

JANET STAIGER

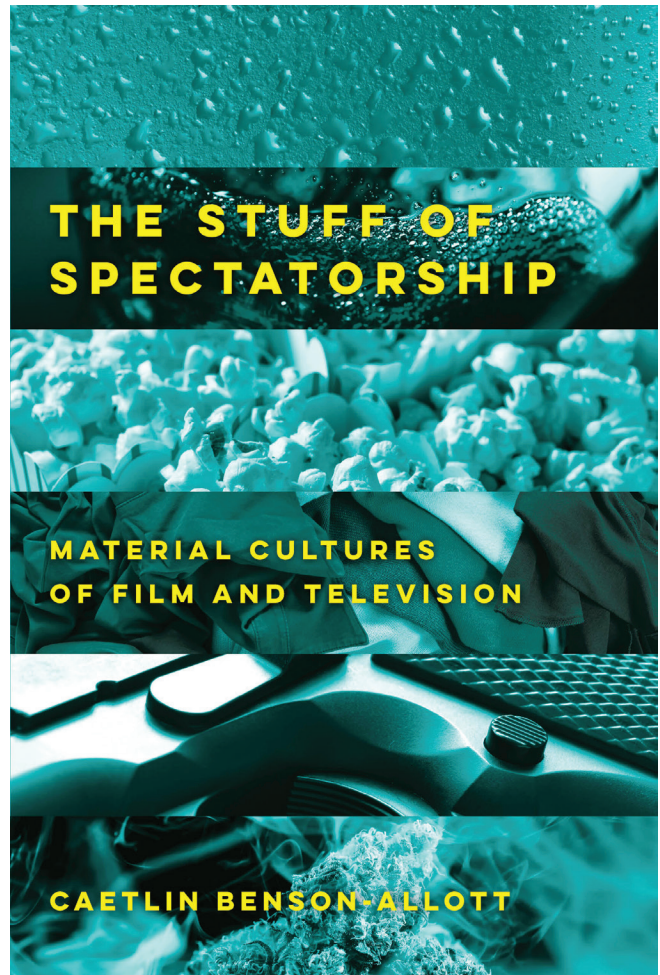
***The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television*, by Caetlin Benson-Allott**

Deftly argued, personal, and detailed, Caetlin Benson-Allott's *The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television* makes the field of "material culture" significant to media critics, theorists, and historians. The "stuff" that she defines as material culture—TV guides, VCRs, DVDs, peripheral promotions, drugs, public pronouncements—is all those sorts of entities scholars often shove to the periphery in investigations of movies and television and digital media but that, as Benson-Allott points out, affect people's "reception practices and their interpellation as spectators" (214).

This book is an important and cutting-edge contribution to thinking about all the angles—from the industrial to the phenomenological, to name just two—from which scholars need to consider these phenomena. While not everyone—indeed, maybe only a strand of academics—has chosen or will choose material-culture research, all media scholars need to be aware of it as they make their generalizations about their objects and field of enquiry. (For instance, in an opening example, Benson-Allott studies the history and layout of *TV Guide* to point out the class implications in what was just a handy magazine in many households.)

To make her argument, Benson-Allott provides six chapter-length case studies—each focused on a different form of material culture—that make visible the important knowledges that, she contends, must be considered whenever other intellectual claims about media and spectators are made. In describing her research as "material culture," she positions it at an intersection among media-industries analysis, theoretical work on spectatorship, and media as a "sociocultural institution" (11).

The first chapter uses the vexed instance of *Battlestar Galactica* (Glen A. Larson, 1978–79) to open a history and discussion of media platforms ranging from VHS and its off-the-air recording, DVD, and Blu-ray to streaming—all incorporated as sources for the texts to be studied. While these media options may play a minor role for most audiences in terms of their experience in watching the text, the



peripheral extras such as interviews and commentaries presented by the manufacturers do cue the buyers as to what the material text can (and cannot) do. Obviously, most scholars know that the type of access to the text makes a difference in what kinds of scholarly claims can be made, but Benson-Allott's analysis here is an excellent reminder of the sorts of textual tics that alter any supposed "direct" access to media history.

Closely related to the first case study is the second, which considers the distribution (or lack thereof) of older films. Entitled "The Commercial Economy of Film History: Or, Looking for *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*," the chapter uses the 1977 crime film as its prime example. Detailing all the complications in releasing and rereleasing films, Benson-Allott again encourages scholars to increase their sensitivity to the differences marking variant instances of a text.

In the book's third chapter, Benson-Allott considers Turner Classic Movies (TCM). In 1994, TCM began

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promoting itself as more than a place to watch movies for the “classic film cinephiliac” (96). The cable network repositioned itself as a lifestyle brand, selling TCM cookbooks, coasters, candles, cocktails, and other TCM-branded products. It created the TCM Classic Film Festival, the TCM-Bonhams biannual auction of movie props and memorabilia, the TCM Wine Club, the TCM online educational courses, the TCM tours with TCM hosts and celebrities. TCM made itself an external and internal site for the consumption of TCM products—and, as publicized at the time of this writing, it plans to remake itself yet again.

Benson-Allott moves in chapters 4 and 5 to consider common ingestions associated with film and television watching: alcohol and cannabis. Her detailed history of the consistent presence of alcohol in and around moviegoing, albeit with transformations in place and style of access and niche appeals, includes not only a discussion of theater-restaurants but also a revealing analysis of AMC’s efforts to specifically target Latinx audiences. Beginning in the early 2010s, AMC exploited the promotional value of ethnicity for making money with its “Dine-In” publicity campaign.

Chapter 5’s study is perhaps the boldest and most debatable for the subjective interpretative claims Benson-Allott makes about aesthetics and spectatorship. Using her own experiences as a sort of autoethnography, Benson-Allott argues that the creators of some television shows, knowing that audiences may be ingesting cannabis and other drugs while watching, structure their narratives and stylistic effects to produce or augment “stoned” experiences, “namely distraction, enhanced or hyper-focus, and paranoia” (172), in what she terms a “poetics of inebriation” (175). After surveying a historical series of generalized hypotheses about spectators’ states while watching movies—inebriated or drugged (Dziga Vertov, Siegfried Kracauer), dreamlike (René Clair, Roland Barthes, Jean-Louis Baudry), distracted (theorists describing female viewers of television)—she analyzes the three inebriated/stoned states in relation to specific programs that she argues facilitate the production of those specific affects.

For the first type or state of inebriation, “distraction,” she suggests that hypersegmented narratives may produce the experience. Her main example is *Broad City* (internet, 2010–11; Comedy Central, 2014–16), whose style is somewhat justified narratively by the protagonists’ use of cannabis. Thus, the story content motivates the style. Another example, *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009–12), has the incessant repetition that Benson-Allott claims is a bad aesthetic experience when one is not inebriated but helpful when stoned.

Her second type of cannabis intoxication is “hyper-focus,” which may be accelerated by binge-watching, with *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–13) as her example. Based on her viewing, the show’s story lines became more complicated, emotional, and melodramatic, reducing any scholarly ability to criticize its story.

Paranoia constitutes the third type of a cannabis-derived bodily response, which some programs attempt to produce aesthetically, conveying the sensation that covert meanings are everywhere or possible, so viewers need to watch and remember everything. Programs within this narrative and stylistic strategy include *X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2018), *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10), and *Breaking Bad*. Benson-Allott makes a detailed case that *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–) works this way, too, for her as a white viewer. Unsure what she might be missing due to not having experienced Black life and culture, she describes the show’s strategy as “marginalizing the white gaze” (211).

In her sixth and final chapter, “Shot in Black and White: the Racialized Reception of US Cinema Violence,” Benson-Allott surveys public political and journalistic responses to violence occurring outside and inside movie theaters. She argues that the public response affects cultural discourses about “who should and should not be going to the movies” (214). This produces what she labels a “panicked reception culture” (214). However, and significant culturally, substantial racial differences exist, based on the content of the films and the individuals involved.

For *Rock around the Clock* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, 1979), and such early 1990s “ghetto” action films as *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), public discourse focused on the races participating in public gatherings around the films as well as on the races of the filmmakers and their films’ content. However, in the case of mass shootings carried out by white men, the public discourse is about “mentally disturbed” people who make theaters unsafe. Thus, the problem is not a matter of the race (white) of the shooters or the content of the movies. This case emphasizes the material culture of public discourse as part of spectatorship.

As noted at the start of this review, *The Stuff of Spectatorship* is an important (and often amusing) group of detailed studies that cautions scholars to remember “stuff” as they make their claims about specific research projects. The book, thus, raises two valuable reminders about film and television studies at this historical point. The first involves how, at this mature age in media studies, academics describe and label the types of research being pursued. As Benson-Allott notes in her introduction, major constellations of research have

involved textual analysis, media-industry studies, spectator theory (general propositions about spectatorship, including phenomenology and affect propositions), and reception studies. To this list, I would add a fifth group—“context studies”—within which I would place Benson-Allott’s work emphasizing material culture.

In fact, from the earliest years of the academic study of cinema, the actual contexts of production and spectatorship have been a prominent scholarly concern. Benson-Allott notes the research starting in the 1970s by Douglas Gomery on exhibition history (12). Indeed, Gomery has studied theater locations (often in the 1920s and 1930s on streetcar lines), architecture (to mimic exotic places), and food (the arrival of popcorn in the early Depression era). However, she does not mention or discuss important work by his contemporaries. In fact, many scholars from the late 1970s to the present have considered the contexts of film and television series in producing and influencing the circumstances of filmmaking and film viewing. Even a brief list would remind researchers that context has been very much a part of film and television studies for some forty years now.¹

Perhaps because films and TV series do remain a primary central focus of media studies—what is the status of the text? why am I experiencing the text as I (and others) do (or should do)?—academics have not gathered these studies into any named or organized field intersecting with, but distinct from, the other four related types of cinema and television studies that Benson-Allott names. However, her book encourages researchers to take on these sorts of contextual inquiries, not only because they have merit in themselves, but also as intellectual gifts to other types of media studies.

The other reminder about film and media studies that this book provokes at this historical moment is the concern about what it is that scholars want to know and why. More specifically, to what extent do each of these types of “stuff” provide information that can become useful to understanding how film and television and culture work?

Undoubtedly because of my personal interests and concerns about the United States in 2021, I found the final chapter on the racialized public response to violence in and around theaters to be exceptionally disturbing, although not surprising given the history of racism in the United States. I am also sure that polling indicating that US citizens are willing to accept big lies even when confronted by alternative (truthful) information heightens my concern. One of the virtues of *The Stuff of Spectatorship* is that Benson-Allott is clear about why her cases matter for broader issues of describing and understanding contemporary culture. For instance, for her first case, the series *Battlestar Galactica* portrays the epic

search for the mythical homeland of Earth after a treacherous violation of a peace treaty with the archenemies of humans. Why should a recording of the actual, on-air US television premiere of a three-hour science-fiction series matter? The series would end up with an extensive run and many fans, but Benson-Allott is particularly invested in finding any off-the-air broadcast recordings of its premiere and details her attempts to secure a VHS (or some other) record of it.

Why? It turns out that the series debut was interrupted during the broadcast by the announcement of the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel—President Jimmy Carter’s historic attempt to resolve the multiple-year hostilities. Thus, any study of the program, and, more specifically, of the initial reception by its audiences (as well as professional critics), needs to consider the potential for ironic interpretations and complex feelings, given the unplanned real-life insert that had eerie parallels with the program’s primary plot line. Moreover, that study would need to ask how one’s ethnic heritage and political stances (a Democratic president led the treaty making) factored into those responses.

Now, it is a very rare, perhaps unique, situation when an off-the-air recording might have more significant evidentiary weight for reception studies than a traditional VHS or DVR document, though I would emphasize that merely knowing that this happened may be enough to provide context for analyzing evidence surrounding the event. Yet, Benson-Allott’s point is well taken. The material stuff may matter, and it matters culturally. Her project is about culture, in the end, and, as such, each chapter draws out the reasons that the case and the stuff she is considering make a difference. These contexts inform broader historical arguments about trends, patterns, and anomalies in gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity as well as other important contemporaneous issues.

A provocative, entertaining contribution to context and material culture studies, *The Stuff of Spectatorship* provides an outstanding rationale to investigate stuff. As the author of an earlier book on the history and uses of the remote control, Benson-Allott is following a path of taking up unexpected subjects that reward with surprising and potent results. Moreover, given her discussions, I would venture to guess that she would be happy for you to read the book, intoxicated (or not).

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Note

1. Many scholars are foundational to this area, including Jeanne Allen (1980; on advertising and exhibition lures for filmgoers in the 1910s–1930s), Robert C. Allen (from 1979; on theater locations and class implications for viewing), Rick Altman (from the 1980s; on music, lecturers, and sound), Mary Carbine (1990; on theaters and exhibition practices in Chicago's black districts), Richard de Cordova (1990; on children's Saturday matinees), Kathryn Fuller (1996; on small towns and early fan culture), Ina Rae Hark (1994; on implications of gender in theater management), Charlotte Herzog (from 1977; on theatrical architecture), Russell Merritt (1976; on class, ethnicity, and gender address in early nickelodeons), Charles Musser (from the late 1970s; on early cinema exhibition), Diane Waldman (1986; on YMCA screenings in Colorado), and Gregory Waller (from 1992; on black moviegoing in the pre-sound era).

SAMHITA SUNYA

Cinemas Dark and Slow in Digital India, by

Lalitha Gopalan

Lalitha Gopalan's latest book opens with her account of acquiring a link to view *Ghode ko jalebi khilane le ja riya hoon* (*Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis*, Anamika Haksar, 2018). Finding herself “floored by ... a work like no other I had seen before, unclassifiable” (3), Gopalan attends closely to the film, discussing not only its form and aesthetics, but also how the film came to be. What unfolds is a story of fine-grained specificities, in terms of production processes, modes of exhibition, budgets, technology, labor, institutions, and friendships. This attention to detail continues in Gopalan's archival and curatorial undertaking toward a philosophy of images. Gopalan explores the “affordances of the digital” (9) through a set of three independent feature films that were themselves contemplating the pasts, presents, and futures of cinema in a specific time and place: India in the 2010s, during a period of transition to digital filmmaking.

Following this introductory chapter, titled “Opening,” each chapter is anchored in an analysis of three films. It would be misleading to suggest, however, that each chapter is about its respective films alone. Instead, Gopalan details a dense web of connections and practices that each film opens up, in addition to closely reading the films for their conceptual engagements with media and medium specificity in a crucible of transitions wrought by the digital era of neoliberal globalization.

In part 1 of the book, the two chapters that follow the introduction—“Minding the Gap” and “Slowing

Down”—are among the most compelling sections. “Minding the Gap” refers to the gap of absent archives, as the availability of, and access to, films in digital formats remain dependent upon the vicissitudes of capital, in terms of technology and infrastructure. Thus, the excess of films that are readily available and accessible in digital formats can even further obscure those independent undertakings whose production and distribution occur on the margins of established institutions, aesthetic and formal traditions, and mainstream platforms.

Chapter 3, “Slowing Down,” considers the long take as an affordance of the digital that has marked several contemporary Asian films. Gopalan ties a “cinema of waiting” (146) to the experiences of those who are abandoned by the state amid increasing privatization on the one hand, and the persistence of state bureaucracies on the other. Gopalan does not naturalize the long take to a spectatorial sensation of soporific entrancement, however, for she avows the “sensation of agitation” (148) that the long take can also produce. Slowness, in other words, is contextual: while it can suggest a sense of relaxation and unwinding in one circumstance, it can suggest a sense of insufferable tedium and frustration in another.

Part 1 establishes an ontology of darkness and slowness in digital images as coterminous with structures of darkness and slowness that exist both as conditions of, and responses to, a globalized, uneven digital world. She refers, for example, to the spatial engagements of *Divya Drishti* (Sidharth Srinivasan, 2002) where “perimeters of the metropolis ... [open up] ways of thinking of the space of action in peri-urban spaces as theatres of darkness in the expanding economies of production and consumption” (126). Against notions of either convergence or the universality of the digital, Gopalan maintains an emphasis throughout the book on local specificities of intermediality, given the “range of technologies whose obsolescence has not yet been pronounced in India” (119).

Part 2 consists of five chapters that focus on genres, approaches, or movements, including the eighth and final chapter, “Time Out,” on women's filmmaking collectives that emerged in India in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Chapter 4, “Bombay Noir,” and chapter 6, “Road Movie,” emphasize itineraries of independent filmmaking that engage with global genres. Chapter 4 contemplates the ubiquity of cell phones in films that grapple not only with hyperconnectivity, but also with the militarization of the everyday through surveillance. Chapter 5, “Tamil New Wave,” connects both slowness and darkness to the ruins—inclusive of the environmental ruins—of industrial capitalism, in contrast to the ruins of war that precipitated the New Wave cinemas that rippled outward from postwar Europe.