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Meta in Film and Television Series by David Roche, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 376 pp., $125 USD (h/c)

Erin Giannini

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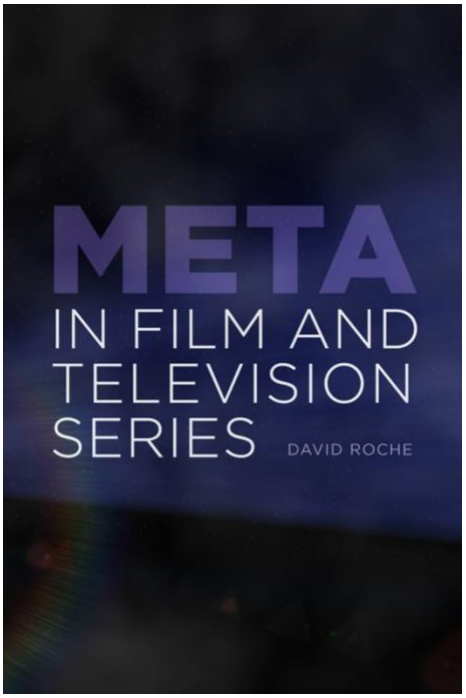

BOOK REVIEW

Meta in Film and Television Series

By David Roche
Edinburgh University Press
2022

376 pp., $125 USD (h/c)

While the term "meta" (short for metatext/metatextuality or metafiction) has become increasingly mainstreamed, invoked in outlets from trade journals to fanblogs, its definition can be as difficult to pin down as its use within various forms of media. Is it merely breaking the fourth wall, a deeper look at the political or industrial undercurrents of artistic creation, or an exercise in narcissism? These elements have been examined by scholars such as Patricia Waugh (1984), Linda Hutcheon (1980, 1991), Robert Stam (1992), and Christian Metz (1991), among others, but much of the work around metafiction has focused on the literary side. David Roche, in his length study, *Meta in Film and Television* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), is explicitly positioned to address that lack through both synthesizing the earlier work around metatext and developing some of his own positions and vocabulary for its use in both the aforementioned mediums in an erudite and broad study.

Reaching back to the silent film era, Roche begins with a thorough review of the literature around metatextuality and its various definitions, threading a careful needle in elucidating the differences between reflexivity more generally and "meta" specifically, and insisting that the terms are not necessarily synonymous. That is, for Roche, reflexivity represents the "zero degree" of meta, in that the constructedness of the text is being foregrounded, without which the meta element would not exist. Meta, in Roche's terms, is not only the emphasis on the text as text, but "a discourse that engages analytically with the aspect of the root term that is being emphasized" (15). Following this, Roche maps out the types, problems, and most importantly for his study, the history of the term and practice within the visual arts. He also touches on the concept of whether—and how—meta translates to media from various cultures,

pointing out an area for further work on metatext within media studies outside of the Western context.

Having set the scene, so to speak, the second—and longest—part of the book regards what Roche amusingly calls the "aboutness of meta." Broadly categorized, this section examines "movies about movies" (e.g,, the "making-of" type of film), movies about watching movies (spectatorship), texts about the mediums themselves, and the meta-ness of adaptations and remakes, genre, seriality, history, and politics. Roche employs an impressive array of film texts in particular, from *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) to *Fellini's Roma* (1972) to not only dig deeply into meta strategies themselves, but investigate how they are employed, on both large and small scales within these texts. This two-pronged approach is essential in situating Roche's book as a template for future meta-based studies across mediums and globally focused. (The conclusion even offers some directions regarding further study for areas Roche does not cover, particularly the inherent meta-ness of the documentary form.) Most importantly, Roche's deep focus on the numerous and multifaceted meanings that metatexts offer undermines assertions that meta is merely a clever ploy, a game for engaged viewers, rather asserting that its use has political dimensions beyond a viewer's awareness of themselves as spectator, or a filmmaker's deconstruction of narrative or production tropes. This is particularly clear in Roche's discussion of the BBC's 1964 docudrama—historiographic metafiction—*Culloden*. Its framing as a documentary that couldn't possibly exist (the Battle of Culloden occurred in 1745) allows it, through the distancing techniques of meta, to "remind us that the events we read in the pages of history books affected the lives of ordinary people at least as much, if not more so, than those of the men who instigated them and whose social status enabled them to escape the consequences of their actions" (235). This awareness, and its focus on the structures of both narrative creation and power, can thus take on a political dimension through its self-aware perspective through performance, dialogue, and camerawork.

If there is one critique of Roche's work (rather, one that Roche does not point out himself), it is that the "Film" portion of the title receives much more attention than "Television Series." Roche's analyses of meta in film is extensive, reaching back to the silent era and across multiple genres, proving through volume (amongst other elements) the extent of its use within the visual mediums and easily making the case against the idea that it represents a "recent" fad or one symptomatic of genre or narrative exhaustion. His discussion of television offers some expected entries (*Community* [2009-2015], *Twin Peaks* [1990-1991, 2017], *The Prisoner* [1967-1968]) and some unexpected surprises

(*This Is Us* [2016-2022]), with brief mentions of "meta" episodes in other series (e.g., "The French Mistake" from *Supernatural* [2005-2020]). Even limiting his study's focus to US and UK media offers a significant amount of television material, much of which Roche touches on but does not fully explore. The caveat to this critique, however, is that Roche's goal is not so much to offer an encyclopedic account as it is to provide a theoretical framework for continuing scholarship in both television and film to fill in these gaps.

The depth and breadth of Roche's analysis of meta, the work around it, and the work that embodies it makes *Meta in Film and Television Series* a valuable work as both a study and a foundational text for future research. Roche's command of a massive body of both the literature around metatext and the film and television series that employ it is impressive and an excellent resource for historical, production, and textual scholars in both film and television disciplines. Roche correctly asserts that material around metatext in the visual mediums lags behind the work around its presence in literature. Yet, as he writes in his conclusion, the meta-phenomenon "invites us to disentangle the strands and formulate its theoretical propositions about creation and reception, its forms and its medium, its aesthetic and political potential, and, more profoundly, about its relation to the world" (283). I would argue that Roche's work is inviting us to do the same.

— Erin Giannini

Erin Giannini, PhD, is an independent scholar. She served as an editor and contributor at PopMatters, and written numerous articles about topics from corporate culture in genre television to production-level shifts and their effects on television texts. She is also the author of *Supernatural: A History of Television's Unearthly Road Trip* (Rowman & Littlefield 2021), and *The Good Place* (Wayne State UP/TV Milestones 2022), and co-editor of the book series "B-TV: Television Under the Critical Radar" for Bloomsbury.

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