nacey discusses the ways that, throughout the 1950s, sponsors increasingly came to directly influence television content – for example, advertising agencies would routinely have on-set representatives to read scripts in advance of filming, and would intervene on behalf of their clients. She also recounts the quiz show scandals of the 1950s in which it was revealed that the outcomes of programmes were rigged and the contestants minutely stage-managed according to the wishes of advertisers. While these scandals provoked a good deal of outrage at the time, Nacey suggests that there was actually very little lasting impact on the commercial operations of television and the regulation of sponsorship.

Alison Hulme’s chapter on the British context follows on nicely from Nacey’s analysis, suggesting that American consumer culture began to feed into British society in the post-war context, and that it was in this moment that *consumerism* (as opposed to the more straightforward practices of *consumption*) – was truly born. Central to Hulme’s argument is that the emergence of Keynesian economic logic and the end of austerity both installed and legitimized pleasure-seeking consumption as a state-sponsored activity – and that television was fundamental to this political shift. To illuminate her argument, Hulme contrasts the ‘anti-consumer’ and ‘stalwart’ character of Mrs Sew and Sew – who appeared in wartime government campaigns to promote thrift as a national good – with the frivolous, eponymous character in *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), as well as the glamorous and decadent Elsie Tanner in

*Coronation Street* (1960–present). These characters embodied the Keynesian doctrine of ‘spending our way out of trouble’, and helped to construct the new figure of the ‘consumer-housewife’ for whom fostering one’s own consumer desire became a duty that was fundamental to nurturing national economic health.

Subsequent chapters in the book jump forward in time to the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries. Rachel Rye’s chapter ‘Birds of a feather shop together: Conspicuous consumption and the imaging of the 1980s Essex Girl’ considers how the famous *Birds of a Feather* (1989–2016) sitcom – and particularly the working-class characters of Sharon and Tracey – reasserted traditional class-based assumptions through which to judge and classify people at precisely the historical moment when Thatcherite rhetoric sought to herald a new ‘classless’ society. As such, Rye presents a valuable analysis of the ways that consumerism both subverts and remakes class hierarchies in specific historical, political and cultural contexts.

In Chapter 5, entitled ‘The “Good Life” on the small screen: Ethical consumption, food television and green makeovers’, Tania Lewis presents a nuanced response to the notion that Anglo-American television is simply an engine of rampant consumerism. She points to a trend that has grown perceptibly over the last decade, in which lifestyle television has become increasingly concerned with questions of responsible consumption – it has taken, we might say, an ‘ethical turn’. For example, Lewis suggests that the rise of lifestyle-oriented cookery shows represent a shift in focus away from rationalized and industrialized food production towards ‘a concern with re-enchanting the contemporary everyday through promoting less alienated, more engaged modes of “craft consumption”’ (77).

Other chapters explore the prefiguring of ethical consumption in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–2012) (Khamis); post-feminist heteroflexible subjectivities in *Sex and the City* (1998–

2004) and *The L Word* (2004–09) (Fegitz); the commodification of ‘gay best friends’ in television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–07) and *How to Look Good Naked* (2006–present) (Khamis and Lambert); reality television representations of the ‘transgressive consumerism’ ascribed to Gypsies, Romanies and Travellers (Bell); and the figure of the post-feminist flaneuse in *Sex and the City* and *In the Cut* (Campion, 2003) (French). The book presents a broad range of strong and well-argued chapters that engage with questions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity as they intersect with changing consumption practices, and which are mediated through and resignified by television’s specific modes of address and representation.

The collection valuably connects the contemporary politics of television and consumption with longer histories of the medium and its indivisible relationships with consumerism and modernity. However, what the book would perhaps benefit from is a stronger sense of its own place within the history of television studies. There is a short preface at the beginning of the collection which briefly refers to debates around consumption that take in the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse’s notion of ‘false needs’ and David Harvey’s call to expose the fetish of products. A more substantial introduction would have provided the space to situate the collection more firmly within the specific field of television studies. In particular, the imperative to understand the politics of consumption was foundational to the development of feminist television studies, as Charlotte Brunsdon et al. noted in the introduction to the seminal first edition of the edited collection *Feminist Television Criticism* (1997: 5). In my view, *Consumerism on TV* would be further enriched by foregrounding these intellectual linkages and heritages. Nonetheless, the collection remains a strong contribution to the contemporary field, offering a wide range of analyses that are accessibly written and which will be valuable for undergraduate students as well as researchers at more advanced levels.

## References

Brunsdon, C., D'Acci, J. and Spiegel, L. (eds) (1997), *Feminist Television Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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