CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7, by David Martin-Jones
Authors	Lamb, Ben
Publication date	2023-12-20
Original Citation	Lamb, B. (2022) 'Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7, by David Martin-Jones', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 24, pp. 190-193. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.16
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.24.16
Rights	© 2022, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-30 22:30:21
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13976

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 24, 2022, pp. 190–93
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.16

Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7, by David Martin-Jones. Edinburgh University Press, 2021, 248 pp.

Ben Lamb

The dedication of a single authored monograph to one television show is becoming increasingly rare. The BFI unceremoniously dropped their TV Classics series ten years ago; Manchester University Press's indefatigable Television Series now produces books on entire genres alongside their volumes that focus on particular auteurs. Given that commercial imperative to cover as many television programmes as possible within one study, the production of David Martin-Jones' book is an achievement in and of itself.

Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7 is peppered with insightful facts and original analyses. The aesthetic and ideological comparisons drawn between other Cop Dramas of the same era means anyone with a critical interest in the development of American detective series will need this book as an essential point of reference. Additionally, the regular comparisons made with contemporary popular series including shows as leftfield as *Game of Thrones*—in what Martin-Jones terms "flash forwards"—will prove a useful tool when demonstrating to undergraduates how *Columbo* continues to maintain a strong presence in popular culture.

The book, however, is principally a philosophical inquiry into how attention is shaped in late twentieth-century society and how *Columbo* participates in this shaping of attention. Thus, with a mixed degree of success, Martin-Jones treats *Columbo* as a historical artefact through which to illuminate America's change from a nation at the frontier of the Cold War to a beacon of neoliberal globalism.

Chapter One, "Blueprint for Murder", is an overly long first chapter that delineates the book's methodology and sets out how it aims to contribute to the literature. Martin-Jones insightfully begins with the "oft told story" of how *Columbo* came to be commissioned and developed before discussing how the series is representative of American Television's industrial practices. Whilst most television scholars will dispute Martin-Jones' vague assertions as to when broadcasting was replaced by narrowcasting, I admire his argument that *Columbo* was not a popular show despite its industrial working practices but, rather, because of them. Unfortunately, the industrial context provided in this chapter offers nothing new to Television Studies, something Martin-Jones openly acknowledges. He sees his work as predominantly contributing to Film Philosophy within a televisual context. That said, Martin-Jones' misleading characterisation of Television Studies as a discipline solely interested in genre and audience is lacking in understanding of the field at best and reductive at worst. A quick glance over the sociological strides made by Christine Geraghty, Helen Wheatley, Charlotte Brunsdon, Rachel Moseley, and others, easily complicates such a crude characterisation of the field.

© *Ben Lamb*
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

Putting semantics aside, I am delighted that *Columbo: Paying Attention* 24/7 develops to offer a valid contribution to Television Studies despite asserting it has nothing to greatly influence the field. Far from it. Despite the problematic distinction drawn between Film Philosophy and Television Studies, each chapter contains two very distinct halves. The first half generally contributes to Television Studies in the traditional sense whilst the second concerns itself with applying Film Philosophy to television.

Chapter Two, "Pay Strict Attention", provides an innovative new schema through which to make sense of *Columbo* that ought to be applied to other crime-series studies. Using Beck and Davenport's *Attention Economy* and Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, the chapter demonstrates how *Columbo* has played a part in the societal shaping of attention as it has shifted gears form the late 1960s until the early 2000s alongside the triumph of neoliberalism as our economic doctrine. Put simply, Martin-Jones outlines how citizens are expected to work longer hours whilst the distinctions between private life and professional identity have become increasingly blurred. Then Martin-Jones measures what role *Columbo* has in this societal shaping of our attention through four criteria: first, how identity is performed in a world under constant surveillance; secondly, the nature of humanity's interaction with technology; thirdly, the complexities that surround which social classes do or do not have a say in how history is recorded by new technologies; and lastly how a location (in this instance LA) situates itself in relation to globalising economics. Martin-Jones applies all four criteria to a brief yet rich comparative analysis of the *Columbo* episode "Identity Crisis" (1975) with "Cries Wolf" (1990). Having unearthed *Columbo*'s overarching ideological development, a chapter then focuses on each criterion in turn.

The first half of Chapter Three, "Performing Falk Acts/Columbo", adopts a traditional Television Studies approach to insightfully chart which aspects of Falk's performances owe a debt to stage and television's approaches to method acting, improvisation techniques from US independent cinema and the vaudeville traditions of Buster Keaton. Having contextualised the chapter, Martin-Jones then takes a leap to ideologically consider how a proliferation of surveillance in society across *Columbo*'s syndication impacts the series in a performance context. The chapter concludes arguing the onscreen suspects require a particularly attentive gaze from Columbo and viewers alike to determine guilt, made possible through the ability of paying attention 24/7.

Chapter Four, "Learning: Columbo Vs Modernity", begins by arguing the iteration of gizmos featured across *Columbo*'s run, from ground penetrating radar to robots, provides the show with the repeated spectacle of Columbo's character rapidly learning about all the latest technologies. Martin-Jones convincingly argues the programme offers repeated reassurances that it is entirely possible to quickly become familiar with such specialised forms of mental labour, in turn propagating the necessity of self-improvement and staying competitive as a labourer within a neoliberal economy. The second half of the chapter then looks at how technology is used for ubiquitous surveillance, consequently enabling Columbo to unmask a person's concealed guilt. Here Martin-Jones offers enlightening comparisons between the programme and dystopian anthology series *Black Mirror* to deduce where the thin line lies between the labour of looking that upholds citizenship and an Orwellian police state.

Curiously, in the first half of Chapter Five, "Policing: Not Class, History", Martin-Jones makes the case as to why he feels *Columbo* highlights rather than critiques the structural inequality of American capitalism as it transitions into the neoliberal era. Interestingly, the chapter uncovers *Columbo*'s problematic relationship with gender and race given their lack of

exposure across sixty-nine episodes. Martin-Jones completes the first half of the chapter asserting that *Columbo* generally avoids sustained critical engagement with class, gender and race, which begs the question: why spend half the chapter pointing this out? Nevertheless, Chapter Five's philosophical turn investigates *Columbo*'s portrayals of recording the past and how the detective deploys staged entrapment to trick suspects into revealing their guilt. In this regard Martin-Jones likens *Columbo* to *Hamlet* in how he is a figure of justice returning to protect the right to life for all and rectify the wrongs of the past. Chapter Five concludes by comparing how *Columbo* differs from *Mindhunter* in that the actions of murderers are depicted as being socially determined rather than predominantly psychological in nature.

The sixth and final chapter, "Locating: Bare Life in LA", pays particular attention to the urban geography of LA and how the programme communicates the late twentieth century city's transformation from western outpost integral to the US defence industry to global gateway city connecting trade with the Pacific Rim. Martin-Jones charts how the appearance of characters is connected to locations known for their conflictive Cold War pasts, foreign trade and investment, and non-English languages as representative of a growing multicultural society. Having identified these trends, the chapter's philosophical second half uncovers LA's changing character in relation to the attention industries and Columbo's role as protector of life. By the chapter's end Martin-Jones explains that despite Columbo's cases directing viewers' attention to the rich families fostered by neoliberalism his character's repeated visual alignment with the homeless, ex-cons and signifiers of justice indicates he champions life ahead of everyone's potential to be a useful citizen as dictated by neoliberalism.

The book's "Conclusion: Paying Attention 24/7" is its raison d'être in determining where Columbo ideologically stands with neoliberalism. Without falling into the trap of judging historical texts by modern standards Martin-Jones discusses Columbo's displays of generalised anxiety disorder, a trait deliberately foregrounded in later successful series such as *Monk* and *Elementary*. Martin-Jones then provides an ambitious, albeit apples and oranges, comparison with *The Purge* TV series. A horror exposing the extremes of neoliberalism undoubtedly will share some commonality with a series that defended a democratic right to life for all. Ultimately, though, Martin-Jones astutely outlines that living and working during the latter decades of the twentieth century entails a long life of 24/7 attentiveness accompanied by perpetual worry about work and an eradication of the distinction between private and professional life, an existence that feels ever more imperative in a post-Covid-19 world. Therefore Martin-Jones meaningfully demonstrates how *Columbo* at once critiques the exhaustion that comes with 24/7 attention whilst also reassuring viewers that everything can be managed by finding enough downtime. Simultaneously, Martin-Jones outlines that, whilst *Columbo* warns protecting the right to life is still a 24/7 job, on balance the programme is a hopeful reminder that a democratic society remains possible so long a as baseline commitment to preserving the right to life is maintained, especially within a post-truth society.

Conflating the study of film with television and philosophy is always liable to be problematic for scholars who feel protective over the unique nature of their respective fields. In terms of using *Columbo* as a means of developing Film Philosophy and its relationship to the socio-economic composition of wider society there are ample detailed textual analyses, and engagement with appropriate archives, that will satisfy *Alphaville* readers. Columbo: *Paying Attention* 24/7 contributes to Film and Television Studies more than Martin-Jones realises. As a philosophical study it is also more useful to Film/TV scholars than Routledge's "Philosophers on Film" book series that treats a given text as a vehicle through which to elucidate philosophical concepts for philosophy students. At the other end of the spectrum sometimes

works that seek to merge philosophy with traditional Television Studies can become completely impenetrable. Essentially *Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7* is an adequately balanced book that—whilst some chapters don't necessarily marry up coherently—nevertheless offers something sufficiently original, significant and rigorous to all readers with varying levels of interest in the series. "Oh, and one more thing", Chapter One's analyses of *Columbo*'s unique relationship with its fans is a hidden treat.

References

Beck, John C., and Thomas H. Davenport. *Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*. Harvard Business Press, 2001.

Black Mirror. Channel 4, Netflix 2011–.

Columbo. NBC, ABC 1968–2003.

Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep.* Verso Books, 2013.

Elementary. CBS 2012–19.

Game of Thrones. HBO, 2011–19.

Mindhunter. Netflix 2017–19.

Monk. USA Network 2002–2009.

The Purge. USA Network 2018–19.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet.* 1603.

Suggested Citation

Lamb, Ben. "*Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7*, by David Martin-Jones." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 24, 2022, pp. 190–93. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.16.

Ben Lamb is an expert on British television crime drama whose book, *You're Nicked: Investigating British Television Police Series* (Manchester UP) was published 2019. His research interests include modes of realism within different television production systems, genre theory, gender politics, and representations of social class. He leads the English Studies and Creative Writing at Teesside University. He is the producer of the film programme Rewinding the welfare state, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and North East Film Archive.