# AMERICAN MASS INCARCERATION AND POST-NETWORK QUALITY TELEVISION: CAPTIVATING ASPIRATIONS

**Lee A. Flamand** (author)
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, pp. 311,
ISBN: 9789463725057

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As I write in January 2025, Lee A. Flamand's book *American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television: Captivating Aspirations* (2022) is scarily rendered more relevant by the approach of Donald Trump's second presidency. In an era in which businessmen become all-powerful political personalities, Flamand's lucid explanation of how mass incarceration has, indeed, turned into a business in the US, brings to light a twisted evolution of enslavement entrenched in local American politics. The volume crucially investigates the topical phenomenon of mass incarceration in the US and its most recent depictions in post-network quality television, which in simpler terms can be defined as TV that advertises itself to be more complex, nuanced, and engaged in contrast to other televisual productions. But how is this quality construed? Is it fashioned by the amount of money invested in the production of a show? Or by its writing and the engagement it establishes with contemporaneous real-life issues? Flamand is interestingly quite critical of what should be considered of quality in the televisual landscape, and presents 'quality' as a construct rather than a factual, tangible reality of the TV he examines.

Divided into six chapters that, as the author states in the introduction, should also serve as standalone articles (confirmed by their own structures and the presence of abstracts and keywords at the beginning of each of them), the volume sets out to retrace the representation of mass incarceration in recent shows, from the late '90s until the present day in American television. After two introductory chapters that appropriately frame the sociological phenomenon at the centre of the study, the book continues with three chapters that, in chronological order, illustrate the development and evolution in

the last thirty years of this type of television. These explore the representation of the book's main topic by different American networks and through contemporary methods of television production by reviewing the series *OZ*, *The Wire, Orange Is the New Black*, *Queen Sugar* and the Netflix documentary *13th* as case studies.

The first chapter following the introduction, "Mass (Mediating) Incarceration," provides a strong historical and sociological framing to the topics later discussed, contextualizing them and outlining the concept of "punitive realism" that foregrounds the study. From the beginning, Flamand points out how his intent is to *problematize* the shows—despite the very high praises they have all received throughout the years—in order to prove how even "very good shows" often end up reaffirming stereotypes or beliefs they had set out to dismantle, especially when these series have run for several seasons. He nevertheless credits them for having depicted—although not always entirely successfully—carceral life, in order to combat its mythicization and to spotlight structural social issues that are pervasive in American society.

Chapter two, "How Does Violent Spectacle Appear as TV Realism? Sources of *OZ*'s Penal Imaginary," focuses on the TV series *OZ* (1997-2003)—an HBO production set in an experimental unit of a fictional prison, echoing Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in its name and thematic framing. This type of quality TV, however, appears to be fashioned for affluent white viewers, in order for them to experience the carceral environment and the violence within it from a safe distance and through a distorted reality. In fact, Flamand crucially affirms how "the prison itself is a hyper-real institution, reproduced and legitimized through the circulation of often nightmarish images disseminated through the field of popular culture; these images permeate our media landscape to such a degree as to saturate it completely" (201). These images and narratives have become so powerful that they have been subverted to become authentic and accurate for prisoners who picture their reality through a fictional lens. However, from his compelling analysis, the show appears to push the carceral reality to its limits, bringing the series' claim to realism to collapse on itself:

> in its attempts to continuously one-up and rejuvenate its own spectacle of prison drama and hyper-violence over the course six seasons, *OZ* turned to increasingly

> unrealistic, strange, and even gothic tropes, figures, and forms. Eventually the veneer of realism begins to crumble, and *OZ* ends up making the very notion of realism – and, by extension, the prison itself – seem hauntingly bizarre. (201)

As in relation to *OZ*, when discussing *The Wire* (2002-2008) in chapter three, "If It's Not TV, Is It Sociology? *The Wire*," Flamand expresses how the show has been incredibly lauded as a piece of great television. Its fame and claim to realism have interestingly turned it into a case study for several sociological studies and courses. Yet, Flamand illustrates how its use as a sociology case study has created an issue—common within the realm of realist visual products—with the blurring of boundaries between storytelling and real life, while he rightfully points out how the TV series remains a piece of fiction and should only be considered as such. He outlines how *The Wire* tried to transcend the common police procedural formula—and succeeded in some way, as for example it is said to have a faithful reproduction of the environment and language of Baltimore, where it is set—but due to its highbrow form of knowledge-making, it eventually came to reproduce the "same capitalistic commercial structures it aims to critique" (162) as its ideologies of visibility were often used to denigrate the lives of the people they aimed to represent and give voice to. This proves how the show's core problem was connected to its employment of inherently capitalistic tools and, despite its efforts, it eventually harmed the ones it wished to depict and put under the spotlight in the first place.

The Netflix production *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) also failed to impress, according to Flamand in chapter four "Is Entertainment the New Activism? *Orange Is the New Black*, Women's Imprisonment, and the Taste for Prisons." Being one of the first original Netflix productions that heralded and led its contemporary success as a streaming platform and producer, the show started with a strong innovative streak, as it focused on a female prison. *Orange*'s core themes were developed around the concept of intersectionality, and therefore the show discussed how gender interlocks with sexuality, queerness, and violence within the carceral environment. Due to this intersectional framing, Flamand states it had what he calls an 'activist imprint,' meaning that it wanted to promote social causes through this form of art. However, the show failed to deliver and remained entrenched in the corporation's money-making scheme, as its

activist element was not fully developed throughout the seasons. Although it retained an innovative element, it still played into stereotypes and has not failed to go through several controversies in the years.

In chapter four, "Can Melodrama Redeem American History? Ava DuVernay's *13th* and *Queen Sugar*," Flamand focuses on the pedagogic and didactic use of documentary and televisual work in DuVernay's depictions of mass incarceration. According to Flamand, these two works are particularly interesting because of the director's established black auteur status, solidified by her show *When They See Us* (2019) too, which depicts wrongful incarceration. However, he identifies from the start how the use of melodramatic television in both fiction and documentary form reinforces stereotypes around the depictions of blackness in the US and the evolutions of enslavement into present-day mass incarceration, not only in DuVernay's work. Nonetheless, *13th* (2016) especially remains a relevant and informative piece of television, despite being a Netflix production like *Orange*.

The concluding chapter is a general reflection on how American politics, the COVID pandemic, and the digital era have shaped a new breed of viewers often influenced by online radicalization that eventually feeds into the type of content each user watches, because of how the algorithms used by streaming or video platforms work. Here, Flamand gives in-depth consideration to the rise of new streaming platforms and how today these giants constantly compete with each other for a bigger pool of viewers. The development of this plethora of websites has turned TV elitist and expensive again, while also producing works that follow specific business models that compete with one another and therefore must produce set quantities each year. This approach is inherently capitalistic and consumeristic and feeds on quantity rather than quality, despite the majority of these productions being marketed as such by these corporations. Within this reflection, Flamand intriguingly connects his considerations on the evolution of TV and its contemporary issues to Trumpism and right-wing politics. From his words it appears that America cannot truly change, since even cultural products have become a form of lip service, when they disguise themselves behind supposedly activist agendas. He ironically (?) comments that "perhaps Americans are only fond of serious political

themes when they take the form of entertainment, yet all too willingly forget those issues in the privacy of the ballot box" (273).

To conclude, the main overarching argument of the book is that majority (if not all) of the works he carefully selected, which depict prisons or mass incarceration, tend to subscribe to the mythology around the carceral systems, those who are in jail, and the stereotypical characteristics that would usually define them in this context. In the author's eyes, America appears to be declining from a cultural and creative point of view, when its artistic televisual production is at its peak in terms of quantity, but its quality progressively dissipates to give space to works with unclear aspirations. This ends the book on relatively grim horizons, stating as well how "American society seems to find collective dreaming progressively more difficult" (270). However, despite its strong sociological and historical background and its very-well-argued theories, the backbone of the book could benefit from a few adjustments and integrations. For example, the author could further consider how other TV shows examine American prisons, while avoiding melodramatic tropes and perpetuating stereotypes. Flamand only nods at this possibility but does not really explore it. In addition, the single chapters that make up the volume are not entirely standalone (contrary to what the author affirmed in the introduction), as they seem to depend on each other. Also, the end to the study itself suggests further considerations but does not develop a reflection and summary of what has been presented throughout the volume. In conclusion, with a different structure the book would have stood out from more traditional academic work. This being said, the book remains an important and valuable publication as it largely contributes to the discussion on a topic not often surveyed, both in academia and cultural representations.

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