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978-1-107-04393-0 - Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama

Christopher Bigsby

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VIEWING AMERICA

Something has happened in the world of television drama. For the last decade and a half America has assumed a dominant position. Novelists, screenwriters and journalists, who would once have had no interest in writing for television, indeed who often despised it, suddenly realised that it was where America could have a dialogue with itself. The new television drama was where writers could engage with the social and political realities of the time, interrogating the myths and values of a society moving into a new century. Familiar genres have been reinvented, from crime fiction to science fiction. This is a book as much about a changing America as about the television series which have addressed it, from *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* to *The West Wing*, *Mad Men* and *Treme*, in what has emerged as the second golden age of American television drama.

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Preface

Many years ago I wrote a series of books exploring American drama in the twentieth century. I wanted to stake a claim for work that had not always received the attention it might, especially within an academic world at the time drawn to the novel and literary theory. It seemed to me that, for all the achievements of European drama, this had in many ways been an American century as far as theatre was concerned. Of course, America still produces major talents who command the interest of audiences around the world, but there is a degree to which some writers of drama, along with novelists, have shifted their attention to television. Once, that had seemed unthinkable.

For many, American television was this one-eyed man in the corner of the room with little to offer beyond shallow entertainment, and in the country of the bland the one-eyed man is king. It was seen as implicitly and explicitly reinforcing a national ideology to do with production and consumption, its programmes regularly interrupted not only to sell products but to sell the idea of consuming as a value. If mysteries existed in television drama series, if there was violence, the former were resolved while violence was either punished or authorised as a legitimate and necessary response to those who would disturb a peaceful norm, disrupt a national dream of endeavour rewarded. The perpetrators of crime were brought to justice. Lawyers pursued truth. Enemies were defeated. Social issues were less addressed than seen as the background to melodrama.

But something changed, and it did so at the turn of the millennium, or perhaps slightly before with *Homicide: Life on the Street*. Suddenly, network television produced *The West Wing*, which dramatised major political issues and even traumas. Cable television created existential dramas, featuring morally ambiguous characters with whom viewers were nonetheless invited to sympathise, as in *The Sopranos* or *Mad Men*. It identified the price of the drive for success, of a vision of life as a game in which winning was all, in *Friday Night Lights*. It explored major flaws in American society,

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the dereliction of American cities, the corrosive influence of drugs, the collapse of the educational system, the failure of journalism, as in *The Wire*, or of political leadership following natural disaster, as in the series which captured the aftermath of the hurricane which struck New Orleans in 2005, *Treme*. With America involved in wars abroad and suffering attack at home, television drama series explored the impact of this on national values, as in *Battlestar Galactica*. Who would have believed *that* a dozen years ago?

Nearly a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, some of the finest dramatic work is now to be seen on a medium that had tended to be dismissed, rather as the novel once was, as an inconsequential form of entertainment, as if entertainment had not always been an objective of the artist. Entertainment, as Michael Chabon has remarked, 'has a bad name. Serious people learn to mistrust or even to revile it. The word wears spandex, pasties, a leisure suit studded with blinking lights. It gives off a whiff of Coppertone and dripping Creamsicle, the fake-butter miasma of a movie-house lobby, of karaoke . . . Intelligent people must keep a certain distance from its productions. They must handle the things that entertain them with gloves of irony and postmodern tongs.'¹ The reason people shun the idea of entertainment, he suggests, is because it has overtones of a vaguely illicit pleasure, of passivity. Writers, it is assumed, would shun the idea of entertaining because 'an entertainer is a man in a sequined dinner jacket, singing "She's a Lady" to a hall filled with women rubber-banding their underpants up onto the stage'.² Yet entertainment, he suggests, 'remains the only sure means we have of bridging, or at least feeling as if we have bridged, the gulf of consciousness that separates us from everybody else'.³

For Joss Whedon, who wrote for both film and television (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), something had changed with the new millennium. As he explained, at first he had been convinced that he would 'never write for television', admitting that 'I was a total snob. I never watched American TV, I only watched . . . *Masterpiece Theatre* . . . I am a film student.' While confessing that he was 'still a complete snob', though, he insisted that 'it's reversed. I feel . . . film is a ridiculous hell and TV is the greatest place in the world'.⁴ Nor was he alone, as writers were drawn not only from film but from the theatre and the novel.

Playwrights who have turned to television include Jon Robin Baita (*Brothers & Sisters*), Tom Fontana (*St. Elsewhere*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*), Keith Huff (*Mad Men*), Jason Katims (*Friday Night Lights*), Warren Leight (*Friday Night Lights*), David Mamet (*The Unit*), Carly Mensch (*Weeds*), Marsha Norman (*In Treatment*), Eric Overmyer (*The Wire*,

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Treme), Frank Pugliese (*Homicide: Life on the Street*), Adam Rapp (*In Treatment*), Theresa Rebeck (*NYPD Blue*, *Smash*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Newsroom*), Craig Wright (*Six Feet Under*) and James Yoshimura (*Homicide: Life on the Street*). As Ellen Gartner pointed out in 2010, 'HBO's half-hour drama "In Treatment," about a therapist and his patients, had a writing staff composed almost entirely of playwrights last season.'⁵ In 2011, seven of the nine writers on HBO's *Big Love* were playwrights. Theatre, then, was now a route into television. Robert Aguirre-Sacasa, who wrote for that series, could think of none of his peers who did not want to write for the medium. Novelists and short story writers who have added television drama to their accomplishments include Rafael Alvarez, Dennis Lehane, Laura Lippman, George Pelecanos, Tom Piazza and Richard Price. What such writers brought to television but also learned from it was the centrality of dialogue. For Eric Overmyer, 'Television is about scenes between people talking... It might erupt in a gunfight, but it's still carried by dialogue.'⁶

The fact is that drama, of one kind or another, has been a staple of American television from the earliest years, and in an introductory chapter I sketch something of its history not least because for many years there has been a tendency to cede territory to European public service broadcasters as though a certain division of labour were to be acknowledged in the international cultural economy. If that was ever true, however, it is no longer. For many years the very best of television drama has come from the United States, if also, more recently, from non-English-speaking Europe whose crime series have proved impressive, particularly Denmark's *The Killing* (2007–) and France's *Spiral* (2005–) and *Braquo* (2009), though effectively this last seemed an echo of America's *The Shield* (2002–8). Ironically, it would be America's achievement that, as the second decade of the century progressed, would prompt a revival of quality television drama in Britain.

In part, America's success has been a consequence of the emergence of a different model of broadcasting, with the arrival of cable and satellite channels, less concerned with ratings and more with building a reputation which turned on a mixture of quality programming. Indeed, until the appearance of DVDs, downloads, webisodes and websites, some of the series considered here had a surprisingly small number of viewers, though others were products of network television, supported by advertising and in search of maximising viewers. What became clear, however, was that there was a new freedom granted to writers, a seriousness of intent acknowledged, an originality of approach encouraged.

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The fact that a number of these series were inspired by works of journalism said something about the desire of the new television writers to engage with the realities of their society (like the creators of documentaries, a form which showed signs of compensating for the decline of the newspaper), to reach for an authenticity that was in some sense evidence of their commitment. As an aspect of that, it was notable that the majority of the work considered here was deliberately shot on location, in North New Jersey, Baltimore, Austin, New Orleans, far from the hermetic world of Hollywood studios. It is also notable that many of the writers have chosen to work within familiar genres (the crime story, science fiction, even the high school movie), discovering there forms that could accommodate their social – no less than aesthetic – concerns.

Though they are set in different times and different places, there are common threads. *Homicide: Life on the Street*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Mad Men* have at their centre flawed protagonists, and in so far as audiences respond to them they are themselves compromised, as they are in *Deadwood*, *Breaking Bad* or *Boardwalk Empire*. There is also an existential element as identity is placed under stress in a country in which identity has always been fluid. For David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, the question the drug addict asks is ‘what am I doing here?’ It is a question asked equally by the other characters in that and the other series considered here, offering, as they do, portraits of a society always concerned to define itself, aware of the fault lines between public myths and public realities. These are also, then, series which have something to say about America, its myths and values, what, indeed, it is to be American. They are series which acknowledge the fact of crisis as they engage with the collapse of institutions and morale in blighted cities and explore the impact of threats internal and external, and to this extent this is a book about America.

In 2013, Hugh Laurie, star of the hugely successful *House* (distributed to sixty-six countries), remarked that today it is television rather than film which is the medium through which America ‘not just projects its image of itself to the world, but actually decides what its image is. It’s America’s way of conversing with itself about what it believes to be important.’⁷⁷ It is that conversation which lies at the heart of the series considered here.

A changing technology, meanwhile, has meant not merely that television drama is now readily available but that the web has become a place where viewers can enter into discussions and the creators of these dramas respond to those for whom television is no longer to be passively consumed. Once, television drama was ephemeral, programmes swiftly forgotten, its history

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disregarded. Now it is available for study and further enjoyment as few stage productions are.

Long-form television drama tends to focus on character rather than plot, character itself evolving over time. In a stage play, or in film, actors are aware of their characters's arc, contained, as it is, within the span of no more than two or three hours. The challenge to the actors is not to perform in the knowledge of how the story will end. In television series they frequently know little beyond the individual episode, not even whether their characters will survive. They play the moment. At the same time there is space for that character to develop, while playwrights who turn to television often return to the stage having learned lessons in concision, in the significance of subplots, in virtues derived from the critical feedback offered in writers' rooms. Theresa Rebeck insisted that it was working with David Milch on *NYPD Blue* that had taught her about writing.

Nor have these drama series, for all their engagement with America, been restricted in their appeal. They have attracted audiences in countries where their quality has even become a reproach to those who once assumed such their own preserve. As ever, constraints of space have limited the number of works I can cover. There will be those who with justification would wish to advance the virtues of *Six Feet Under*, *Breaking Bad* or half a dozen other series. Nonetheless, I would assert that those I consider in the following pages can claim to be among the very best to have appeared in a remarkable period.

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In memory of my friend, Gilbert Debusscher