

HOW TO WATCH TELEVISION

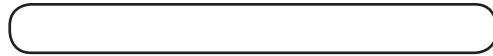
EDITED BY
ETHAN THOMPSON
AND JASON MITTELL

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ETHAN THOMPSON
AND **JASON MITTELL**



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An earlier version of Noel Murray's essay on *M*A*S*H* appeared in *The A.V. Club*—we are grateful for their willingness to allow it to be revised and reprinted.

ETHAN:

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Finally, biggest thanks to my wife and primary TV-watching partner, Maria, and our three awesome kids, Jenna, Dax, and Mia. You all make me feel lucky and proud every day.

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Introduction

An Owner's Manual for Television

ETHAN THOMPSON AND JASON MITTELL

Imagine that you just purchased a brand new television, and inside the box, along with the remote, the Styrofoam packaging, and various cables, was this book: *How to Watch Television*. Would you bother to open the cellophane wrapper and read it? Sure, you might scan through the “quick start” guide for help with the connections, and the new remote control may take some getting used to, but who needs instructions for how to *watch* what's on screen? Do-it-yourself manuals abound for virtually every topic, but TV content is overwhelmingly regarded as self-explanatory, as most people assume that we all just know how to watch television. We disagree. Thus, this is your owner's manual for how to watch TV.

First, a word of warning: this particular manual is not designed to tell you what to watch or not watch. Nor does it speak with a singular voice or seek to produce a consensus about what is “good” and what is “bad” on all those channels. In other words, the forty writers who contribute critical essays don't all agree on how to watch television. Despite the hundreds of years of cumulative TV-watching and dozens of advanced degrees among them, you can rest assured that, in many cases, they would disagree vehemently about the merits of one TV show versus another. This collection draws upon the insight of so many different people because there are so many different ways to watch TV and so much TV to watch. To be sure, the writers of many of these essays might “like” or “dislike” the programs they write about—sometimes passionately so. But we are all concerned more with thinking critically about television than with proclaiming its artistic or moral merits (or lack thereof). This book collects a variety of essays and presents them as different ways of watching, methods for *looking at* or *making sense of* television, not just issuing broad value judgments. This is what good criticism does—it applies a model of thinking to a text in order to expand our understanding and experience of it. In our book, those “texts,” a term scholars use to refer to any cultural work, regardless of its medium, are specific television programs. Too often, people assume that the goal of criticism is to judge a creative work as

either “good” or “bad” and provide some rudimentary explanation why. Let us call this the “thumbs up/down” model of criticism. This model is useful if one is skimming television listings for something to pass the time, but not so useful if one wishes to think about and understand what’s in those listings.

The “thumbs up/down” model reduces criticism to a simple physical gesture, possibly accented by a grunt. In contrast, we want to open up a text to different readings, broaden our experience of a text and the pleasures it may produce, and offer a new way to think about that text. Criticism should expand a text, rather than reduce it, and it is seldom concerned with simplistic good or bad judgments. In fact, most of the contributors to this volume would feel uncomfortable if they were forced to issue such a judgment on the programs they write about with a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” icon next to the title of each essay. While most of the authors do provide some judgment of the relative worth of the program they analyze, those evaluations are always more complicated than a simple up or down verdict. One of the ironies of media criticism is that the individual who is probably more responsible than anyone else for the popularity of the “thumbs up/down” model is Roger Ebert, one of America’s most thoughtful, articulate film critics from the 1960s until his death in 2013. Yet it was a succession of television shows starring Ebert and fellow critic Gene Siskel—first *Sneak Previews* (PBS, 1975–1982), then *At the Movies* (syndicated, 1982–1986) and *Siskel & Ebert* (syndicated, 1986–1999)—that popularized “thumbs up/down” criticism. How can we reconcile the fact that Ebert, an insightful critic and compelling writer, could also have helped reduce criticism to the simplest of physical gestures?

The answer, of course, is that Ebert didn’t do it; a television program did, and television criticism can help us to understand why. If we examine the structure of these programs, we can see the usefulness of the “thumbs up/down” gimmick. Film, television, theater, and book reviews all have a long history in popular newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting, following the common model of making a value judgment and providing the reasons for that judgment. Sometimes the judgment is a vague endorsement of the work owing to particular qualities, while other times it is quantified—“3 out of 5 stars,” for example. But in all those cases there are typically clear rationales, with the “stars” or “thumbs” providing a quick reference and reason to read further. There were movie critics on TV before *Sneak Previews*, but this program’s innovative structure featured two critics discussing a number of films, with one critic introducing a clip and launching a conversation or debate about the film’s merits. The “thumbs” metric provided a jumping off point for discussion, and guaranteed that the two had something concrete to agree or disagree about with a reliable and consistent structure for each review. At the end of each episode, the hosts recapped their judgments on each film, giving viewers a shorthand reminder to consider the next time they

themselves were “at the movies.” While “thumbs up/down” might be a reductive form of media criticism, it made for entertaining and sometimes useful TV, creating film criticism uniquely suited for the television medium. By looking at the various Siskel & Ebert TV shows and thinking about how “thumbs up/down” might have “fit” with the television medium, we can understand that program and appreciate it beyond whatever effect it might have had on narrowing the public’s expectations about what media criticism does.

It is notable that while there have been television shows focused on film criticism and book criticism (like C-SPAN’s *Book TV*), there has never been a TV program focused on television criticism. In fact, television criticism has an unusual history within popular media—traditionally, television reviews were published in newspapers upon the debut of a show if at all, rather than dealing with an ongoing series as episodes aired. Magazines like *The New Yorker* or *Newsweek* might run pieces analyzing an ongoing series, but not with any comprehensive structure or commitment to covering a series as it unfolds over time. The rise of online criticism in the twenty-first century has drastically changed the terrain of television criticism, as sites like *The A.V. Club* and *HitFix*, as well as the online versions of print magazines like *Time* and *Hollywood Reporter*, feature regular coverage of many series, reviewing weekly episodes of new shows and returning to classic television series with critical coverage to inspire re-watching them. Noel Murray’s series “A Very Special Episode” at *The A.V. Club* is an example of such “classic television” criticism, featuring this tagline: “Sometimes a single TV episode can exemplify the spirit of its time and the properties that make television a unique medium.” This book shares that critical outlook, and an expanded version of Murray’s essay on “The Interview,” a *M*A*S*H* episode, is included in this book.

Despite the rise in robust television criticism in popular online sites, academics have been less involved in such discussions of the medium. While the histories of academic fields like literary studies, film studies, art history, and music include many critical analyses of specific works, television studies as a field features far less criticism of specific programs. In part this is due to the series nature of most television, as the boundaries of a “text” are much more fluid when discussing a program that might extend across months, years, or even decades. Additionally, television studies emerged as an academic field in the 1980s and 1990s under the rubric of Anglo-American cultural studies, an approach that emphasizes contexts over texts, and thus much of television scholarship is focused on understanding the industrial, regulatory, and reception contexts of the medium more than critical analyses of specific programs. Books examining a particular program do exist, but critical works in television studies more typically focus on a format or genre (reality TV), a decade (the 1960s), or a methodology or area of study (industry

studies). There are exceptions to this, of course; online academic journals like *FlowTV* often feature short critical essays on particular TV series. But we believe that there is a crucial role for television scholars to use our expertise about the medium's history, aesthetics, structures, and cultural importance to provide critical analyses of specific programs. Additionally, we want to see scholars writing for audiences broader than just other scholars, so we have commissioned shorter essays than typically found in an academic journal or book, and asked that they be written accessibly for students and a general readership.

While there is no single method employed by the dozens of authors found in this volume, most essays can be described as examples of *textual analysis*. The shared approach assumes that there is something to be discovered by carefully examining a cultural work, or "text"—in the case of this book's topic, that means watching a television program closely. In some cases, the text might be a single episode or two; in others, the essay looks more broadly at a particular series, or multiple programs connected by a key thread. But in each case, the author uses a "close watching" of a program to make a broader argument about television and its relation to other cultural forces, ranging from representations of particular identities to economic conditions of production and distribution. The goal of such textual analysis is to connect the program to its broader contexts, and make an argument about the text's cultural significance, thus providing a model for how you can watch television with a critical eye—and write your own works of television criticism.

A piece of television criticism, like the ones modeled in the rest of this book, can have a wide range of goals. Certainly all the book's authors believe that watching television is an important and pervasive facet of modern culture, and that taking time to analyze programming is a vital critical act. Some authors are more invested in understanding television as a specific medium, with industrial and regulatory systems that shape its programming, and its own unique formal system of visual and aural communication that forge TV's modes of storytelling and representation across a number of genres. Others regard television more as a window to broader social issues, whether by establishing norms of identity categories like gender or race or by framing political agendas and perspectives. These are not opposing perspectives, as television critics can think about the interplay between the medium itself and its broader context—indeed, every essay in this book hopes to shine a light on something about television itself as well as something broader within our culture, as we believe that knowing how to watch TV is a crucial skill for anyone living in our media-saturated world.

Of course, for many people reading this book, the idea of "watching television" might seem like an anachronism or a fossil from the previous century—what with so many electronic gadgets and "new media" surrounding us these days, why single

out television? Television can seem to be an object from another era, quaint in its simplicity and functions. Such a response is the product of a very limited notion of what “television” is, and indeed, if you do think of TV as just a piece of furniture around which the family gathers each night, then there is something potentially outdated about television. However, television is (and always has been) more than just furniture, and now in our era of convergence among different technologies and cultural forms, there is more TV than ever. New or emergent forms of television work alongside the residual or “old,” and it’s important to remember that the majority of viewers still do most of their watching on traditional television sets. If we define the word “television” literally down to its Latin roots, it is often translated as “remote seeing.” By thinking about television not as furniture but as “remote seeing” (and hearing) of sounds and moving images from a distant time or place, we can recognize that so many of our new media interactions are new kinds of television that we integrate into our lives alongside the familiar and pleasurable uses of TV we’ve known for so long.

Rather than radically reconfiguring our uses of media culture, new technologies and media forms emerge and find a place among and alongside those forms that already exist; a medium might ebb and flow in popularity, but seldom disappears altogether. And one of the most important aspects of all forms of media engagement, whether watching on a television set or mobile phone, is that these forms of engagement become part of our everyday lives, adapting to our geographical, technological, and personal contexts. Moreover, while new technologies might enable some to claim that they do not watch television, we believe that people who say they don’t watch TV are either lying or deluding themselves. TV is everywhere in our culture and on many different screens, as we often watch television programs on our computers, or play videogames on our televisions. People who say they don’t watch TV are usually suggesting they don’t watch *those* kinds of TV shows that they assume less sophisticated viewers watch uncritically. But even as it gets reconfigured in the digital era, television is still America’s dominant mass medium, impacting nearly everyone.

A brief anecdote about the dual editors’ own media consumption practices while writing this introduction point to the role of television and other technologies in contemporary life. One of the editors of this book (Ethan) began writing the first draft of this introduction while watching a professional football game live via satellite television at a ranch in rural south Texas. The other editor (Jason) was at that very time travelling by train with his family across Europe, where they were watching Looney Tunes cartoons on an iPad. Ethan was watching a program via the latest digital high-definition TV technology, but in a highly traditional way—live broadcast to a mass audience sharing the same act of “remote seeing.” Certainly one of the great pleasures of watching televised sports, which

remains one of the most popular and prevalent forms of television today, is the sense of communal participation in an event as it occurs, shared by viewers both within the same room and across the globe; this experience depends on liveness, even at the cost of watching commercials and boring bits that modern technologies like DVRs can easily bypass. As a fan, Ethan watches for the sense of participation in what is happening at the time—a case of old-fashioned remote seeing enabled by new technologies.

Jason's experience is quite different, but still falls under the general category of "watching TV." As his kids watched Looney Tunes on a European train, they embraced one of television's longstanding primary functions: allowing children to see things beyond their personal experiences. This literally was "remote seeing," as his kids were watching something from a distant time and place: Looney Tunes were created as animated shorts screened in American movie theaters from the 1930s to 1950s, but they thrived throughout the second half of the twentieth century as a staple of kids' TV, and more recently through numerous DVD releases. Shifting these classic cartoons to an iPad enables a mobile viewing experience that trades the imagined community of the television schedule for the convenience of on-demand, self-programmed media consumption. While technically there is no "television" involved in watching cinematic cartoons on a mobile digital device, we believe that the cultural practices and formal elements established via decades of television viewing carry over to these new technologies, making watching TV a more prevalent and diverse practice in the contemporary era of media convergence.

These brief descriptions of watching television foreground our diverse viewing contexts, which help make watching TV such a multifaceted cultural practice—we multitask, watch on a range of screens in unusual places, and experience television programming across timeframes spanning from live to decades-old, and spatial locations from rural Texas to European trains and beyond. The rest of the book focuses less on specific viewing practices, and more on how we can use our expertise as media scholars to understand the programming that we might encounter in such diverse contexts. This is the goal of any form of criticism: to provide insight into a text, not to proclaim a singular "correct" interpretation. Indeed, there is no such "correct" interpretation, any more than there is a "correct" way to watch a football game or cartoon.

The essays in this book cover a representative sampling of major approaches to television criticism, and they are quite different from one another in terms of the TV they analyze and their methods of analysis. However, they do share some basic assumptions that are worth highlighting:

1. TV is complicated. This can mean many different things. Sometimes the text itself is formulaic, yet its pleasures are complicated. Other times, the

narrative of a TV program doesn't present a clear plot, yet attempting to puzzle out the story is a fundamental pleasure. Sometimes where a program comes from is complicated—the question of who created and is responsible for it can, for example, be less than straightforward. Or perhaps the meanings expressed by a show are complicated, presenting contradictions and diverse perspectives than can be interpreted. The bottom line is that television criticism seeks to understand and explain TV, no matter how simple or complex it might seem at first glance.

2. To understand TV, you need to watch TV. This might seem obvious, but there is a tradition of critics writing about television (usually to condemn it) without actually taking the time to watch much of it, or even to specify what TV texts they are criticizing. Judgments like these tend to be common amongst politicians, pundits, and anyone else looking to use television as a convenient “bad object” to make a point. Understanding TV requires more, though—and more than just watching TV, too. That is, some types of television require particular viewing practices to really understand them, such as the long-term viewing of serials and series, or the contextualized viewing of remakes or historically nostalgic programming.
3. Nobody watches the same TV. We watch a wide variety of programs, and even in those cases when we watch the same programs, we often watch them in vastly different contexts. Television is still a mass medium experienced by millions, but the specific experience of watching television is far from universal. While television in a previous generation was more shared, with events like the moon landing or the finale of *M*A*S*H* drawing the attention of a majority of Americans, even then our experiences of watching television were diverse, as viewers often think quite differently about the same texts.
4. Criticism is not the same as evaluation. You don't have to like (or dislike) a particular television program to think and write critically about it, and our goal is not to issue a thumb up or down. However, evaluative reactions to a text can be a useful way to get started thinking critically about television, as you attempt to figure out what you are reacting to (or against). Many of these essays foreground their authors' own evaluative reactions to programs that they love or hate (or even feel ambivalent about), but in every case, the critic finds his or her particular program interesting. Exploring what makes it so is a worthy goal for television criticism.

What follows in this book is a set of critical analyses that model how we might watch a particular television program that we find interesting. The programs represented are widely diverse and even eclectic, including undisputed classics,

contemporary hits, and a few that you might not have heard of before. They cover a range of genres, from cooking shows to cartoons, sports to soap operas, and they span the medium's entire history. Even so, we do not claim to be comprehensive—there are countless other programs that might be the subject of such works of television criticism. We have focused primarily on American television, or in a few cases how non-American programming is seen in an American context, although given the pervasive reach of American television throughout the globe, we hope that international readers will find these critical works helpful as well. The authors are media scholars with a range of expertise, experiences, and backgrounds, offering a wide range of viewpoints that might highlight different ways of watching TV. Each essay starts with a brief overview of its content, and ends with some suggestions for further reading to delve deeper into the relevant topic and approach.

Each of these critical essays can be read on its own, in any order. We encourage readers to go straight to a particular program or approach that interests them. However, we have organized the book into five major areas to assist readers looking for essays that speak to particular issues or approaches, as well as instructors seeking to assign essays in relation to particular topics. Essays in the first section, "TV Form," consider aesthetics, analyzing visual and sound style, production techniques, and narrative structure, and showing how television style is crucial to understanding television content. The essays in "TV Representations" focus on television as a site of cultural representation of different groups and identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Although many essays in the book are politically concerned, those in the "TV Politics" section look more explicitly at public affairs, government, and national and global boundaries in both fiction and factual programs. In "TV Industry," essays focus on economics, production, and regulation in historical and contemporary television culture. Those in "TV Practices" consider television in the context of everyday life, and the ways in which engagement with television texts carries across media and technologies. In the contemporary digital convergence era, it is increasingly important to think beyond a single television screen into a multiplication of media and devices.

Finally, while most owners' manuals get filed away and forgotten or thrown in the recycling bin unread, we hope this one will enjoy a more enduring presence. This book, the essays inside it, and the critical methods the authors employ, all seek to expand the ways you think about television. If the book itself doesn't earn a spot next to your remote control, we have no doubt that some essay inside it will form a lasting impression. Perhaps it will provoke you to think differently about a program you love (or hate), or it will make you a fan of a program you had never seen or even heard of before. Better yet, we hope *How to Watch Television* will prompt you to think critically and apply the methods you've read about

in your own original way, while discussing or writing about a program of your own choosing. That is how this owners' manual can prove to be more permanent than others: as you flip through the channels, and especially when you stop to view a particular program, we hope that you cannot help but think critically about the television that you watch.

FURTHER READING

Butler, Jeremy G. *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 4th ed. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Gray, Jonathan, and Amanda D. Lotz. *Television Studies*. Boston: Polity, 2011.

Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

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I

TV Form

Aesthetics and Style

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1

Homicide Realism

BAMBI L. HAGGINS

Abstract: One of the most critically acclaimed but low-rated dramas in network television history, *Homicide: Life on the Streets* approached the cop show genre by trying to remain true to actual police work and life in Baltimore. Bambi Haggins explores this commitment to realism by investigating the narrative and stylistic techniques employed by the show to create its feeling of authenticity.

Homicide: Life on the Streets (NBC, 1993–1999), one of the most compelling and innovative cop dramas ever aired on U.S. network television, occupies a significant, if often overlooked, position in the history of television drama. *Homicide* is the “missing link” between the quality dramas of the 1980s, such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987), and groundbreaking cable series unencumbered by network limitations, like *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008). While *Homicide* continues the “quality” tradition from its NBC dramatic forbearers—the multiple storylines, overlapping dialogue, and cast of flawed protagonists in *Hill Street Blues*, and the cinematic visual style and the city as character in *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–1989)—it manages to convey a sense of immediacy and intimacy that can be as disquieting as it is engaging. Based on David Simon’s nonfiction book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, which chronicled his year “embedded” with Baltimore’s “Murder Police,” *Homicide* does little to assuage the audience’s anxieties; rather, it brings a messy and unsettling slice of American urban life to network television. As a twentieth-century cop show, it offers an inspirational model for twenty-first-century television drama.

We might consider *Homicide*’s commitment to realism in terms comparable to those of the “RealFeel” index, a meteorological measure that takes into account humidity, precipitation, elevation, and similar factors to describe what the temperature actually *feels* like. Thus, by examining the look, the sound, and, most significantly, the *sense* of *Homicide*, and by attending to facets of “emotional

realism” and “plausibility, typicality, and factuality” of the series, we can describe its “RealFeel” effect. Though “RealFeel” synthesizes a variety of specific qualities, this essay focuses on signifiers of realism that build upon each other, resonate for the viewer, and make the televisual world of *Homicide*, its people, and its stories *feel* real: socio-culturally charged, unpredictable narratives with crisp and edgy dialogue; a *sense* of verisimilitude in terms of both the historical moment and the place; a cast of complex characters in a culturally diverse milieu; and the sampling of generic conventions combining dark comedy, gritty police drama, and contemporary urban morality tale within each episode.

These elements are not unique to this series—not when *Homicide* owes a debt to *Hill Street Blues*, and *The Wire* owes a debt to *Homicide*. While all three combine the highly evocative, and sometimes unsettling, visual style and the narrative complexity we have come to expect of quality television drama, each series builds upon the other, refining its sense of the real. The multiple storylines and flawed protagonists of *Hill Street Blues* give way to *Homicide*’s extended story arcs (across episodes and seasons), nuanced depictions of conflicted characters, and an incisive view of Baltimore in the 1990s. *The Wire* mobilizes—and expands upon—all of the aforementioned elements of “RealFeel” in its made-for-HBO drama.

Both the televisual milieu of *Hill Street Blues*, an inner city precinct in an unnamed urban space, and the multiple factions in *The Wire*, including Baltimore’s police, government, unions, and schools, which are tainted to various degrees by corruption, resonate differently for audiences than the televisual milieu of *Homicide*. *The Wire* adheres closely to the multifaceted nature of the body of creator David Simon’s journalistic work (which includes the corner, the precinct, and the press room), and, thanks to freedoms offered by the premium cable HBO network presents an unfiltered vision of Baltimore. *Homicide*, while undoubtedly ambitious, is more modest in its aspirations. Like the book upon which it is based, the focus is narrow: one work shift in one squad in one precinct, which makes the depiction of a small slice of Charm City more plausible and, arguably, more intimate.

Some might argue that the more controversial *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2005) covered similar narrative terrain and that its much-publicized instances of nudity and swearing pushed the boundaries of network television.¹ However, by utilizing the generic conflation of procedural and melodrama, *NYPD Blue* offers a more palatable—if provocative—televisual meal for primetime audiences. *Homicide*, a series in which issues of class and race are always part of the narrative rous, is often not easily digestible—nor is it intended to be. The lives and the work of homicide detectives are not easy: they deal daily with death. By spurning, for the most part, the violence of chases and shootouts typical of conventional cop shows, these Charm City stories achieve their “RealFeel” by offering a condensation of

the *everyday* drama of being Murder Police—the cynicism, the frustration, the humor and the responsibility of “speaking for the dead.”

David Simon once said, “The greatest lie in dramatic TV is the cop who stands over a body and pulls up the sheet and mutters ‘damn’ . . . [T]o a real homicide detective, it’s just a day’s work.”² From the very beginning of the series, *Homicide* endeavors not to lie. The signifiers of “RealFeel” can be seen in the opening scene of the first episode where we are thrown into a case in progress. In a dark, rain-drenched alley, Lewis and Crosetti are on the verge of calling off their half-hearted search for evidence—and the first lines of the series express their frustration:

LEWIS: If I could just find this damn thing, I could go home.

CROSETTI: Life is a mystery. Just accept it.

Beginning the series with a sense of frustration and disorientation captures the tone of daily life for Murder Police; neither the visual nor the narrative depiction is idealized. In physical terms, Crosetti and Lewis are clearly not the detective pinups of *Miami Vice*, nor do they have the unspoken closeness of the original troubled twosome of *NYPD Blue*. They are not the interracial partners favored by Hollywood films like *Lethal Weapon* (1987), in which the two who make up the odd couple come to know and care for each other. Lewis and Crosetti talk past each other, not really connecting with or acknowledging the other’s views, with the result often playing as comedy. In the opening scene of the series, the quotidian woes of partnership are uppermost. Thereafter, Lewis and Crosetti continue to grouse, as the latter spouts his profundities and the former counters by casting aspersions on his partner’s ethnic background (such as “salami-head”). The visual style matches the viewer’s sense of the narrative flow—the camera pulls in as if trying to catch up to the two detectives, following their exchanges and their movement through the alley. The audience is drawn into a scene that, despite appearing mundane, is disorienting; while it is initially unclear what exactly the two are doing, their states of mind appear crystalline. Lewis is “done” in multiple ways: done searching, done listening, and, on some level, done caring. In contrast, Crosetti is waxing philosophical about the search.

As they move out of the alley and towards the light on the corner, a couple of uniformed cops and the victim, splayed on the ground with a bullet in his head, come into view. Lewis and Crosetti’s tired banter, like the scene itself, creates the sense that solving murders is just another job—without the flourish of flashy crime-scene investigation or the romance of crusading cops. Overzealousness is seen as poor form. Lewis responds to the uniforms’ attempts to engage him with thinly veiled hostility: “Ain’t no mystery, the man who shot him wanted

him dead.” Crosetti’s observation that the victim “tried to duck” meets with no sympathy from Lewis—“A lost art: ducking”—who mistakenly assumes that the shooting is drug-related. The scene is a commonplace for this pair and for the place, inner city Baltimore in the 1990s. The visual bleakness, the dark humor, and the casual lack of empathy shown by Lewis and Crosetti, for each other and for the victim, combine as signifiers for the “RealFeel” of *Homicide*.

The camera work in that premiere episode (“Gone for Goode,” January 21, 1993) also contributes. With Academy Award-winning filmmaker, native Baltimorean, and series executive producer Barry Levinson as director, and with documentarian Jean de Segonzac as cinematographer, *Homicide*’s signature visual style is established through the use of hand-held cameras. These swoop shakily in and out of the action at times, trying to capture all movement and thus constructing a frenetic scene; or at other times, they simply appear to record, without any stylistic flourish. Close-ups of the victims provide an intimate and unromantic view of the initial investigative process. Similar visual techniques capture the dance between the detectives and suspects during interrogation. Whether set in a back-alley crime scene, the drab squad room, or the claustrophobic minimalism of the “Box” (interrogation room), scenes are drained of color as if to signify the soul-sapping nature of the job. Jump cuts and play with perspective and point of view create a distinctive, raw, and artsy look for *Homicide* that functions in harmony with and in counterpoint to the narrative flow. The effect is part documentary, with the unflinching witnessing of *Harlan County USA* (1976), and part French New Wave, with the intimacy and evocative camera movement in *Breathless* (1960). Thus, the visual and narrative style act in concert to provide audiences with an understanding of the moment and of the place that has an aura of authenticity, and construction of character and situation feel emotionally realistic from the outset as well.

Indeed, *Homicide* marries the incisiveness of Simon’s case studies and the collective vision of the creative team that was led by Levinson and included the award-winning television writer-producer and showrunner Tom Fontana, known for his groundbreaking television (*St. Elsewhere* and, later, *Oz*), as well as creator Paul Attanasio, who fictionalized Simon’s book for the small screen and would later adapt *Donnie Brasco* (1997). Since early in his career, Levinson had been sending cinematic love letters to Baltimore through *his* visions of Charm City in *Diner* (1982), *Avalon* (1990), and, *Liberty Heights* (1999). By contrast, *Homicide*’s vision of Baltimore is not colored by nostalgia; rather, the series, by design, depicts a city that is both a microcosm of 1990s urban America and a socio-culturally unique space.

Here, it is worth emphasizing that attempting to arrive at any singular definition of the “real” necessarily poses pragmatic, theoretical, and existential

problems. Yet, it is possible to address the matter in another way by drawing on the work of media theorist Alice Hall, who describes a range of elements that establish how “real” a series *feels* to an audience: whether the events could have happened (“plausibility”); whether the characters are “identifiable” (“typicality”); and, the “gold standard” of television realism, whether the story is based on actual events (“factuality”).³ Indeed, Hall’s “continuum of realism” offers a framework that encompasses signifiers of *Homicide*’s “RealFeel” such as the choice to shoot on location in Baltimore, the use of the term “Murder Police” (Baltimorean lingo), and the creation of an ethnically, economically, and racially diverse televisual milieu. Moreover, the construction of *Homicide*’s fictional detectives was informed by the actual ones described in Simon’s book, which also adds to the series’ verisimilitude.

However, the characters reflect the police force that one might *expect* to find in a city with a majority black population; thus, the majority white squad room from the book was diversified. Furthermore, the creative powers on *Homicide* did not succumb to the “majority hotness” requirement of most primetime dramas. In other words, the squad was cast to look the way that people actually do in real life, not on television. In the process of adaption of the book to the series, Lt. Gary “Dee” D’Addario became Lt. Al “Gee” Giardello, whose Sicilian lineage remained an essential part of the shift commander’s persona; while the gender of Det. Rich Garvey was changed, Det. Kay Howard retained the reputation for putting down all of her cases, like her original; the white Det. Donald Waltemeyer, who played a minor role in the book, became Det. Meldrick Lewis, whose character provided a black Baltimorean view (from the projects to Murder Police) that differed significantly from that of Gee and of the highly educated New York transplant, Det. Frank Pembleton. *Homicide*’s varied (and progressive) depictions of black characters in an arguably idealistically integrated workplace were groundbreaking and remain uncommon. While endeavoring to capture the socio-political and socio-cultural complexity of the “Not quite North, Not quite South” urban space, the series plays with preconceived notions about urban American ills. The city of Baltimore depicted in the series still bears the scars of the 1968 riots, white flight, long-term unemployment, poverty, the scourge of crack cocaine in the 1990s, which has since waned, and the decades-long heroin epidemic, which has not. In Charm City, social problems are almost never as simple as they seem and, as seen in *Homicide*, the signifiers of “RealFeel,” within the continuum of realism, reveal complexity, conflict, and contradiction.

The “RealFeel” of *Homicide* can also be understood in relation to Ien Ang’s assertion that “what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling.’”⁴ The inherent drama of *Homicide* and its “RealFeel” come into focus most clearly through nuanced—and

seemingly incidental—exchanges: within backstories, idiosyncratic dialogue, and ticks of persona. Fleeting glimpses of detectives' internal angels and demons inflect the narrative: there is more to the characters' inner lives underneath the surface. Consequently, the audience's "subjective experience of the world" of *Homicide* is rooted in the worldview of Murder Police, for whom exposing the darker side of human nature is commonplace and for whom every victory is tinged with loss.

The characters in the series that best encapsulate the complexity, conflict, and contradiction of *Homicide* are Tim Bayliss and Frank Pembleton, arguably the program's central partners, due in no small part to the stellar performances of Kyle Secor and Andre Braugher, respectively. Bayliss and Pembleton can initially be viewed as binary opposites—idealist versus pragmatist, native versus transplant, white versus black, emotional versus intellectual. In the series premiere, Bayliss first enters the squad room as a transfer to the division, his box of possessions in hand, believing he will live his dream: "Homicide—thinking cops. Not a gun," he says as he points to his head. "This." His idealized vision of working homicide can be contrasted with Pembleton's monologue as he prepares to enter the Box, where he is king, with Bayliss:

What you will be privileged to witness will not be an interrogation, but an act of salesmanship as silver-tongued and thieving as ever moved used cars, Florida swampland, or Bibles. But what I am selling is a long prison term, to a client who has no genuine use for the product.

While the actual interrogation is quick and manipulative, it provides the first demonstration of the differences in perspective between the new partners. Pembleton refuses to let Bayliss view this case in crisp, clean absolutes as he forecasts the young white male suspect's path through the system: his being re-cast by the defense attorney from murder suspect to an innocent seduced by an older male predator in a way that plays upon the predispositions of the jury pool and negates the voluntary nature of his actions. The case, with its cynical—and accurate—take on the course of justice, is the first of many that will make Bayliss question his beliefs in fundamental ways.

In Bayliss's first case as primary investigator, the victim, Adena Watson, is an eleven-year-old black girl with the "face of an angel." From the moment he flashes his ID and tentatively says, "Homicide," this case becomes his long-term obsession, extending throughout the life of the series. While trying to speak for Adena, Bayliss finds his adherence to a certain code of conduct challenged and eventually defeated.

In "Three Men and Adena" (March 3, 1993), an acclaimed, tension-filled episode penned by Tom Fontana and filmed almost entirely in the Box, Bayliss and



FIGURE 1.1.

Bayliss and Pembleton interrogate Risley Tucker in “Three Men and Adena.”

Pembleton use every possible (legal) means to illicit a confession from Risley Tucker, an elderly black street vendor, who is known as the “Arraber” and is the only suspect in Adena’s murder. In response to pressure to close the case and end his own obsession, Bayliss, in tandem with Pembleton, wages a twelve-hour interrogatory assault that makes the earlier interrogation seem like polite conversation. Both sides are firing in this verbal warfare. Tucker disparages Pembleton as “one of them five-hundreds,” after the detective tries to play on a sense of racial solidarity to coax an admission of pedophilia: “You don’t like niggers like me ‘cos of who we are, ‘cos we ain’t reached out, ‘cos we ain’t grabbed hold of that dream, not Doctor King’s dream, the WHITE dream. You hate niggers like me because you hate being a nigger. You hate who you really are.” As the deadline to release him grows nearer, Bayliss pulls the Arabber from his chair and almost uses a hot water pipe to coerce a confession. After this Tucker taunts Bayliss: “You from Baltimore, right? Do you say BAWL-mer or BALL-di-more? . . . Say Baltimore, and I’ll tell you within ten blocks where you were born. . . . You got that home grown look. The not too southern, not too northern, not on the ocean but still on the water look with maybe a touch of inbreeding.” After pushing Tucker to the brink of physical and emotional exhaustion, and getting him to confess his love for the young girl, the detectives lose their traction when the old man refuses to speak and their time runs out. In the end, Pembleton has been convinced that the Arabber is the killer, but Bayliss is no longer sure. (In season 4’s “Requiem for Adena,” it becomes clear that, in all likelihood, Tucker was not the killer.) Both Bayliss and Pembleton are changed by this interrogation—as partners and as individuals; the issues of race and class to which the Arabber refers in his barbs surface in their relationship to cases and to each other, reinforcing *Homicide*’s emotional realism. In “Three Men and Adena,” Bayless, Pembleton, and Tucker speak to and

from perspectives about race, class, and justice that are deeply rooted in their individual histories as well as the histories of Baltimore—and viewers have limited knowledge of each. Our experiences as longtime viewers of this genre are challenged: while we may always *feel* like we know more than we actually do—about the players, about the case, and about the city—the lack of certainty in these narratives (for the characters and for the viewers) imparts an uneasy ambiguity.

As Bayliss and Pembleton confront combustible issues, the viewer is forced to do the same—with no easy epiphany. In “Colors” (April 28, 1995), the partners clash when Bayliss’s cousin shoots a drunk Turkish exchange student dressed as a member of the rock band KISS who tries to enter his house (mistakenly believing there is a party inside). Bayliss’s unquestioning acceptance of his cousin’s self-defense plea makes Pembleton question whether Bayliss can see racism in his family or on the job. This point is driven home for Bayliss when his cousin, cleared of the shooting, remarks, “Who’d have thought their blood was the same color as ours,” as he washes it off his front porch. In “Blood Ties, Part 2” (October 24, 1997), Bayliss questions Pembleton’s objectivity when a prominent black millionaire and humanitarian is embroiled in a case where the victim is a young woman who works and lives in his home and who is killed at an event honoring the patriarch. Due to the wealth of the family, their influence, and very good lawyers, no one is prosecuted, though Pembleton and Giardello know that the son is the killer and that they have been manipulated. Pembleton must admit that his judgment was colored on more than one level—by class and fame as well as race. However, the awareness of flawed perceptions, biproducts of greater social maladies, leaves issues unresolved—the characters, the narrative, and the viewer carry vestiges of these experiences. While the partnership between Pembleton and Bayliss, like those of the other detectives and the police and populace of Baltimore, dips into dysfunction as often as it reveals a kinship that is both tenuous and time-tested, we *feel* that their daily quest to get the “bad” guy in the Box is only part of the story.

While this essay can only begin to explore the concept of “RealFeel” as a way to talk about reading television drama, the uncomfortable pleasures of watching the televisual tales of the Murder Police, whose job is never really completed (“like mowing the lawn, you always have to do it again”) and Baltimore, a not so safe space on the small screen and in “real life,” does provide an analytical mother lode. Although the sense of the “real” in emotional, intellectual, visual, and narrative terms can be difficult to quantify, in *Homicide*, and in most quality drama from *Hill Street Blues* to *The Sopranos*, you can see how aspects of “RealFeel” work in concert and at cross purposes. On the one hand, they conspire to synthesize backstories about culture, class, morality, and place in ways that feel comprehensible; on the other, the complexities of the narrative and the milieu

depicted often cause those very assumptions to be called into question. In the end, *Homicide* elicits the aura of realism imbricated with a sense of knowing and not knowing simultaneously—a state of ambiguity not uncommon to everyday life—which makes these Charm City stories *feel* enticing, unsettling, and “real.”

NOTES

1. See Jennifer Holt's essay on *NYPD Blue* in this volume.
2. Jim Shelley, “Is *Homicide: Life on the Street* better than *The Wire*?” *Guardian*, March 26, 2010, 10.
3. Alice Hall, “Reading Realism: Audiences' Evaluation of the Reality of Media Texts,” *Journal of Communication* 53, 4 (December 2003): 634.
4. Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), 45.

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2

House Narrative Complexity

AMANDA D. LOTZ

Abstract: In her analysis of the medical/procedural program *House*, Amanda Lotz shows how a procedural program can exhibit narrative complexity and innovative techniques of character development. Lotz examines how a single episode draws upon a variety of atypical storytelling strategies to convey meaning and dramatize a central theme of the series: “everybody lies.”

In the 2000s, some U.S. dramatic television entertained its audiences with increasingly complicated characters. Series such as FX’s *The Shield* (2002–2008), *Rescue Me* (2004–2011), and *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–present) and AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007–present) and *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) explored the complicated personal and professional lives of male characters and maximized the possibilities of television’s storytelling attributes for character development. While several of these series can be properly described as character studies, other narrative forms also provided compelling examples for thinking about characterization, narrative strategies, and television storytelling. Series such as *CSI*, *Law & Order*, and the subject of this essay, *House, M.D.*, are organized episodically, so that they can be understood in individual installments, in stark contrast to the serialized character dramas on cable.¹ Yet even series that use limited serial components and instead structure their stories around solving some sort of legal or medical case within each episode can provide lead characters with the texture of depth and sophistication.

Episodically structured storytelling dominates the history of television, and this format has typically offered little narrative or character complexity; instead, characters are stuck in what Jeffrey Sconce describes as “a world of static exposition, repetitive second-act ‘complications,’ and artificial closure.”² Such an assessment in some ways aptly characterizes the FOX medical drama *House, M.D.* (2004–2012, hereafter *House*). The basic features of an episode of *House* vary

little: an opening scene involving characters and settings outside those common to the show begins each episode. These scenes introduce viewers to the case of the week and often feature some sort of misdirection—for instance, it is not the overweight, middle-aged man complaining of chest pains who will become this week's case, but his apparently healthy wife who will inexplicably collapse. The series' opening credit sequence rolls, and we return from commercials to find Dr. Gregory House's diagnostic team beginning their evaluation of the opening's patient. The remaining minutes of the episode focus on the team's efforts to identify the patient's ailment in time to save him or her, embarking upon a series of misdiagnoses along the way. Various interpersonal complications are introduced and addressed throughout the case; typically, they are related to evolving romantic entanglements among the primary cast, although few of these complications are likely to be resolved in one episode. At some point near the end of the episode, House has a conversation—typically with his friend Wilson—about some other matter and becomes suddenly quiet, having just stumbled upon the possible diagnosis evading the team. The condition is caught in time and alleviated (although in some rare cases the team fails to find the diagnosis in time), and the “artificial closure” Sconce notes is achieved.

As a series that chronicles the efforts of a master team of diagnostic doctors to identify and treat the rarest of illnesses, *House* emphasizes the plot goal of diagnosis in each weekly episode. Where many other series attempt to balance serial and episodic plotlines through a serialized, overarching mystery (*Murder One*, *Burn Notice*, *Monk*), *House* solves its mystery each week; the exploits of its misanthropic, drug-addicted lead character are what propel serial action instead. The implicit central enigma of its cumulative narrative—or the eight-season total story of *House*—is whether the series' eponymous lead can ever be properly civilized. Can House exist without painkillers? Can he cultivate meaningful relationships? Can he be brilliant and happy?

Most series that are dominated by this logic of episodic storytelling emphasize plot action and consequently leave characters fairly static over time. Yet in recent decades, even some episodically structured series have indicated the possibility for complex character development, and as Roberta Pearson outlines, mundane plot action can serve this end. In her case study of *CSI*'s Gil Grissom, Pearson presents a six-part taxonomy of elements that construct the character: psychological traits/habitual behaviors; physical traits/appearance; speech patterns; interactions with other characters; environment (the places the character inhabits); and biography (character's backstory).³ She uses this taxonomy to create a language for exploring the particularities of television characters, which, along with techniques of characterization—beyond the case study—have been a significantly under-explored area in the field. She notes that the rudimentary

taxonomy works for characters in all moving image forms, but that specific media or narrative strategies may vary techniques. For example, the ongoing storytelling process in television series allows for much more character growth and change than in the limited storytelling period available to realist cinema.⁴ Pearson's case is valuable for illustrating that even though many episodic series place little emphasis on character depth, this is a creative choice rather than an inherent feature of episodically structured shows.

To better understand attributes of episodic television storytelling and techniques of characterization, this essay analyzes a single episode of *House*, focusing on how narrative strategies convey meaning on multiple levels. The episode "Three Stories" (May 17, 2005) conveys crucial character information in its basic plot, although the episode uses confounding techniques such as dream sequences, flashbacks, and imagined alternate realities—rarely clearly marked as such—to do so. The misdirection of these storytelling techniques reaffirms a central theme of the series: namely, that "everybody lies," which is House's personal outlook and dictates his particular approach to diagnostic medicine. Thus, this episode of *House* illustrates the complexity available to a series with a narrative structure that is generally rebuked for its reliance on formula and lack of nuance.

"Three Stories" is arguably the least routine episode of a series that normally maintains exceptional consistency. Although the selection of an aberrant case rarely offers sound footing for broader arguments, the unusualness of this episode underscores its significance and indicates the novelty of the series' approach to character development. Hence, it serves as the focus of this essay. The episode, the penultimate of the first season, finally explains the injury to House's leg, which has led to his chronic pain and perhaps his unhappiness—arguably his primary character traits. While this pain and unhappiness centrally define House, they are also what enable future serial storylines, such as his spirals through drug addiction, his efforts to get and remain clean, and his attempts to deal with human interaction and emotions without pharmaceutically induced numbness. House's struggles to alleviate his pain and his unhappiness—neither he nor the audience is ever fully aware whether these are separate conditions—are traced loosely in the cumulative narrative.

By the time "Three Stories" aired (twenty episodes into the first season) in May of 2005 and finally explained the origin of the lead character's primary character trait, *House* had established itself as a bona fide hit. The series benefited from airing during a post-*American Idol* timeslot, when the reality competition returned in January of 2005, but even this most enviable of lead-ins might not have been adequate to make such a contrary leading character so popular. Greg House remains the least conventionally heroic lead character to motivate a successful broadcast drama, although such flawed characters have been prevalent in recent years in the more niche-targeted storytelling space of original cable dramas.

House's personal misanthropy functions as a guiding ideology of the series, which stems from his requirement that his team of diagnosticians work from the assumption that "everybody lies." House encourages his team to dismiss medical histories reported by patients and instead sleuth through their homes to uncover the truth or think of things patients may be unwilling to tell doctors.

"Three Stories" begins exceptionally, but not in a way that informs viewers just how significant the exception will become. It opens in the middle of a conversation between House and chief of medicine, Dr. Lisa Cuddy, in a way that violates the well-established pattern of opening episodes with a non-regular character experiencing a medical emergency. The conversation in Cuddy's office establishes that a fellow doctor is ill and that Cuddy needs House to replace him and lecture on diagnostic medicine to a class of medical students. House characteristically tries to refuse, but accepts a release from doing clinic hours—an activity he finds distasteful due to the mundane ailments he encounters—in exchange for agreeing to lecture. House leaves Cuddy's office and finds a woman named Stacy, who we learn is his ex-girlfriend, in need of his diagnostic skills for her husband. Despite its atypical inclusion of regular characters, this pre-credit sequence offers two obvious potential patients—the ill doctor whom House must replace and Mark, husband to Stacy—although the deviation from the usual location external to the hospital suggests a greater break with conventional form could be occurring as well. A viewer could reasonably presume the still-young series was varying its conventional start, but the opening of "Three Stories" offers the ultimate misdirection, as the episode eventually reveals that the conversation between House and Cuddy involves the case of the week.⁵

After the opening credits, House begins his lecture to the medical students. He poses that there are three patients with leg pain and asks the students to diagnose the cause, as he gradually builds the stories of the patients. Although the series rarely uses techniques such as dream sequences, flashbacks, or imagined alternate realities, this episode eschews the realist techniques that normally characterize *House* by portraying characters whose conditions and embodiments shift each time House retells their scenarios. The cases begin as that of a farmer, golfer, and volleyball player, but House rewrites their histories and attributes each time he elaborates on the cases to the students, making "reality" difficult to discern. The actor playing the farmer (a middle-aged man) also appears as the volleyball player at first as well—although House describes the volleyball player as a teen girl. The golfer is actress Carmen Electra as herself, yet Doctors Foreman, Chase, and Cameron are interjected into the cases in a manner suggesting the scenario is real. Eventually three distinct actors embody the possible leg pain patients (none of whom are Electra) as House works through possible diagnoses, treatments, and consequences with the room of students.

FIGURE 2.1.

In an atypical episode, House eschews realist techniques by portraying characters whose conditions and embodiments shift as House retells their scenarios. Here, actress Carmen Elektra temporarily appears as an injured golfer.



Beyond the context of the lecture, this episode's inclusion of three different patients is uncommon, as the show usually features just one case. This unusual number of cases further confounds viewers' efforts to understand what is "really" going on, which isn't made clear until the episode is two-thirds complete. After multiple diagnoses and treatments of the farmer and volleyball player, House reveals the patient who began as a golfer, and is assumed to be a drug-seeker, has teak-colored urine. He offers a few additional indicators of the possible condition to the dumbfounded students when Dr. Cameron, a member of his diagnostic team, suggests "muscle death." House berates the students for not thinking of muscle death, while explaining that none of the man's doctors thought of it either, and that it took three days before the "patient" suggested it was muscle death. The episode then cycles back through vignettes in which the farmer and volleyball player are diagnosed and their doctors inform them that their legs may have to be amputated. When the episode turns back to the golfer/drug seeker/muscle death patient, Cuddy appears as the doctor. She delivers the news that amputation may be necessary. The scene transitions back to the lecture hall where House explains that an aneurism caused the muscle death, and a camera pan of the audience reveals all of House's team, Doctors Cameron, Foreman, and Chase, now seated in the back row, hanging on every detail. Foreman mutters, "God, you were right, it was House," and the scene cuts to House in bed as Cuddy's patient.

The remaining fourteen minutes of the episode shift to a more reliably realist style, although they do cut back and forth between flashbacks of House's treatment and his account of the tale to the class. In these scenes, the audience learns that Stacy was his girlfriend at the time of the aneurism, that House refused amputation—the better way to resolve the issue—and demanded a bypass to restore blood to the leg. But as Cuddy predicted, the pain was so great that he needed to be placed in a medical coma until the worst of it had passed. Stacy waited until

House was in the coma and, as his legal health-care proxy, allowed further surgery to remove the dead tissue. House's ongoing chronic pain results from the extent of the muscle removed in this subsequent surgery and the delayed diagnosis.

Beyond the idiosyncrasies of this particular episode, *House's* treatment of character development is uncommon in a number of respects. First, it is most curious that the series waits until nearly the end of its first season to explain the origin of House's chronic pain. A conventional way to compensate for building the series around such a disagreeable protagonist would be to add layers to the character, to explain the origin of his pain, and/or to give it a cause that would warrant and justify the subsequent suffering and attitude that results.⁶ Consider how CBS's *The Mentalist* (2008–present) explained the steady agitation of its less-than-personable protagonist as a result of the murder of his wife and daughter. This backstory is explained multiple times in the pilot and reemerges constantly throughout the series so that new or occasional viewers thoroughly understand the personality traits of the character and see how the exceptional tragedy he experienced justifies his focused search for the killer.

Instead of following such conventional explication and reiteration, the first season of *House* offers little explanation for House's physical or psychic ailments until this episode. The unconventionality of this strategy of under-explanation is furthered by the degree to which future episodes of the series do not recall House's origin story to audience members who missed this particular episode. Such recapping is easily and unobtrusively performed in other series by recalling crucial background details when new cast members are added. For example, in this case a new doctor could be informed of why House needs a cane by another character. Each episode of *House* introduces a new patient and in most cases provides a moment where House's poor bedside manner could be explained as a result of his chronic pain, including some details of its origin. However, the series does not recall this episode, or the information imparted in it again until late in season seven. In the interim, an entirely new group of doctors have become *House's* primary team, and the series never depicts them inquiring about House's pain or another character explaining the limp.

It is also notable that this crucial origin story is told in such a convoluted manner. Viewers do not realize they are being told House's story until they are deep into it, and even once Foreman makes clear the significance of the story, the preceding deviation from realist narrative and inconsistent blending of three different stories make it difficult to identify what parts of the previous narrative of the golfer/drug seeker were real. Moreover, why confuse the story by suggesting the patient could be a drug seeker? Viewers know House as a drug addict, but he would not have been before the injury. The significance of the episode's more complicated techniques becomes clear if one considers the narratives and narrative techniques not

chosen: House could have directly explained the incident in telling another character why he and Stacy broke up; the classroom technique could have been retained with just one case; all three cases could have been used without the constant variation in situations. These “easier” ways of incorporating the same information suggests the choice of complex techniques was deliberate.

The episode provides an explanation for House’s devotion to his guiding mantra that “everybody lies,” a crucial component of his character’s psychology, in two different ways. First, the audience and lecture hall of medical students see that diagnosticians must face unreliable information from patients through House’s repeated and varied presentations of the patient’s situations and ailments. Patients, even when not trying to confuse a diagnostician, change their stories and omit vital details in ways that require physicians to reconsider everything they thought they knew. The deviation from realist storytelling illustrates to the viewer how diagnosticians might also feel that they don’t “know” anything. With the things thought to be certain and true proven false, the episode appears to allegorize House’s view of the world and justification for his conviction that everybody lies. The episode also depicts House’s betrayal by Stacy, providing insight into his general distrust of people outside of diagnostics. Stacy acts in what she believes is House’s best interest once he is comatose and defies his expressed treatment desire. His insistence upon the medical possibility of maintaining the leg and his life appears irrational—at one point she asks if he’d cut off his leg to save her, which he acknowledges he’d do—but his faith in medicine proves wise. The suspicion with which House regards self-disclosures begins to make more sense in the context of this tale in which his closest confidant betrays his clearly expressed desires.

The writers of *House*, including, notably, series creator David Shore, who penned this episode, use unconventional techniques to provide more than the morsels of character development commonly offered in each episode, thus helping to compel the audience to take an ongoing interest in the series beyond the short-term gratification of seeing the case of the week solved and whether the doctors are able to save the patient. But despite this structural variation, the episode perpetuates the general beliefs and outlook of the series.

The question for the critical analyst, then, is what is the consequence of this unconventional treatment of character? Throughout most episodes and seasons, the origins of House’s bizarre actions are commonly attributed to “House being House.” This phrase, used most often by those who have a long relationship with House, such as Doctors Wilson and Cuddy, refers to House’s monomaniacal and socially unacceptable behavior, often to suggest that abnormal behavior is consistent with what characters can expect from him. Some characters know his story, which is presented as a defining cause of his behavior. Yet knowing the origin of House’s injury does not change how his team approaches him. Moreover, other characters

who join later and never learn the truth do learn how to “treat” House nonetheless. To handle the situation of House—to deal with a friend and coworker who suffers constant pain—it makes no difference whether that pain originated from a rare infection, a stabbing wound, or an aneurism. The series’ handling of House’s truth thus affirms the series’ principle that understanding a history doesn’t help understand an illness—knowing why House has pain doesn’t help in dealing with or helping him. “Three Stories” illustrates the need to look beyond plot structure in assessing the simplicity or complexity of narrative and character. Although the staid features of episodic structure might allow for repetitive act structure and enforced conclusions, this episode illustrates the creative possibilities in character development and series outlook that can still be incorporated.

NOTES

1. Episodic shows have an industrial advantage because their ability to be viewed out of order and haphazardly yields larger audiences and thus license fees in syndication.
2. Jeffrey Sconce, “What If?: Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 97.
3. Roberta Pearson, “Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character,” in *Reading CSI: Crime TV Under the Microscope*, Michael Allen, ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
4. *Ibid.*, 49.
5. Just as this essay was completed, *House* aired episode 807, “Dead and Buried,” in which it disregarded its usual opening structure for no apparent narrative reason.
6. For example, audience members could hardly shun House if his pain resulted from an injury suffered while saving a child or performing some other similarly heroic act.

FURTHER READING

- DuBose, Mike S. “Morality, Complexity, Experts, and Systems of Authority in *House, M.D.*, or ‘My Big Brain is My Superpower.’” *Television & New Media*, 11, 1 (2010): 20–36.
- Mittell, Jason. “Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory.” In *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010.
- O’Sullivan, Sean. “Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season.” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2 (2010): 59–77.
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3

Life on Mars Transnational Adaptation

CHRISTINE BECKER

Abstract: Remaking foreign programs is a common strategy for American television producers, but we must consider the contexts of each nation's industrial practices to fully understand such remakes. Christine Becker looks closely at both the British original and the American remake of *Life on Mars* to explore how contrasting norms of scheduling and serial formats help explain the differences in both storytelling and popular success between the two versions.

With the exception of the soap opera format, television dramas in Britain largely operate as short-run series, with as few as six episodes constituting a single “season,” and only one or a handful of seasons making up the entirety of a program's run.¹ As a result, writers for such series can plot out prescribed endpoints to stories before launching production. In contrast to this “definite end” model, American network television generally operates through the “infinite middle” model, wherein writers for successful programs have to continually devise ways to delay the narrative endpoint in order to keep the show running for over twenty episodes a season, year after year, while also bearing in mind that a show could be cancelled at virtually any time. As Russell Davies, the creator of the British *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999–2000), said of the American remake (Showtime, 2000–2005) at the latter's onset: “The most important thing is to think of the U.S. version as a new show, a different show. Even before they'd written a word, a 22-episode series is a profoundly different thing, a different concept, to an eight-parter.”²

American remakes of British dramas thus throw into relief the challenge of translating a show from one storytelling mode and industrial practice into another. In particular, the ABC remake (2008–2009) of the BBC's *Life on Mars* (2006–2007) offers a fruitful case study. Both versions have a nearly equal number of episodes: the British version ran for sixteen hour-long episodes split into two series units, and the U.S. season ran for seventeen 43-minute episodes before