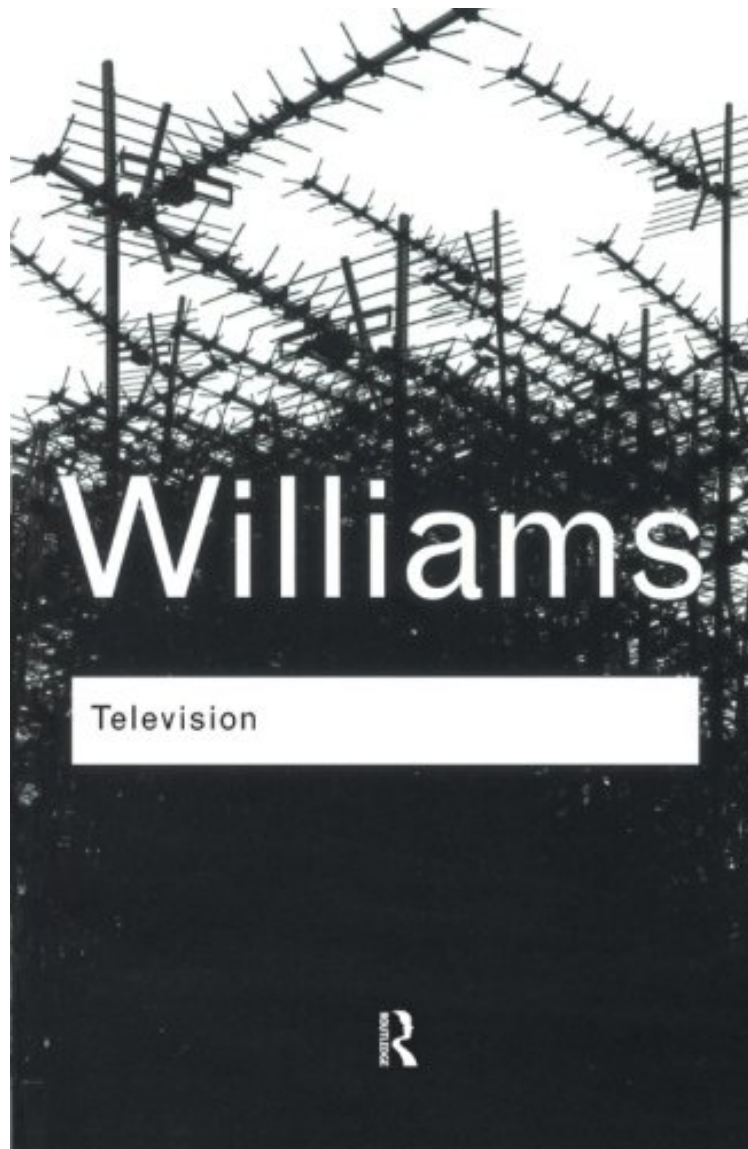


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Raymond Williams : Television: Technology and Cultural Form (Routledge Classics) (Volume 124) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Television: Technology and Cultural Form (Routledge Classics) (Volume 124):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A classicBy PulpThis is a classic work in television studies. If you

are interested in reading about how the study of television works or the core concept of flow, read this. 10 of 12 people found the following review helpful. An intelligent, prescient study of the medium of television by Robert Moore Raymond Williams's TELEVISION: TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL FORM is regarded as the first important book written about television. Certainly it is the oldest book that any student of television studies is expected to read. It is not a perfect book, mainly because of technological changes that have rendered many of Williams's points invalid or irrelevant. But what is amazing reading this book in 2008 is how much of television's potential Williams anticipated, as well as some of its weaknesses. Television as a form of popular art was very slow to mature. Though one can cite a few -- a very, very few -- important television series before 1981, it wasn't until the eighties and nineties that television really grew up and became a fully formed means of artistic expression. Some of the books that many people love to cite as to the awfulness of TV -- such as Jerry Mander's abysmally awful FOUR ARGUMENTS FOR THE ELIMINATION OF TELEVISION, which could easily compete for the title of the Worst Book Ever Written award -- depended not on the potential of TV, but on the way it appeared at the time. Williams correctly understood that TV had enormous potential for artistic excellence and was able to identify some of the better shows of his time, which is astonishing given that he wrote the book in 1973, when virtually all TV shows were awful. Much of the book consists of a very accurate, very concise history of TV as a medium. Williams also sums up the various formats of TV series, even distinguishing between serials and episodic shows. I think he would have been surprised at the degree to which serials have dominated quality TV (indeed, I would argue that virtually all the very good TV series have been serials). He wrote in 1973, while the first non-soap serial in American TV was HILL STREET BLUES, which debuted in 1981. He was also extremely sensitive -- as a good Marxist, albeit a Western one -- of the role that corporate interests played in TV. Had he written the book at a later point, I'm sure he would have made a great deal out of the ludicrous assertion that the media, which is corporate owned and micro-managed, is liberal. (One of the great propaganda successes of the past forty years of the Right has been the creation of the myth of the Liberal Media, doubly ironic because media is so deeply entrenched in right winged interests and control.) It is a tragedy that Williams died at age 67, though he wrote this at age 51. The book is for the most part fundamentally solid, though seriously out of date. More needs to be said about how the book is out of date. Williams attempted in the book to anticipate the changes that were about to occur in television. He correctly anticipated the role that cable would play, though I suspect he would have been amazed at how the VHS tape would alter things. But even more he would have been astonished at how DVDs would have changed the way we view TV. Indeed, when DVDs were first introduced, even the studios had no conception of how much demand there would be for television series in DVD form. Because of the bulkiness of VHS tapes, TV shows were never very popular in that form. But beginning with BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER (which was the first series to price seasons below \$50 a season -- shows like THE X-FILES and the various STAR TREK series were priced at twice that cost) the studios were taken aback at just how much demand there was for TV series on DVD. Also, Williams had no way of anticipating just how many channels cable would be able to accommodate or how large TV screens were going to become. While Williams's theory is solid for the most part, the technology grew at a pace he could scarcely anticipate. The one part of Williams's book that I have serious problems with is the one part of the book that had enormous and widespread influence. By far the most famous part of Williams's book is that part in which he articulates his theory of "flow." He insists -- I believe correctly -- that studio personnel design entire evenings around the goal of causing a flow from one constituent element of the broadcast to another. In other words, a show begins, but cuts to a commercial, which leads to a preview for another show, which leads to another commercial, which takes the viewer back to the show, which eventually give way to another commercial, preview and commercial, all the way through the evening. Williams believes that the evening needs to be viewed as a whole, with each element reinforcing another. I just think the idea of "flow" is all wrong. I'll grant that the networks plan an evening that is supposed to flow from one element to another, but I insist that it rarely if ever works out that way. At least, my personal experience doesn't bear this out. Williams imagines a viewer sitting entranced, passively viewing one element to the next. But I'm rarely passive. If I am watching, for instance, FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS, the second the commercial comes on, I'm out of my seat like a lightning bolt. I either hit the restroom, or the fridge, or my computer, where I check my e-mail or go to IMDB.com to check out the name of a guest star on the show or go to the TV board of which I'm a member (and where we all tend to congregate very briefly to record our reactions to a show). In other words, I rarely see the commercials Williams believes is integral to the "flow" of the evening. And when FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS is over, I'm gone. If my memory serves me correctly, the show that comes after FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS is VEGAS. I've never watched the show. I'd say the most I've seen is 3-5 seconds, and only then if I can't find the remote to turn off the TV. I suspect my experience is similar to most people's. The networks may fantasize about people sitting around passively succumbing to the "flow" of an evening, but I suspect we viewers have our own agendas. Myself, all my TV viewing is "by appointment." I never, ever watch TV in the sense of plopping myself down in front of the tube and then passively absorbing whatever is placed before me. I watch an enormous number of TV series, but all by appointment. And I believe that this is true for an enormous number of viewers. There is no way that Williams could have anticipated the kind of control viewers now have over their TV viewing. DVRs, streaming Internet, downloading torrents, DVDS: these completely undercut the idea of

"flow." Whether the idea ever had any validity, it certainly does not now. Nonetheless, this remains an important book, and not merely for the historical reason of its being the first important book on TV. Williams has many superb things to say about TV. His criticisms of McLuhan are as devastating today as they were in 1973. But it is nonetheless dated. Much of it has been rendered untrue by changes in technology. Still, for anyone interested in television studies, it remains on the shortest of short lists of crucial texts on the subject.

Television: Technology and Cultural Form was first published in 1974, long before the dawn of multi-channel TV, or the reality and celebrity shows that now pack the schedules. Yet Williams' analysis of television's history, its institutions, programmes and practices, and its future prospects, remains remarkably prescient. Williams stresses the importance of technology in shaping the cultural form of television, while always resisting the determinism of McLuhan's dictum that 'the medium is the message'. If the medium really is the message, Williams asks, what is left for us to do or say? Williams argues that, on the contrary, we as viewers have the power to disturb, disrupt and to distract the otherwise cold logic of history and technology - not just because television is part of the fabric of our daily lives, but because new technologies continue to offer opportunities, momentarily outside the sway of transnational corporations or the grasp of media moguls, for new forms of self and political expression.

"The founding text of television studies. A true Classic: Always worth consulting for its style, scope, and insights." - Jostein Gripsrud "This book is a classic because it inaugurated ways of thinking about a new technology - television - as part of everyday material culture which are even more pertinent to us now as we enter the digital age." - Charlotte Brunson "Williams understood that TV was the theatre of capitalism, the drama of modernity. He took both drama and capitalism seriously, and this book is the result -- a decisive moment in the formation of TV studies as a properly theorized field, and a permanently useful account of cultural form." - John Hartley, Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of Queensland About the Author Raymond Williams (1921-1988). British cultural thinker and sociologist Raymond Williams is best known for pioneering the study of popular culture and the media, as well as for being one of the founding fathers of the British cultural studies group.