

When American Television Became American Literature  
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Office Hours: Wednesday's 12:00 – 2:00 and by Appointment

In a 2015 interview with David Simon (creator of *The Wire*) President Barak Obama offered that *The Wire* is, "one of the greatest -- not just television shows, but pieces of [American] art in the last couple of decades." *The Wire* combines hyperrealism (from a quasi anthropological capture of syntax and dialect that recalls the language of Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston to a preference for actors who lived "the game" in Baltimore's inner city) with the reinvention of fundamental American themes (from picaresque individualisms, to coming to terms with the illusory "American dream", to a fundamental loss of faith in American institutions), and engages in a scathing expose of the shared dysfunction among the bureaucracies (police, courts, public schools etc.) that manage a troubled American inner city. On a more macro level *The Wire* humanizes (and therefore vastly problematizes) assumptions about the individual Americans' who inhabit America's most dangerous urban environments from gang members to police officers to teachers and even ordinary citizens.

*The Wire*, of course, did not single-handedly reshape American television. Scholars like Martin Shuster refer to this period of television history as "new television." That is, the product of new imaginations that felt television had exhausted its normative points of reference, subject matter and narrative technique. Many of the shows from this period sought to reinvent television for interaction with an evolving zeitgeist shaped by shared dissolution with 21<sup>st</sup> century American life: "I'd been thinking: it's good to be in a thing from the ground floor, I came too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling I might be in at the end. That the best is over," Tony Soprano confides to Dr. Malfi in S1.E1 of the Sopranos. Series that fall within this rubric include (in chronological order): *The Sopranos*; *The Wire*; *Deadwood*; *Madmen*; and *Breaking Bad*.

We need to consider carefully that these shows emerged during a particular moment on American history. This was a period shaped by an increasingly relativist conceptualizations of truth (and, at times, outright fraud) and a resultant loss of faith in American institutions. This was a period that witnessed 9/11 (among worst failures of the American state in the nation's history) and subsequent invasion of Iraq based on the fraudulent threat of "WMD." During these same years Lance Armstrong dopped his way to 7 tour de France wins while the likes of Barry Bonds, Jose Conseco and Sammy Sosa dopped their way to various home run records and threatened that most sacrosanct of American spaces: baseball. Tiger Woods, among the most commodified figures in American history was revealed to be a profoundly tragic figure. The deregulation of Wall Street triggered the Great Recession while Purdue Pharma (and the Sackler family specifically) orchestrated a vast and fundamentally fraudulent PR campaign that resulted in the on-going opioid epidemic. At the same time resistance movements (MeeToo, and Black Lives Mater) began to shape. No wonder that so many of the series under discussion take place amid American cultures defined by a liminal faith in law and order, within the contexts of vague moral authorities and hold American institutions with a shared, deep, suspicion.

These shows also share a reimagined concern for what scholars like Astrid Böger term America's "documentary aesthetic." Borger, however, situates this aesthetic amid artistry of the 1930s much of which was shaped by a government initiative to "introduce America to Americans" in order to justify sweeping government intervention amid national crisis. Alfred Kazin observed that, "one of the most remarkable phenomena of the era of crisis . . . the WPA guides to states and roads . . . the half-sentimental, half commercial new folklore . . . ; the endless documentation of the disposed in American life – it testified to an extraordinary national self-scrutiny . . . Never before did a nation seem so hungry for news of itself." For our interests, however, we need to consider that "reality television" (and, not sweeping new government sponsored aesthetics) helped to inform this "new" American television. Whether concerned with historical verisimilitude (*Madmen*, *Deadwood* etc.) or with a Naturalist aesthetic (*The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* etc.) American culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cultivated a new interest in unflinching examination of the dispossessed.

Finally, we need to consider how this period of American television can be interpreted, and reinterpreted, within contemporary digital matrices. Essentially, this means considering how DH can be used a critical structure to shape new points of critical entry using analytics and visualizations as well as considering globally comparativist contexts.

### Assignments:

#### Undergraduate Students

- Assignment 1, Mid-Term Writing Assignment:
  - One five-ten page (midterm) paper.
    - Choose from among the four serials on our syllabus: *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood* or *Mad Men*. Your assignment is to author a complete scene that could appear in the serial you select. Yes, this is supposed to fun. BUT, the greater intent is develop a regard for the literary / artistic achievement that gives shape to this (new) American art.
    - N.B. In advance of this assignment we will be studying several examples of scripts from these serials. This to say, you are in no way expected to be an accomplished screen-writer or have any experience writing a script.
- Assignment 2, Final Term Paper, 10 pages
  - Please, select from among any of the serials our course examines. Your assignment is to author a research / term paper identifying what marks this serial uniquely American and what marks this serial as part of new generation of (revolutionary) American television.

### Course Calendar:

Day 1 Origins: Cultures of Corruption, "America's Documentary Aesthetic" and new American Hi-Story-Oographies

"Never Before did a Nation Seem so Hungry for News of Itself" – Alfred Kazin

Assigned Viewings:

- Roots, Episode 1
- Ken Burns, The Civil War, E.1 “The Cause”

In Class Viewing:

(Short) excerpts from (among):

- Gerald Ford pardons Richard Nixon
- Iran Contra Hearings
- *Enron, The Smartest Guys in the Room*
- *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing*
- *The Crime of the Century*

Assigned Readings

- *John C. Tibbets, The Incredible Stillness of Being- Motionless Pictures in the Films of Ken Burns*

## Day 2. From the Godfather to Goodfellas to The Sopranos

“But lately I’m feeling like I came in at the end. That the best is over.” – Tony Soprano

### Assigned Viewings

- The Godfather
- Goodfellas
- The Sopranos, S.1.E.1. “The Sopranos”
- The Sopranos, S.1.E.1. “I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano”

## Day 3. The Wire and True Detective

**Detective McNulty:** “Well, if every time, Snot Boogie stole the money, why’d you let him play?”

**Kid:** “Got to. It’s America, man.”

### Assigned Viewings

- The Wire, S.1.E.1. “The Targets”
- The Wire, S.1.E.13. “Sentencing”
- True Detective, S.1.E.1. “The Long Bright Dark”
- True Detective, S.4.E.1. “Night Country”

Assigned Readings

- From Henry Mayhew, *London Labor and the London Poor*

- T.S. Eliot, *A Game of Chess* (from *The Waste Land*)
- From, Truman Capote, In Cold Blood

#### Day 4 Deadwood: The American Frontier Reimagined

*“What slows me down is thinking about freezing my balls off in a creek for the cocksuckers I’d lose the gold to at poker.” – Wild Bill Hickock*

*“Everyday takes figurin’ out all over again how to fucking live.” - Calamity Jane*

*“The world ends when you’re dead. Until then, you got more punishment in store. Stand it like a man . . . and give some back.” – Al Swarengen*

**\*\* MID-TERM SCRIPT ASSIGNMENT DUE \*\***

#### Assigned Viewings:

- Deadwood S.1.E1 “Deadwood”
- Deadwood S.1. E.12 “Sold Under Sin”
- Breaking Bad. S.1.E.1. “Pilot”
- Ken Burns, *The West* E.3.
- *The Searchers* (1956)

#### Assigned Readings:

- From, Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Newspaper account of Wild Bill Hickock
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Newspaper Accounts of Calamity Jane
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century Newspaper Accounts of Deadwood

#### Day 5. Mad Men: The “All Swallowing Vortex of the Great Money Whirlpool”

*“What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons.” – Donald Draper*

#### Assigned Viewings:

- Mad Men. S.1.E.1. “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”
- Mad Med S.1.E.3. “Marriage of Figaro”
- Mad Men S.1.E.13 “The Wheel”

#### Assigned Readings:

- John Cheever, The Swimmer
- Sylvia Plath, from, The Bell Jar
- Betty Friedan, from, The Feminine Mystique
- From, The Fifties, A Women’s Oral History

