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Christopher Bigsby, Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama.

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In his critical overview of American theatre titled *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, Christopher Bigsby quoted Arthur Miller as saying that “Watching a play is not like lying on a psychiatrist’s couch or sitting alone in front of the television. In the theatre you can sense the reaction of your fellow citizens along with your own reaction”—a communality of experience that, along with self-knowledge, “brings a certain relief—the feeling that you are not alone” (119). This, as Bigsby had astutely already intimated then, is no longer the case: television, he argues in *Viewing America*, and specifically contemporary cable television, may very well claim the honor of representing and reflecting key aspects of what one might call the American soul in such massive numbers as to provide a new cohesive element for American viewers’ consciousness. What is more, the product it has come to offer in the 21st century is no longer the risible or ephemeral stuff of populist diversion, but borrows elements from literature and other traditionally valorized arts and also employs considerable talent intrinsic and extrinsic to the world of television scriptwriting and producing so as to provide top-quality material that both entertains and instructs, engaging yet also challenging our senses *and* our (political and cultural) consciousness

- 2 Bigsby’s argument joins with those of a number of critics working in the lately-emerging field of Television Studies,ⁱ from Horace Newcombe who, in the true spirit of the parent-field of Cultural Studies, argues for the strong osmosis between culture and television as well as the growing complexity of the medium, to Amanda Lotz, who seconds Bigsby’s point that the change to “post-network” television of HBO, AMC, or online-tv hybrids like Netflix, breathed new life into a tired medium suffocated by corporate conservatism and overwhelmed by internet technologies. Perhaps mindful of Pierre Bourdieu’s brilliant and

damning exposé *On Television* on how journalism standards have suffered for being streamlined through image-obsessed television, Bigsby prudently limits his argument to television drama, his own field of expertise, but also—seeing that more than a decade has passed since Bourdieu’s 1999 diatribe—underlines the evolution of the said genre via its incorporation of, and being a medium for, acts and material of serious and committed journalism.

- 3 The great virtue of Bigsby’s book is its inspired sense of structure via which he classifies the various TV dramas he analyzes, placing what others might see as apples and oranges (genre-wise, for example) on a conveniently comparable footing. Each chapter is named not only after the show it deals with, but is additionally assigned to an American city in which the action is located and whence the inspiration for the show was originally derived. In addition to that, Bigsby’s meticulous sourcework links each show to the creative genius of a specific author/playwright/scriptwriter/journalist, or a small core team thereof, so as to underline beyond the shadow of a doubt the difference between network television (where “creative” decisions are taken by faceless producers who are themselves driven by larger market-dictated corporate interests) and the new, cable/satellite/online television shows that are to be seen as works of careful craft and art bearing the imprint of each creator’s individuality. Finally, each show is linked to an extra-televisional genre, be it literature, journalism, or even music, that for Bigsby adds that extra dimension of artistry to a medium that has historically—and not always wrongfully—been dismissed as simplistic.
- 4 The Preface and Introduction of the book lay out the particulars of Bigsby’s argument as well as his methodology, which blends genre studies—notably drama—with broader socio-historical observations about shifting trends aided by new technologies in American culture. Bigsby’s argument for the importance of his material is twofold, the first compelling element being the shift in quality due to the engagement of playwrights and journalists: “What such writers brought to television but also learned from it was the centrality of dialogue” which, coupled with “a different mode of broadcasting,” “turned on a mixture of quality programming” (xi). The second and most important attribute is the organization of the loose material of cultural observations under the umbrella of a political critique, in the mode Stuart Hall suggested the loose consciousness of a cultural critic ought to operate (284-86): Bigsby’s foci “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” (xii). And why should this connection be especially poignant regarding television? Because, in Dennis Potter’s words, “Only television is classless, multiple... Television is the biggest platform” (3). Moreover, the form of television drama allows for the lengthy development of themes, as well as detailed exposition and tracking of the characters’ growth; all that was lacking was a “commitment to authenticity,” “a genuine degree of seriousness” (18)—and this is what the new generation of television writers brought to the medium. Finally, the nature of cable television, where viewers “vote” via subscription and later downloads and not only via instant ratings, provided “feedback” opportunities for quality shows with initially poor ratings to continue producing superior material. With this latter comment Bigsby rather reinforces Raymond Williams’s observations who, in his 1974 *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* predicted that the power of the medium lay not solely in its massive entertainment value or its mere capacity for technological absorption and evolution, but in the ability that selfsame

technology would give future viewers so as to interact with the medium, challenge it culturally and politically, and make it grow symbiotically.

- 5 Chapter One focuses on Aaron Sorkin's brainchild, the NBC political hit *The West Wing* and its city, Washington D.C. Perhaps a bit too much space is initially devoted to the drug addictions of its playwright and film scriptwriter creator, but Bigsby ties key aspects of Sorkin's persona to various characters in the show (like the alcoholic Chief of Staff), as well as to the liberal-yet-realpolitik agenda of the show's fictional White House chief operatives and their aides. Bigsby traces the gradual engagement of the show with versions of contemporary political dilemmas and especially with the radical shift in governmental attitudes that came with the Bush administration and the "illiberality" (57) of its "War on Terror" agenda after 9/11 (an event in which "the line between fiction and reality was disturbingly blurred"—54). Meanwhile, much is made of the show's filming innovation: Sorkin's trademark mode is cameras following Mamet-like characters spitting out fast-paced exchanges of cutting aphorisms while speeding down endless convoluted corridors symbolic of the labyrinths of power. In that, Bigsby argues, one can trace the fruitful osmosis between play, where dialogue and character development are key, and television, where plot usually is paramount. Sorkin's work, by introducing depth and reflection to event, signaled thus the shift to a new hybrid of quality TV.
- 6 Chapter Two moves from upper-echelon D.C. to the New Jersey underclass explored in the HBO hit *The Sopranos*. Again, Bigsby channels his exploration through the show's creator, David Chase (with a nod of acknowledgment to Mafia *capo* Bill Bonanno and his 1999 exposé), personal aspects of whom—like his relationship with his mother—end up in the show (74). Even though the connection between earlier noir, gangster films and crime novels as the roots of the show is amply acknowledged, and Bigsby notes how even the show's characters keep on making meta-textual references to films like *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas* (90), the core attraction of the show, according to the author, is the parallelisms between the show's image of the Mafia as an organization run in the style of U.S. corporate business: "America's fascination with the Mafia comes in part...from the fact that it is implicated in the larger story of a country in which enterprise is encouraged, the pursuit of wealth a national imperative and reinvention a proffered grace" (85). Here, however—and whence the show's value as sociocultural critique—both contemporary Mafia and America are depicted as a failing, spent, sordid business, all the more savage in its decline of values, with Tony Soprano thus having more in common with Willy Loman and Eddie Carbone than with Don Corleone (102).
- 7 Baltimore is the geographic focus of the next three chapters, and specifically the drug-and-crime-infested streets of the Western District, the heart of darkness of the decaying city. Given that all three drama series featured are cop shows—NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Street* and HBO's *The Corner* and *The Wire*; that they all are the brainchildren of journalist-author David Simon (and his subsequent team of associates, like former policeman Ed Burns or crime novelists Dennis Lehane, Richard Price and George Pelecanos); and the common theme running through all of them "is a study of America whose announced values and imperatives seem at odds with those who live their lives on the margin and for whom the promise of a country given to announcing its unique virtues has proved disturbingly factitious and irrelevant" (Bigsby 125), one wonders whether it would have been best to broach all three shows collectively in one chapter to avoid overstating the otherwise perfectly legitimate point of America's utter physical, cultural and ethical decay. Perhaps the author wants to emphasize what for him is the driving virtue behind

all three shows, the unflinching commitment to realism. Indeed, although Chapter Three begins by invoking Edgar Allan Poe's dark romantic crime fictions and Chapter Five is introduced via Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and ends up invoking Greek tragedy (224), it is the journalistic, documentary aspect of each show's text that is underlined and praised. What emerges thus is the picture of a hybrid form of docu-drama, "a television series that struck [one]...as anti-television" that owes its "fascination" to the fact that the documentary mode is simply depicting a reality much stranger or gothic than fiction could ever dream of being (201).

- 8 After such large dosages of gritty naturalism, it appears initially odd that the next Chapter, Six, is titled "Earth," occurs mostly in prehistoric outer space, and is a science fiction show based on a cheesy 80ies original: yet Syfy Channel's 2004 *Battlestar Galactica* is broached here as a serious quality drama series that "would use science fiction as a means of engaging with politics, insurgency, counter-terrorism and the tension between the political and the military" (261)—all issues that would become starkly, urgently relevant in the post-9/11 context. Ergo, what appears as escapism "is nothing less than the reinvention of the science fiction television series" and a daring attempt "to introduce realism into what has hitherto been an aggressively unrealistic genre," says the show's creator Ron Moore (267)—hence the show's "documentary environment," "handheld camera style" (277), and props that suggest modern-day America. And while the show's themes engaged head-on with issues—moral and pragmatic—of a nation at war with an "Other" that is also uncomfortably "human," its inspired ending slyly suggests, as Bigsby shrewdly observes, the circular nature of our history as nations and as species. When the prized Earth located at last is discovered to be a nuclear wasteland and the joined survivors of both species end up settling on a randomly-found planet arbitrarily named "Earth"—our Earth in its prehistory, as it turns out—only to spawn a future (our "now") with identical players and enmities, the show debunks all myths of teleological linear perfectionism on which nationalistic hybris is ultimately based.
- 9 From limitless space to the asphyxiating confines of small-town America, Chapter Seven features Odessa, Texas, via the NBC/DirectTV show *Friday Night Lights*. Although the importance of football in American culture cannot be overstated, the show's significance is the treatment of high-school football as "a metaphor for the American dream, for that battle for success that leaves more losers than winners" (310) and the unequal relationship between the urban and the rural. Once more, the point of entry is Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist H. G. Bissinger's 2000 documentary book about the ethical and physical decay of Odessa as representative of flatiron, flyover, America, parochial, racially divided, and landlocked. So, while films like *Hoosiers* insisted on beautifying that image via happy endings, Peter Berg's subsequent *FNL* series honors that original commitment to authenticity in its "documentary feel not merely through the camerawork...and employing non-actors but by encouraging a degree of improvisation" (309). To consider the revolutionary audacity of such a filming approach for TV, one merely has to think of the made-up, painfully effete nature of even those so-called "reality shows."
- 10 Bigsby's eighth Chapter returns to a scriptwriting team that has clearly impressed him, *The Wire*'s David Simon and Ed Burns who created HBO's *Generation Kill*, a seven-part series based on the book of embedded reporter Evan Wright about the 2003 Iraq invasion: "It follows a reconnaissance group which turns out to be incidental to the main attack, a group which for much of the time does not perform the function for which it was trained. [...] There is, however, action in dramatic terms...the revelation of character,

transformations, conflict” (352). Again, authenticity is underlined as the show’s chief virtue, as the recounting of the fumbling, humbling exploits of Bravo Company are presented in “drama-documentary” mode (347) with much handheld camera, much improvisation, and as much eschewing of celebrity glitter, easy patriotism, or fictional cohesion as possible. Those marines emerge as synecdoches of the average low-class American citizen, immersed in a war they know nothing about, for ideals that seem increasingly irrelevant, false and deleterious, and proving the cultural construction of the “Other” as disastrously arbitrary. They therefore offer a lesson in civic responsibility in the most unlikely context, that of unquestioning army discipline: “They are under orders but at the same time come to understand, or deny, the extent to which they are defined by their own actions” (353).

- 11 Chapter Nine, devoted to New York’s *Mad Men*, both comments on the attraction of period pieces (also attested by the transatlantic success of *Downton Abbey*) as parables of contemporary society and its issues, but also exploits the ties between the world of advertising (a world of false idols), American television, and corporate America at large “at a time when performance was a virtue and a metaphor” (369): “*Mad Men*’s achievement, indeed, was to capture the shifting values of Americans through its dramatising of those working in such an agency dedicated to selling a version of the country often at odds with the private no less than the public world” (357). The hybrid brainchild of anticonformist sixties writer Richard Yates (author of *Revolutionary Road*) and scriptwriter Matthew Weiner, the show eschews the label of a period piece whisking its viewers away from current crises (in economy, in gender roles, in cultural certainties) and, on the contrary, addresses those very crises paradigmatically. Its protagonist, Don Draper, may seem like a paragon of successful Alpha masculinity, but is internally torn asunder by his dissatisfaction with a changing world awakening to post-war contemporaneity. At the same time, we of the 21st century, “far from condescending to the 1960s, we have been assiduously mimicking it,” observes Bigsby of the show’s specular critical value, since “the past is never finished and complete, not least because we contain it and reshape it to serve our present needs” (396).
- 12 The ensuing and final Chapter Ten follows a period piece with a show dedicated to a city that seems to exist in its own chronotope: New Orleans. HBO’s *Treme* might have become just another blend of ethnography and sensational news cashing in on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but for two things that make it emerge as quality television drama. The first is the commitment of its creators, *Homicide*’s David Simon and Eric Overmyer, to authenticity as a means to a politically-galvanized critical legitimacy; the second is jazz, New Orleans’ trademark feature that here—like it did for Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*—defines the filming methodology and format. For Simon, the city “was different from anywhere else, and so nourished a distinct culture that was about the meaning of culture. And we wanted to make a show that was about the meaning of culture...” (411). Bigsby chronicles how the putting together of a team of local writers and reporters and the use of real stories and real citizens with minimal fictional twists served the demand for authenticity so that what emerged was not a reassuring tale of trial and triumph, but a realistic, often sad portrait of a people in dire need betrayed by their own government for being considered second-rate citizens (423); yet, eventually, Simon’s emerging question is of national concern: “Why does it matter that we are Americans?” (443).
- 13 In the end, the question definitively answered by the book by the dangling of the above and other unresolved whys is “why American television drama matters” (443). In his

characteristic blend of meticulous fact and lyrical observations, blemished only by a handful of instances where the same quotes have been used more than once, Bigsby offers us a television where a millennial “new freedom of thought and imagination” attracted the right stuff to TV scriptwriting and “[t]he result has been a drama that in many respects can challenge the achievements of the American theatre” (443). In fact, what we see emerging in summing up Bigsby’s different foci is a TV that aspires to be not TV: to quote David Simon, “fuck the average reader”—or viewer (203). It is a thesis well worth the reading time, and, if anything, one wishes it extended to more series mentioned in passing or not at all in the book: *ER* (1994-2009), *The Shield* (2002-08), *Deadwood* (2004-06), the AMC mega-hit *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), *The Walking Dead* (2010-), but also HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011-), which Bigsby doesn’t seem to think much of. Interestingly, and ironically in a good way, what is ultimately put forth in this study as the outcome of this motion of innovative breakthrough attitudes and new technologies in the world of television is a *return* to tradition, in the sense of fine, quality, slowly-broiled art, as opposed to consume-and-forget popular culture since the 1980s at least.

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