

THE WATCHER: CINEMATOGRAPHY AND EMPATHY IN PRESTIGE TELEVISION

by

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(Under the Direction of Isiah Lavender)

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the 21st century, a new type of show emerged that has changed the way we look at our TV sets. Prestige TV was a genre that roughly began in 2000 and ended in 2020. It was the first “Golden Age” of the new millennium. The shows identified as part of this generic period by the new television journalists and scholars of the day share a common cinematographic theme: they all train their viewers in how to look at the TV screen in new ways as well as how to understand the lives of Others both on and off screen. Tracking this pattern across the four main distribution methods (Broadcast, Basic Cable, Subscription Cable, and Streaming Video On Demand), this project looks closely at CBS’s *The Good Wife*, AMC’s *Breaking Bad*, HBO’s *The Wire*, and Netflix’s *Orange Is The New Black*. At the heart of each disparate series is a focus on what justice looks like and who has access to it in American society.

INDEX WORDS: Television, TV, Television Studies, Cinematography, Prestige TV,
Breaking Bad, Orange Is The New Black, The Good Wife, The Wire

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MA, University of Georgia, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2025

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May 2025

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my friends and family, without whom it would never have seen the light of day. Thank you to my parents, Paul and Lynda, for having the enthusiasm to go ahead and buy that bottle of champagne to celebrate me finishing and for having the wisdom to know that bottle should be one that could stand to age for a while as you waited. Thank you to my friends, The Athens All-Star (Mostly English Grad Student Drinking Team, for carrying me over the finish line and never doubting that I could manage it. And thank you specifically to John for making sure that this project was literally ready for the presses. I couldn't have done this without y'all!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge faculty who, while no longer on my final committee, played a significant and foundational role in this project: Christopher Pizzino, Michelle Ballif, and Channette Romero.

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1. Introduction

Who Is The Watcher and What Does She See?

Like most Americans, I love TV. It's a ubiquitous presence in our lives - how could we not? One of my earliest memories of myself as a being with the power to influence the world around me is about TV. As a child, I managed to convince my parents to switch channels on the family television set to watch the premieres of *The Simpsons* instead of *The Cosby Show*. I've been hooked on the medium ever since.

And like many Americans, if fewer now, I also love cameras. I love them as objects, and I love them for the images they create. Their ability to capture moments in time and open up new worlds of visual possibility captivates me. Thus, when taken with my love of television, it should come as no surprise that I have a particular passion for televisual cinematography.

Unlike most Americans, this passion for TV's moving images has led me to consume our national medium differently. I find myself often looking *at* images instead of *through* them to plot.¹ If most people in our economy of attention watch TV for the substance of its stories, I'm more likely to be looking at how its style delivers that substance. Thanks to this personal quirk, I've had the opportunity to see something happen in recent American TV history that I find absolutely fascinating: a new metaphor of envisioning power at play within Prestige-era TV. In

¹ to steal a phrase from Richard Lanham.

the pages that follow, I'd like to show you how I saw this new metaphor and discuss some of its potential to change not just American television but the tangible lives of viewers as well.

I call this metaphor The Watcher. It represents for me an activist camera of sorts, a visual rhetorical Style² that is knowingly and deeply indebted to the power of art to persuade and educate. No mere pedant, The Watcher teaches audiences new ways of understanding television and our relationship to this populist technology. It asks us as consumers of 21st century American culture to consider anew our relationship to everyone watching along with us, our connection to the strangers in these wider audiences, and our individual expectations of our shared culture by way of the television camera as a presence that unites us through mediated images.

A "Truth" about Television Studies

Though I will return to the specifics of how The Watcher accomplishes such grand acts later (as well as discuss why I locate the metaphor so specifically within an era of TV history), I need to describe the academic field to which I'm introducing it and why I feel it's imperative to share The Watcher with others. Television Studies is at a crossroads. The style of Media Studies associated with university journalism and mass communications programs that dominates scholarship in the field means much of TV Studies as a discipline focuses on industrial concerns like demographics, advertising, or marketing.³ The little work done from a Humanities or Liberal Arts perspective tends to view television either as the ugly little brother of Film Studies, more

² I mean "Style" in the classical rhetorical sense - *elocutio* in Latin or *lexis* in Greek – which is to say in the sense of "how" thought is expressed. In this tradition, the word's use also reflects part of the character of the rhetor.

³ As Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz point out in *Understanding Media Studies*:

Understanding exactly how media industries – particularly commercial industries – influence society and politics has been a matter of some debate. Many observers distinguish between entertainment and information services, with the latter typically identified as more serious and important for the proper functioning of democratic societies. This perspective emerges from the belief that noninformational media are 'only entertainment' and this unlikely to play a significant role in shaping attitudes about political and social issues. We disagree strongly with this position (Havens and Lotz, 7-8).

concerned with commerce than art, or focus on now-outdated technological aspects of the television-set mechanism to an extent that makes it seem almost irrelevant. In both cases, the field's traditions are predicated on observations about commercial American TV from the middle of the 20th century. Among these truths⁴ (which critics seem perpetually shocked to find are as false today as they've likely always been) are that the monolithic audience cannot be challenged in any way, only wants to see happy endings, cannot be bothered to invest in long-form storytelling, and is confounded by any disruption of the status quo. Underlying these truths is the belief that television is inherently ugly, incapable due to either technological or financial limitations of exploring or embracing complex aesthetics; that bright lights, flat framing, canned soundtracks, and an insistence on close-ups at the expense of wide shots are the way TV must be. These truths manage to ignore the contexts that birthed these features while assuming that each context also became applicable medium-wide.

Many of these truths can be traced back to the fears and biases of media and culture scholars at the birth of mass communications in the early 20th century. The prejudices of critics like Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and the rest of the Frankfurt School inform, if indirectly, prejudices about then-bourgeoning technologies like radio, film, and television, and inform specifically the legitimization crises each medium has gone through. Radio's moment has passed, so concerns about its dangers and limitations feel antiquated and misplaced. Film weathered its legitimization phase to become acknowledged and accepted high art, the sort of thing

⁴ Havens and Lotz point out how industry lore like this has long limited access for nonwhite audiences and creators noting that it even held back *The Cosby Show*, which would become one of the biggest hits of the 1980s (cont.):

One example of industry lore that long governed the television industry was the perception that white audiences wouldn't watch a comedy about a middle-class, professional, married, African American family. Certainly, many creators suggested shows with black casts, and industry executives would say something like, 'oh, you can't do that. It will never succeed, because white people won't watch.' Then, eventually, and industry executive decided to take a risk and test the industry lore," and the rest was, as they say, history (Haven and Lotz 162).

a frantic new critic can feel good writing about. But television seems to be stuck in the awkward teenage years of its legitimization growth spurt. Though several Golden Ages of American TV have come and gone, academic scholarship about television is only now beginning to catch up to the notion that TV might be worth critical attention beyond its status as a whipping boy for helping cement the legitimacy of other art forms.⁵

Not only are these presumptions predicated on snobbish fears about the corrupting influence of mass culture, they are built on a model of American commercial television that hasn't been valid for decades. The mechanism of American TV has changed. The content of American TV has changed. The appearance of American TV has changed. Even the business model upon which these truths rely has changed. Scholarship on American TV needs to acknowledge these changes as well.

And it is, slowly. Voices like Jason Mittell and Amanda Lotz⁶ are transforming television studies criticism, incorporating a literary studies model into the Media Studies' model of a social science that melds artistic and industrial concerns. I think, though, that we need to move the field even further, and that we should, in a full embrace of irony, take some of our cues from contemporary television journalism to do this.

⁵ Legitimation itself is a dangerous and ultimately fruitless game, one that tends to reify longstanding bigoted ideas about who deserves access to art. Legitimacy implies illegitimacy, and illicit cultural productions have overwhelmingly been aligned with social outsiders. Soap operas, for instance, were reclaimed beginning in the 1970s by scholars like Tania Modleski and Mary Ellen Brown, who believed that academics had dismissed the genre because it was geared to housewives. I mention these scholars here, specifically the work by Modleski that has been so foundational in the history of both Feminist and Television Studies scholarship, to highlight just how long academia has struggled or outright failed to take wildly popular genres seriously when those genres are considered feminized. These scholars were doing important work decades ago, but we're still fighting their battles today. For more, see Modleski 12-21, and Brown

⁶ I will discuss Mittell's work in detail later in this chapter. Lotz's work with the television industry has been invaluable for helping me understand the mechanics behind networks' presentation of these TV shows to American audiences. For an excellent discussion of the ways that the rise of cable and internet distribution across the country changed the television industry and how those changes paved the way for Prestige, see Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* and *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*.

Around the turn of the millennium, the traditional television critic began morphing into something intriguingly different. Whereas the *TV Guide* model of criticism gave brief overviews of what a viewer could expect of a particular episode or show, passing judgement at the start of a season premiere or before the awards season, this new Internet critic was obligated to do much more. Not only because the speed at which the Internet moves is light years faster than an old-school print schedule, but because filling more hyperspace meant diving more deeply into TV programming as well. The result was a new form in pop culture journalism - the overnight recap. Perfected by writers like Alan Sepinwall, Emily Nussbaum, and Emily St. James, these recaps became havens for TV geeks to ponder the intricacies of plot points, character motivation, and myriad other factors at play in the ever-increasing variety of programming across an ever-growing number of platforms in American commercial media. This is not to suggest that all American television journalism suddenly transformed. The traditional snippets and puff pieces still abound, and it is still easier to find overnight recaps that do little more than detail plot points than critics close read episodes for nuances. However, the new breed of journalism is integral to some of the changes in quality we can trace out across the dial. These critics assume most of those old truths are hogwash and that television and her audiences are not only capable of becoming more than what has been traditionally expected of them but are doing exactly that. TV can be beautiful, and her audiences can be discerning.

Defining a New Golden Age

One genre above all others has arguably ushered in this latest Golden Age. Prestige TV, a 21st century programming genre defined as such by the journalists responsible for 21st century criticism, is identifiable almost as much by its paratextual elements as by its text. After the era of

Quality Drama in the late 20th century and the rise of features like the white male anti-hero and single-camera comedies at the turn of the century, the new millennium gave birth to Prestige. These shows have a sort of genetic history. Much like the genre's closest relative, Quality, Prestige programming has been singled-out in the vast television landscape as award-worthy.⁷ Its accolades stem from their DNA's shared aesthetic traits. Like Quality TV, Prestige TV has featured complex storytelling about dynamic characters presented with an attention to visual aesthetic detail often dubbed "cinematic." Unlike Quality, however, Prestige programming appeared aware of itself as specifically televisual and of its historiographic context within the broader narrative of American Media History.

The Watcher's Family Tree

Before we can understand Prestige's role, though, we must fully acknowledge its debt to Quality, a genre of American TV generally assumed to have begun in 1981 with *Hill Street Blues*' transformation of the police procedural, as well as the television awards arms race. The radical change to the TV landscape -*Hill Street* helped usher in meant that Quality programming began dominating industry chatter and plaudits. Quality Drama raised the bar for what would merit critical attention and Emmy accolades, both of which began to drive network programming

⁷ Or, to put it more cynically and accurately as "award-chasing." The genre's nickname was born from these series' seeming obsession with winning awards. By comparison with the more traditional mass-market fare that still dominates Nielsen ratings, Prestige TV was often little-watched. But the shows occupied a disproportionate amount of attention in critical and critics' circles. As Amanda Lotz notes of a powerhouse of Prestige TV that I do not cover in this work:

Someone living in the United States from 2007 to 2015 [when the show aired] could be forgiven for believing *Mad Men* was an enormous cultural phenomenon. As had been the case with *The Sopranos* before it, the series caught the fancy of journalists and entertainment pundits; the number of articles published about *Mad Men* bore little relation to the relative size of its audience ... *Mad Men* likely lost money for AMC, yet, paradoxically, it was simultaneously very profitable. *Mad Men*'s value to AMC derived less from advertising than from helping it become a top-of-mind cable channel (Lotz *Disrupt* 85). Here, *Mad Men* stands in for all of the series that I discuss. None of them made their distributors money in the traditional sense, but all of them generated buzz that established those distributors as forces to be reckoned with in the industry.

decisions in a way they hadn't in previous television golden ages.⁸ Though many Quality series failed to match the Nielsen rating heights of traditional programming, the critical spotlight they brought their distributors often extended their shelf life if not ensured it outright by bringing more and more options for viewing into the TV marketplace and allowing cable programming to expand during this period. Increased competition meant that budget-conscious broadcasters couldn't promise the largest audiences to prospective advertisers, they could nonetheless tout their show's critical praise and award season wins.

This is the environment into which Prestige was born. As we reach "Peak TV"⁹ and a seemingly infinite number of niche programming options, critical and industrial praise become even more important for distributor programming decisions. However, what Prestige programs share, despite looking different and attempting different means of telling stories, is an unusual rhetorical motif: the camera acts as a sort of surveillance system of the world within the TV show as well as the one without. The Prestige camera itself appears aware of the audience and our role in the process of making meaning. Prestige cinematography contains a metaphorical act of visual rhetoric, which I call "The Watcher."

⁸ Depending on which TV historian you ask, the many and concurrent golden eras of television have overlapped since the birth of the medium.

⁹ John Landgraf, CEO of the FX Networks, is credited with starting the conversation about Peak TV and the idea that "There is simply too much television" during a summer 2015 press tour with the Television Critics Association. The idea is that with the hundreds of different cable channels now available, and the exponentially increasing number of airtime hours these channels have to fill, it is simply impossible to pay attention to everything on television anymore. Per *Variety*,

By FX's math, there were about 280 scripted series on the air in the U.S. five years ago. In 2014, it was about 371. And this boom has come at a time when Netflix, Amazon, Hulu et al. are also providing instant access to an array of older series. 'You take a fixed audience and divide it by 400 shows (and library product), and most shows are going to see ratings go down,' [Landgraf] said. (Littleton)

Landgraf and his staff have continued this conversation by regularly tabulating the number of scripted shows on television, as the *Variety* piece references. They have even released a chart which tabulates the steady increase in scripted (as opposed to "unscripted" reality programming, though these shows also strongly rely on pre-planned narratives). According to their figures at the end of 2016 alone, there was a 71% increase from 2011 to 2016, 266 shows to 455, the majority of which air on basic cable. According to Statista, there were 516 by the end of 2023. See also Zuckerman, Stoll.

Describing The Viewer: Guy Debord

Though I fear he would shudder at the realized connection, I turn to a scholar who might be more closely aligned with the troublesome Frankfurt school than any other I cite, Guy Debord, whose *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is less a treatise on the role of media in contemporary culture than a radical engagement with philosophical conversations about how culture became utterly dependent upon the false idol of spectacle. Neither strictly Marxist nor Hegelian, Debord uses the writings of both political thinkers to build his own case for how economic thought – here, an abstract akin to a general idea like politics rather than something specific, such as industrial late capitalism – creates and is fueled by spectacles. These predominantly visual¹⁰ displays are similar to Jean Baudrillard's simulacra: they have the appearance of something real but are entirely unreal. They have replaced reality. For the society of the spectacular, there is no longer any reality: “*fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at ... The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving” (Debord 2, emphasis original). Paradoxically, the Economy Society creates and is created by these unreal displays, as the spectacle is the product and the mechanism of the society that has become economic. If “the spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images” (Debord

¹⁰ Debord stresses how spectacle tends towards the visual, as sight is the most easily deceived human sense. He is cynical enough, though, to allow for spectacles in many forms. He writes:

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images,” emphasizing the role of vision and sight at the heart of spectacle ...

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to *show* us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity, whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever *representation* becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself. (Debord 2, 6, emphasis original)

11, emphasis original), then it is also “a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws” (Debord 17). In such an economy, people themselves are reduced to commodities within the spectacle.

For Debord, the run-of-the-mill viewer lacks any political education and has never contemplated her role within the society of the spectacular, because she is fully pacified by the television’s glow. She watches TV and never considers how it might be watching her back, informing the ways she “spends” her “free” time and influences the ways she loses bits of herself to its “work.” She laughs when her TV tells her to; she cries when it demands that as well. She thinks these are her own choices because she is ignorant of how, and why, she is being manipulated by the Spectacle. Guy Debord’s image of the typical viewer is a pessimistic one indeed.

In fact, his work is an alarm intended to open his readers’ eyes to the (unreal) reality of spectacle. Though he has no love for the spectacle itself, Debord cares very much for the people under its sway. For him, the viewer has been almost powerless to resist spectacle and its influence. Unlike the pessimism of the Frankfurt School critics, Debord does not condemn the masses for their powerlessness, positioning them instead as victims of capitalism taken to its ultimate end. He is not, however, as hopeful about the worker-viewer’s revolutionary prospects as was Marx. Where Marx imagined political revolution at the hands of the awakened working proletariat, Debord sees spectacle lulling those workers into a complacency that cannot be shaken off:

Consciousness of desire and desire for consciousness are the same project, the project that in its negative form seeks the abolition of classes and thus the workers’ direct

possessions of every aspect of their activity. The *opposite* of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.

(Debord 20, emphasis original)

This is possible because “complacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness – dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economy of abundance develops the capacity to process that particular raw material” (Debord 23-4).

Debord fears that workers, then, are trapped in unconsciousness even in their discomfort.

There is seemingly no escape from the trap of Spectacle. Even as Debord’s viewer attempts to resist the commodification of wider culture through the spectacular, their resistance is itself absorbed into the spectacle. The inevitability sparks a sort of schizophrenia in the worker-viewer. Spectacle breeds madness:

Individuals who passively accept their subjection to an alien everyday reality [the simulacra of truth that is spectacle] are thus driven toward a madness that reacts to that fate by resorting to illusory magical techniques. The essence of this pseudo-response to an unanswerable communication is the acceptance and consumption of commodities.

(Debord 116-7)

Consumerism is both cause and symptom of spectacle’s schizophrenic disease.

Tellingly, however, Debord does not suggest that we under the spectacle’s sway should abandon resistance. He offers a small ray of hope for those willing to think critically, who do not accept their subjection passively, who are willing to continue searching for something real.

Spectacle’s goal is the creation of false consciousness, such that the viewer never realizes the trap within which she exists. Hope is therefore in the possibility of patient, consistent work by

the ideal emancipated worker-viewer, the audience member willing to push back against the spectacular:

In contrast to [this] false consciousness, which cannot truly know itself, the search for critical truth about the spectacle must also be a true critique. It must struggle in practice among the irreconcilable enemies of the spectacle, and admit that it is nothing without them. By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudo-revolutionary collective actions, those driven by an abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the *latest news*. In this way delirium reappears within the camp that claims to be opposing it. A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must *know how to wait*. (Debord 117, emphasis original)

The worker-viewer must resist the lulling charms of spectacle, striving patiently toward “real” truth. The possibility of hope hinges on the chance that someone might be able to recognize the unreality of their reality for a just moment, just long enough to begin questioning first the spectacle, then history. It’s the tiniest glimmer of hope, but that glimmer does suggest that resistance is possible — even if Debord is cynical enough about the power of spectacle to doubt that the glimmer can become a spotlight. He finds the glimmer of hope, oddly enough, in playing with a Hegelian sense of history:

The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This ‘historic mission of establishing truth in the world’ can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realized democracy – to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and

surveys its own actions. Only there are individuals ‘directly linked to world history’ – there where dialogue has armed itself to impose its own conditions. (Debord 117)

The average worker-viewer may not be able to reach this place of realized democracy, but if the “individuals directly linked to world history” who have been able to escape spectacle’s thrall can attain emancipation, then their revolution can be passed on. In a sense, it is the savvy viewer who is best-situated to save society. I’m left wondering, though, if the mechanisms of spectacle (i.e., television and its content) can be redeemed by these viewers — or if revolution requires the rejection of all aspects of the spectacular.

To get a better sense of how the emancipated worker-viewer might manage their redemption, we need a better sense of who the persona is. Though Debord does not describe this worker-viewer in detail, we can form an image through those glimpses he provides us in his wider theory. The emancipated worker-viewer is, in effect, a schizophrenic in recovery. Her treatment is a political education, so we can assume she has access to the privilege of education as well as leisure. Debord affirms that any distinction between the type of white- or blue-collar labor our worker-viewer performs in contemporary Western society is null: all labor, whether with the head or the hands, fuels the spectacular economy in the same way. So, let’s imagine our heroic spectator as a middle-class woman with enough means (i.e., wealth) to keep herself current as possible with contemporary media consumption. The biggest difference between our hypothetical heroine and the still-mad masses enthralled by the spectacular is her growing sense that something isn’t quite right with what she watches around her. She has learned enough about the politics of economics to be suspicious and begin paying a different sort of attention to the unreal reality around her. When she watches television, for instance, she pays attention to the ways that advertisements aired during shows she follows create their own story about who she

must be as their viewer, which in turn starts her wondering about exactly who else is watching these shows along with her. The sense of her place in a larger community reinforces the political education that heals her schizophrenia, inspiring her to help others in that community. Slowly, surely, thoughtful ad-break by reconsidered frame, she — and the growing mass of emancipated worker-viewers like her — unsettle spectacle's power over their society.

Describing The Viewer: Richard Dienst

Guy Debord's subtle but persistent sense that the tiniest glimmer of hope for society resides in the awakening of an emancipated worker-viewer has echoes in later critical media theory. Richard Dienst's work in *Still Life in Real Time* (1994) extends that hint of hope into a critical discussion of television in particular. He charts the ways television has been theorized by other scholars in an attempt to synthesize a new form of theory, for television-itself as theory. While he de- and then re-constructs an image of television through the theoretical lenses of critics like Marx, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze, Dienst's own conception of a television viewer bubbles through and informs his re-readings of their works. It comes through most strongly alongside his reworking of the Television Studies notion of flow. For the rest of the field, particularly the media studies critics working out of the mass communications and journalism tradition, flow typically refers to the relationship created between content of broadcast and viewer response as manipulated by distributors. This relationship is best understood through the sorts of questions it raises for the industry: how can FX hold on to viewer attention through a commercial break with ad time purchased by local stations rather than national? Will HBO's placement of a particular promotional spot after an episode of their breakout hit drive audiences toward the new show advertised? If CBS interrupts their live

broadcast of a football game for a news report, how many viewers can they assume will stick around after the interruption? Flow, then, is about managing attention in a constantly shifting landscape. For Dienst, however, flow is more about the sequencing of images and the intention behind their distribution combined with the viewer's experience of their reception, but not at the practical level that concerns distributors. Dienst's flow is a continuation of the kinds of thought project moves made by Marxist and post-Marxist critics discussing how capitalism morphs society both ontologically and epistemologically. The difference between flow for the industry and for Dienst is rather of degree than kind, as Dienst is not concerned with the minutia of particular programming or the commercial and industrial concerns behind it.¹¹

Much like Debord, Dienst views televisual flow as a fairly continuous stream of images. The particularities of specific image sets within the overall stream are less interesting to him than the political and economic impact of the stream itself. Those specific image sets are abstracted into a larger reconfiguration of temporal experience in capitalism. He writes that the televisual stream "becomes 'part of' the way in which value is constructed, distributed, and attached to bodies formed in the general circulation of labor, commodities, and money" (Dienst 64). It is not the "what" being watched but the amount of time "spent" in the watching that makes television remarkable for Dienst. Like generations of Marxist critics before him, many of whom he addresses in his own work, Dienst is suspicious of any attempt to read the particular image sets

¹¹ Dienst does discuss particular moments that have aired on television. However, he uses them as examples of how broader socioeconomic theories work within television as a component of a larger capitalist society. Like with Debord and, as we will see shortly, Marshall McLuhan, the ins and outs of specific programming content does not interest Dienst, because his goal is to describe and discuss a theory of how television fits into Critical Theory traditions. For Dienst, the vast majority of programming is interchangeable. Specific content can be overlooked in favor of a closer examination of how the apparatus of television — both machine and process — functions culturally. Additionally, if McLuhan believes the real message of television comes through in the way the medium itself extends human experience, not specific programming content, then Dienst would claim the process of the apparatus is what extends experience, though the sociopolitical drives behind that process fascinate him more than the mechanics of media that so fascinate McLuhan.

within the stream of television's flow because of how easily that content can be used by hegemonic capitalist forces to objectify and further alienate the individual viewer from her own labor power. As he states, "televisual images do not represent things so much as they take up time, and to work through this time is the most pervasive way that subjects suffer through, participate in, and perhaps even glimpse, the global unification of contemporary capitalism" (Dienst 64). It would therefore seem that every act of TV consumption equals participation within the alienating effects of capitalism, another opportunity for the machinery of capital to co-opt and contain agency. As such, television is deeply anti-social and divorces the viewer from democracy. The typical viewer is alienated from her political life by the sweep of flow, though Dienst's astute ideal viewer is aware of the manipulations acting upon her.

We must return to Debord to understand the political relationship Dienst implies for his typical and ideal viewers. Television is Debord's spectacle *par excellence*. If TV, "by delimiting and monopolizing the time of imagination, allows us to offer up our social lives as free contributions to capitalist power," and "the 'choice' of whether or not to watch television [and by extension, what we watch] becomes part of the way one directs oneself toward others ([which is really] no more a choice than the decision whether or not to work or to use money"), then viewership, "conditioned by this preliminary contract... cannot be modelled as an act of reading nor can it be assumed to follow a clear subjective path, whether directed by economic rational interest or transparent desire" (Dienst 62). Similar to the way Debord charts how spectacle traps the viewer regardless of the content of that being viewed, Dienst himself then situates flow as the mechanism within televisuality that so captures the viewer.

Even as flow "defines how programming seizes its viewers," the particulars of that programming are essentially inconsequential (Dienst 26). Flow's "transmission washes away the

particularity of its messages along with the differences between them [and] drains perception of its resistant holding powers of distance and memory. [Flow] absorbs the entirety of the televisual textual process” into the all-consuming grind of capitalistic objectification and alienation (Dienst 27). Even when Dienst does allow that some sort of segmentation exists within the stream of Flow, it is still subject to the governing politics of time-as-labor and leisure-as-reification of that labor: “The original force of television is revealed in the way one media event can interrupt another, the new event randomizing the old horizon of references and suspending the procedures of truth” (Dienst 77). This last observation comes from one of the rare moments Dienst turns his attentions to a specific televisual text rather than a more generalized conception of televisuality itself.¹²

Dienst’s project was constrained by the limits of then-contemporary TV programming. Though TV had experienced several so-called golden ages by the mid-1990s, many of the old truisms about lowest common denominator programming still held sway over the American industry. The strides that Quality TV had begun to make, with regards to narrative complexity in particular, were influencing creators, but only just.¹³ Dienst was trying to formulate a theory of television while TV was in dramatic flux. The industry was reacting slowly to the waves of Quality’s landslide, and Dienst recognized that something new was happening. Those ripples, however, would not coalesce into the revolution we see now through *Prestige* until after Dienst’s work was already in the world. He was responding to the birth of something new, recognizing

¹² Dienst has three relatively short chapters dedicated to specific television programming, two on serialized dramas (David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* and Michael Mann’s historical crime drama *Crime Story*; this passage comes from a discussion of complex chronology in the latter chapter) and one on various music videos by a single director (Jean-Baptiste Mondino). These chapters illustrate his deeper points about television-as-theory, essentially enacting the theory he proposes through the reading of these texts.

¹³ In my individual case study chapters, I will point to particular examples of Quality TV and its predecessors to highlight some of the ways that these programs unsettled notions of what TV was “supposed” to look like. I cite what we might refer to as the auterist work of Michael Mann on *Miami Vice* and Normal Lear on *Good Times*, the subtle manipulation of traditional genre work on *LA Law*, and the godfather of Quality TV itself, *Hill Street Blues*.

that the old ways of thinking about and through TV were insufficient in the face of such change, but the crest of that change wouldn't break until the turn of the 21st century. Television is a deeply conservative industry, and many other factors had to fall into place before TV was ready to enact the sort of theoretical work Dienst was doing with it. Positioned somewhere between the cynicism and fear of the popular that haunts Debord and the virtually unchecked utopian optimism that suffuses much of Marshall McLuhan's work, Dienst anticipated the way TV would mean one day, though it ended up following some paths that he could not see coming.

Describing The Viewer: Marshall McLuhan

However, Marshall McLuhan's conception of the viewer and the spectacular technologies behind things like television acts as sort of optimistic tonic to the bitter pill Guy Debord gives us that Dienst then extends through flow. His view of the technologies themselves less politically loaded than in Debord and Dienst, McLuhan readily admits that these technologies can be used toward many of the same upsetting political ends. For McLuhan, the godfather of American media studies, though, emergent media technologies like television are important, and potentially dangerous, *because* of how they change the lived experience of human existence. All media are extensions of the self in some way. McLuhan opens what is arguably his most influential work, *Understanding Media* (1964), by remarking that:

During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.

Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively

and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (McLuhan and Zingrone 149)

Every “advancement” in technology and every “development” of new media creates a way of extending ourselves into the world differently. Thus, “the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan and Zingrone 151). McLuhan is most fascinated by the ways that two seemingly disconnected technologies, the Phoenician alphabet and electricity, have forever altered the way human beings conceive of existing in the world. As he lays out in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), alphabetic thinking paved the way for the sort of individual interiority that spurred on the great sociopolitical movements in the West, changing the way we sense the world around us, shifting the balance of our senses toward the visual. The new electric media, however, are forcing another shift, back to what McLuhan deems an auditory and tribal experience, and in this shift rest most of the anxieties plaguing the 20th century West:

It is our enormous backlog of literate and mechanistic technology that renders us so helpless and inept in handling the new electric technology. The new physics is an auditory domain and long-literate society is not at home in the new physics, nor will it ever be. (McLuhan and Zingrone 122)

A bit of Debord’s fear echoes in a later passage, as McLuhan explains why we would all feel so anxious and afraid when confronted with the new electric media:

Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall

at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence ... Terror is the normal state of any oral society, for in it everything affects everything all the time. (McLuhan and Zingrone 127)

This is why he will claim, in *Understanding Media*, “If the nineteenth century was the age of the editorial chair, ours is the century of the psychiatrist’s couch” (McLuhan and Zingrone 150). This anxiety in the face of the new (which is in many ways a return to the old) is McLuhan’s jumping off point for developing media studies as a focused pursuit.

Though he acknowledges some of the same underlying anxiety as Debord and Dienst, McLuhan quickly moves on into examining what these new electric media do and how they mean rather than dwell for long on any melancholy about how they might be changing Western society. He believes that “our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot” (McLuhan and Zingrone 158). Rather, “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan and Zingrone 152). Thus, since

the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance[, then the] serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception. (McLuhan and Zingrone 159)

The media scholar should take her cues from such artists, tracing out the ways that new media themselves reshape human life instead of focusing on any narratives being delivered by the media. The true “content” of any media is the prior medium the new one extends: “program and ‘content’ analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge”

because (McLuhan and Zingrone 160). Returning again to Richard Lanham's "at versus through" vision metaphor, McLuhan's media scholar should privilege the ways television influences culture because it has forced us to look anew at the technologies that preceded it.

As for his conception of television in particular, and by extension his concept of the viewer, he claims TV is a so-called cool medium, which requires high levels of viewer participation in the construction of meaning because it is a relatively low definition medium. A hot medium, like cinema according to McLuhan, carries with it such high-definition, such an overwhelming load of data that its content's meaning is received almost exactly as it is presented. Whereas, cool media give the viewer such limited data that she must fill in the gaps to create and complete the content's meaning:

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, 'high definition.' A cartoon is 'low definition,' simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone. (McLuhan and Zingrone 161-2)

What's more, "the hot form excludes, and the cool one includes ... Intensity or high definition engenders specialism and fragmentation in living as in entertainment" because of the way it isolates and privileges a single sense (McLuhan and Zingrone 162). Despite contemporary television sets boasting ever-higher literal definition in terms of their pixel display, television as a medium is still decidedly cool. The oscillation between the action within the TV frame and the domestic environment beyond it still emphasizes the social setting of television as it was in McLuhan's lifetime. With the advent of the Internet and its relationship with TV content, I think one could argue that television has gotten even cooler despite the technological improvements in equipment.

According to McLuhan's theory, hot high-def media foster individual interiority, because it forces the viewer to develop specialized skills for consuming these media, whereas Cool low-def media foster a more social experience because they inherently require a wider but less developed sensory skill set. McLuhan characterizes the distinction in terms of individualization versus tribalization: "Specialist technologies detribalize. The nonspecialist electric technology retribalizes" (McLuhan and Zingrone 163). He continually returns to this dichotomy across his writings, suggesting that the ways alphabetic thinking engendered literacy, and in turn privileged sight over the other senses and individual interiority over social connection, are being undone and reformed in the electric age. McLuhan finds that the cool electric technologies are most dramatically reshaping the way we extend ourselves into the world through media. This is why television has had such a powerful impact on American culture. As "our private and corporate lives have become information processes just because we have put our central nervous systems outside us in electric technology," the cool, low-definition participatory impulse of television

tends toward making those processes more social (McLuhan and Zingrone 176).¹⁴ It is the social relationship that I find so central to *The Watcher*. The rhetorical moves I see Prestige TV making reinforce our relationships with other and Othered members of our society through our participating in television as a medium.

This, then, is why it is so important for us to understand what *The Watcher* tries to show us. Even if

the immediate prospect for literate, fragmented Western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his total interdependence with the rest of human society,

it is still incumbent upon the media scholar to help explain these changes (McLuhan 50-51). Of this ideal viewer, McLuhan writes,

If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives that they touch. (McLuhan 177)

The media scholar-viewer becomes like

the poets and painters who react instantly to a new medium like radio or TV ... [which,] with its deep participation mode, caused young poets suddenly to present their poems in

¹⁴ It must be noted that, while electric media tend toward the social, McLuhan also stresses the way they tend toward the simpler, even the simplistic. In rebalancing the extended senses, reintroducing aurality and orality to privileged positions alongside visibility, electric media tend toward delivering more universally consumable content in many ways. McLuhan would not assign value judgments on these differences (complexity versus simplicity), as he would ask us to adapt with the changes. It is the fear of the change that causes the anxiety he locates in these new media.

cafés, in public parks, anywhere. After TV, they suddenly felt the need for personal contact with their public. (McLuhan 177)

Additionally, the new viewer's scholarship is important because, "until we have mastered the multiple grammars of the new nonwritten media, we shall have no curriculum relevant to the new languages of knowledge and communication which have come into existence via the new media" (McLuhan and Zingrone 187). The Watcher is our means to understanding these multiple grammars., The "student of media" is The Watcher's primary focus, trying to reveal to her what Prestige's curriculum is.

As for to this particular moment in time, the Prestige era, and turning a critical eye to why it is this space in American TV history that would birth such a new visual rhetorical like The Watcher, McLuhan actually makes some interesting claims in his address at the Vision 65 conference that

The television form has remained quite invisible – and will only become visible at the moment that television itself becomes the content of a new medium. The next medium, whatever it is – it may be the extension of consciousness – will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form. (McLuhan and Zingrone 221)

I wonder if this might not be the Internet. The rise of this new medium coincides with the birth of Prestige TV as a genre in American television, and the explosion of subscription streaming services¹⁵ and their own original programming feels like an on-the-nose example of this new medium transforming TV into an art.

¹⁵ Also referred to as Streaming Video On Demand services, though this is a broader term that also incorporates the "watch on demand" services provided by cable and satellite TV carriers. These services are more like private lending libraries for already aired TV programming, though they also include the complicated hierarchies of on-

Putting the role of the Internet aside a moment, for the more typical TV viewer in McLuhan's paradigm, enjoying the pleasures of television is the entire point. This viewer does not concern herself with the techno-politics of the medium, because she is paying more attention to the content of the stories being told to her. She skips the commercials, because they bore her. What they say about who they think she should be holds no sway with her, unless, of course, they're funny or provocative. Story is paramount for her, and she is a sophisticated reader of story. However, she cares little for how the medium transmitting her stories might be changing her as a person.

What, then, would the McLuhan media-scholar-viewer look like in today's era of television as art? Like Debord, McLuhan does not provide us with a specific description of such a viewer beyond saying she would be like an artist in her appreciation of the subtle ways new media extend experience. If we in turn extend this description through what McLuhan implies about her, we find the media scholar-viewer to be very similar to Debord's emancipated worker-viewer. More explicitly than Debord, McLuhan suggests that this media scholar-viewer is a privileged member of American society.¹⁶ She is formally educated (and not just politically educated) with a specific emphasis on media studies. As an educated viewer, like Debord's heroine, she is also aware of the social nature of TV. She is fascinated by demographics and what they reveal about our expectations for how people consume TV, but she knows all of this depends on how television is reshaping our collective consciousnesses. If, for Debord and Dienst, the viewer was a worker lulled by spectacle, she is for McLuhan a scholar plugged into a

demand film (which may mean first run movies debuted through VOD as well as second and third run movies that originated in movie theaters).

¹⁶ Though McLuhan would lump all such viewers in with Western cultures in general, he does acknowledge the special place and power of television in American in particular. I therefore read his media scholar-viewer as an American.

new epistemological state of being. She watches TV herself, enjoying the stories being shared with her in ads and in shows, but she marvels more at their relationships with previous media than with their own internal pyrotechnics. She notes how like the novel a show seems and wonders if that novel might not have its own roots in something older that she has never encountered. TV is never just escapist fun for her, no matter how hard she works to let its stories transport her; she is never not aware of its place in a larger web of techno-power, nor of her own. Such an educated viewer is primed to notice and to understand the metaphors of social power that *The Watcher* represents.

This plugged-in-scholar must walk a very fine line as she attempts to read the televisual. Debord, Dienst, and McLuhan have hinted at the issue here, balancing a theoretical understanding of the medium with a practical application of it in daily American life. We feel a pull towards literalizing the theoretical in the face of such a ubiquitous machine as TV. It is this metaphorical/literal tension I find most fascinating about *Prestige* programming. In 1967, McLuhan claimed of the difference between movies and television,

in the movie you sit and look at the screen. You are the camera eye. In television you are the screen. You are the vanishing point as in an oriental picture. The picture goes inside you. In the movie, you go outside into the world. In television you go inside yourself ...

The TV screen just pours that energy into you which paralyses the eye; you are not looking at it; it is looking at you. (McLuhan and Zingrone 294)

This metaphor, describing our relationship to the televisual, often expresses itself quite literally within the content of television programming. What, then, is the relationship between such metaphorical seeing, literal gazing, and our position as both viewers and members of a wider society?

Describing The Viewer: Michel Foucault

I think Michel Foucault offers some answers. I want to look specifically at the way he conceptualizes surveillance, that politically charged mode of viewing that so defines our age, in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1977). My metaphorical Watcher, and the idealized worker-viewers that inform it, is born of an extrapolation from Foucault's own panoptic metaphor and influences by my experiences watching the series I will discuss in detail momentarily. I find it quite telling that the cinematographic moves informing The Watcher are found on display in television narratives dedicated to questions about criminality and justice in America. For the time being, let's delve deeper into how surveillance functions as its own metaphor before returning to its role in a specifically televisual landscape. The carceral surveillance state Foucault describes is an expression of anxieties a society will feel around its own power hierarchies. When he discusses surveillance as a disciplining aspect of penal reform, the root here introduces the idea of persons as objects of a sign (individuals are less the things pointing to signs than the sign of objectification pointing back at itself somehow). This new body of signs subject to "humanity" and nearly infinite types of illegality demand a semiotic response on the part of "justice." Thus, Foucault traces the surveillance state back to this reform. In order to determine every possible type of illegality it can then punish, justice must track every action, every movement, and every intention of the object-members of society in order to mark those actions/movements/intentions within its scope. But, because this marking must necessarily be carried out without the object-member's notice (so as not to skew the results, because this is ultimately all an act of Scientific Method, after all), justice must *mask* its own actions. The object-member cannot know when "he" is being observed but must assume "he" is being perpetually observed. Thus does the

panopticon come into existence conceptually as a form before being recognized as a necessity by political theorists and being “created” as a model of punishment “for real.”

That this ethereal panopticon exists before it is officially theorized suggests that it is ultimately an aesthetic. It is semiotic, a sign, before it is a thing. The simulacra, here, predates the reality upon which it is supposedly based. The panoptic is a representation before it is ever that which is represented. This suggests to me that it could potentially be but a choice amongst many possible representations, given that in describing a thing we are also always not describing something else. In choosing one word, we are expressly not choosing all other words. Thus each choice creates a sense of style, in that it reveals an operating logic behind the choice: here the panoptic, though a result of the objectification of the object-member through humanity, could manifest in any number of ways, but the influence of the Enlightenment and the organizing logics of that movement shape the way that this objectification reveals itself in punishment/justice, which I read as aesthetic. In classical rhetoric, Style is the choice of how to present an aspect of Invention. That presentation, that representation, is an aesthetic choice. Because the simulacra is not “really” the thing it represents, but rather so close to “real” as to be indistinguishable, it is still just a sign of the real. It is still but a choice within many. It is still just an aesthetic logic overlaying the semiotic shape of reality. In tracing the genealogy of penal reform, Foucault traces the genealogy of aesthetic change. The economy of power is an economy of Style. Power is aesthetic.

The Watcher Is a Power Broker in Our Economy of Attention

What, then, of television? If power is itself a form of Style, what then is the Style of Prestige television trying to accomplish? Prestige’s social potential rests in this equation. If

aesthetic choice is itself power-through-persuasion, then the cinematographic markers of any popular genre hold significant sway within its given medium. What sets *Prestige* apart, then, is the self-reflective nature of its aesthetic, which I term *The Watcher*. This embodied metaphor of *Style* appears aware of its mediating role between content and reception in this aesthetic of power in a way that changes meaning-making for the medium of television. Which leads me to ask, in what ways are the mechanisms of *Prestige* television “seeing” us viewers back? If the mechanisms of discipline run on “eyes that must see without being seen,” (Foucault 171) or rather the mechanics of discipline must operate in such a way as to elide their role in influencing the disciplined, how can we interpolate this onto the mechanics of the televisual, specifically with *Prestige* programming? I think the self-awareness, the metaknowledge of itself as historiographically television, suggests that *Prestige* is (could also be) aware of the disciplinary function of the televisual in American society. Much of what we now understand about our culture (how we create said culture) is transmitted through television, so the televisual is thus complicit in that understanding. It shapes the metaphors we use to come to understanding about culture long before the content of television reflects culture back at us. The oscillation between content and context that comprises Dienst’s flow seems to be at the heart of this mechanics. *The Watcher* appears to understand the disciplining power of television as a mass-medium in American society and uses its power to disrupt cultural expectations. *The Watcher* appears aware of television’s history, of assumptions about what television can be and do, and turns that history back on itself. What I will do here is highlight some of the various ways that *The Watcher* reveals itself through the aesthetic elements of the four shows I’ve selected: *Breaking Bad*, *Orange Is The New Black*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Wire*. Each series stands as a representative

of one of the four distribution models available during the rise of Prestige TV, and each reveals The Watcher in different forms.

Through The Watcher and Prestige TV, we can gain a better understanding of what America thinks of herself. Prestige programming deals with significant cultural issues like class, race, and gender; we can better understand how American culture came to tell stories about ourselves built out of cultural tropes. The stories we tell and how we tell them are important, and the stories we laud perhaps more so. With The Watcher, I claim that these particular lauded stories are disrupting hegemonic power structures subtly governing the way our society works. These television shows are helping change the way our society views itself. Can Foucault's own metaphor [to render visible those who are inside it] be reconfigured or adapted so that its connotations become positive and redemptive rather than negative and paranoid? If we look at this metaphor the way it appears on the page, it works to remind us that discipline makes the disciplined utterly visible to power. Authority sees all, and nothing can be hidden from or separate from discipline. I wonder, though, if we might turn that revelation around somehow. Perhaps the historiographic meta-awareness of Prestige can shine a light on those most removed from authority, those at the margins so often elided by content in such a way as to empower them as well. Because Prestige TV is aware of its own historiographic relationship to American Television at large, it is afforded the opportunity to comment on television through its content. Specifically, Prestige TV shifts the spotlight of narrative focus away from the kinds of figures most often centralized by traditional TV (white, male, middle class, heterosexual) and onto figures at the margins and edge of American society (people of color, women, lower classes, the LGBTQ+ community). These narrative shifts are echoed and bolstered by the aesthetic tendencies of Prestige TV as well. Cameras-as-Watchers redirect vision, be it with aesthetically

ostentatious or naturalistic *mise-en-scene*, underlining new narrative paradigms by way of self-surveilling style.

Describing a New Media Studies: Jason Mittell

Jason Mittell, a critic at the vanguard of the new form of media studies that I join with this project, describes *Prestige* as a genre-as-process of categorization, reminding us that genres are not textual, they are intertextual. A genre is a discursive practice, not a trait inherent in a single text. A discursive category, while often containing examples of similar formal techniques, is born more of critical discussion about certain TV shows than of any unifying intention or mode within those texts. Mittell demonstrates how *Prestige* in our most recent Peak TV golden age underscores ways labeling something as prestigious actually reveals more about the assumptions of the speaker than the programs and that complexity rather than quality is a better term for discussing shows as texts themselves.

Prestige, as such a discursive category, directly challenges traditional views of television complexity by countering the cliché that intellectuals avoid TV due to its lowest common denominator past. Mittell and his partner for this particular work, Ethan Thompson, note that,

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 ... 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 ... 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. (Thompson and Mittell 5, 7 emphasis original)

This is where the new breed of online television journalist comes in:

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 version 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. (Thompson and Mittell 3)

Likewise, the second decade of the 21st century changed the way viewers interact with their favorite shows because of this new form of television journalism:

Online television criticism has risen during this era, in both forums such as *Television Without Pity* and commercial sites such as *The A.V. Club*, providing thoughtful and humorous commentaries on weekly episodes and serving as sites of fan engagement and conversation. The Internet's ubiquity has enabled fans to embrace a 'collective intelligence' for information, interpretations, and discussions of complex narrative that invite participating engagement. (Mittell *Complex TV* 35)

It is not just the programming that has been labeled "prestigious" that is worthy of such revitalized attentions. Mittell identifies a larger trend in contemporary American TV that he calls "complex television." Previous generations of media scholars ignored television programming as texts because the assumption has been "that television storytelling is simplistic" (Mittell *Complex TV* 4). This isn't really true. In his work, Mittell tracks the complexity of narratives and storylines in contemporary television programming, occasionally referencing aesthetics when

they bolster his points about story structure. He devotes almost no time, though, to understanding the structure of the visual elements used to develop those stories. I, instead, focus on the interesting trends in visual rhetorics I've noticed particular to this strain of contemporary TV by using his arguments to expand the scope of our new field and trace out its implications on a broader plane. I then unsettle the staid metanarratives about media within the academy. Not only can such analysis expand our understanding of the way we make culture and shape people, it can revitalize the way we conceive of media institutionally.

The Watcher is a reflexive metaphor that does not point to itself alone. Mittell notes a new "operation aesthetic" shaping complex television narratives, a sort of meta-reflexivity¹⁷ whereby these texts "not only focus on the diegetic world offered by the [shows] but also revel in the creative mechanisms in the producers' abilities to pull off such complex plot structures" (Mittell *Complex TV* 42). The Watcher's meta-reflexivity underscores this connection between the worlds depicted on screen and the creative choices of television producers depicting those worlds. Mittell also cautions that

this is not the reflexive self-awareness of Tex Avery cartoons acknowledging their own construction or the technique of some modernist art films or Brechtian theater asking us to view the narrative artificially from an emotional distance; operational reflexivity encourages us to simultaneously care about story and marvel at its telling. (Mittell *Complex TV* 46)

The Watcher is that which facilitates this reflexivity. It is the intermediary between story and craft and the guide that

¹⁷ Mittell borrows this term from Jeffery Sconce's usage with genre films and television.

invites viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action that is typical of most mainstream popular narratives. (Mittell *Complex TV* 46-47)

Mittell, though, does not recognize the significance of what *The Watcher* represents as an aspect of visual rhetoric, instead subsuming these aesthetic choices into his conception of narrative complexity and television poetics. Though he insists that

you cannot simply watch these programs as an unmediated window to a realistic storyworld into which you might escape [since] complex television demands that you pay attention to the window frames, asking you to reflect on how it provides partial access to the diegesis and how the panes of glass distort your vision on the unfolding action,

Mittell misses the significance of complex television transforming these visual techniques because his attention is only on the plotting techniques (Mittell *Complex TV* 52-53). When once we shift our analytical attentions to the construction of the images on our screens, we can begin to see a much more extensive and complex interplay between those diegetic worlds, our own world, and the cultural connections between the two that ultimately shape both. In looking for evidence of *The Watcher*, I have found a broader understanding of just what complexity can mean on TV.

From here, we can use a variety of theoretical lenses to help read this complexity.

Feminist theory offers us an example for reconceptualizing such complexity. Using intersectionality and intersectional feminism¹⁸ as guiding metaphors, I chart a few of the

¹⁸ Though deeply indebted to Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and the work she did in coining the term “intersectionality” in 1989, I use the concept somewhat more loosely than she originally defines it. I try, and I

multifaceted ways that each of my four case studies have been marked as gendered, as raced, as classed. As Julie D'Acci has noted, “television representations of gender (like television representations of nation and other categories) indeed have very profound effects on very real human bodies, societies, and economics” (D'Acci 376). There are real implications for real life in these fictional stories about fictional people. If we assume that Pierre Bourdieu is correct and “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possess the cultural competence, that is, the code, in which it is encoded”, then we scholars need to make sure that the lacunae of our discussions about art provide room for those who don't yet possess that cultural competence (Bourdieu 2). What's more, we need to challenge the very roots of such competence. As Guy Debord reminds us of the power of the image, “the society that brings the spectacle into being does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely through the exercise of economic hegemony. It also dominates them in its capacity *as the society of the spectacle*” (Debord 37, emphasis original). Mass media disseminate spectacle throughout society; their images carry messages both explicit and implicit. If we continue to dismiss mass media like television as simply a commoditized product of the amusement industry, as so much media studies scholarship currently does, then we are ignoring those messages in these images. We are ignoring the real implications for real life in these fictional stories about fictional people.

Television, as arguably the most popular of contemporary mass media, can provide a site to push back against that hegemony. As Colin MacCabe has noted, “popular culture is simply a way of specifying areas of resistance to dominant ideological forms” (MacCabe 4).

Unfortunately, most current television research relies on theory that fails to address the inherent

believe that Prestige more generally tries, to center the experiences of the women of color encountered in my work. However, I also extend intersectionality to attempt to examine the web of social systems and power structures influencing all of the peoples my work touches.

possibilities of the medium. Specifically, many scholars write about television as if it were film or literature. It is not. As an example from audience reception theories, Jane Feuer reminds us that, “the ‘implied spectator’ for television is not the isolated, immobilized pre-Oedipal individual described by [film theorists] Metz and Baudry” but rather a post-Oedipal family member (Feuer 103). Television is a social medium, and theories that treat it as the same as film or literature ignore much of that social function. Deborah L. Jaramillo takes this one step further, castigating scholars who “have become reliant on terms that characterize television as a stylistic dumping ground that must pray the cinema will rescue it from its excessive or sheer lack of style” (Jaramillo 71). Even work such as Jaramillo’s still focuses on only one aspect of the televisual. She, like most scholars in the field, ignores the “intersectional” nature of television. I intend to present a new theory of mass media, one that incorporates the stylistic, narrative, industrial, social, and economic modes of media and allow for a more accurate discussion of the ways that mass media function. Ignoring any one of those modes ultimately re-calcifies theory around the traditions and paradigms of dominant/dominating ideologies. By incorporating the community-focused work of online television journalists alongside my own theory of televisual rhetorics, I believe this new vanguard of criticism can open up media studies for the academy and beyond.

Learning Through Play

I believe this “opening up” is vital because of the central role popular artifacts play in contemporary American culture. I turn here to Henry Jenkin’s sense of “convergence” and the ways he sees such artifacts influencing institutions and processes across our society:

Convergence culture represents a shift in the ways we think about our relations to media, that we are making the shift first through our relations with popular culture, but that the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world. (Jenkins 22-23)

For me, the key phrase here is “through play.” As all of the disparate media and their various technologies we interact with on a daily basis converge, as they all start to shape and influence each other through these converging interactions, they also shape and influence us. Even as we simply “play” with media as entertainment, our play is changing us. “Entertainment,” after all, “isn’t the only thing that flows across multiple media platforms. Our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels” (Jenkins 17). As McLuhan told us, these media act as extensions of ourselves.

We cannot treat them as isolated events, and we do ourselves harm by misunderstanding or even ignoring cultural touchstones that don’t quite “measure up” to established acceptable academic standards. Likewise, if Pierre Bourdieu is right and “the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education,” we within the academy have an ethical responsibility to try to understand fully these extensions of ourselves into the world (Bourdieu 3). The way we code our conversations about these shows shapes our understanding of the narratives depicted in them and their potential real-world analogues. How we talk about what we see with this educated eye actually creates the social class-groups and their zones of taste. When we claim the “popular” is for the dominated, we reify their domination. When we claim that legitimated art is the purview of the dominant class, we reaffirm the status quo. However, when we talk about the stylistic mechanics behind Prestige, we can open up access into the very heart of the culture/taste industry, into the very heart of power.

Paying Attention to Who We Pay Attention To

This is why the paradigm shifts of *Prestige TV* and *The Watcher* are so important. Taking advantage of convergence and flow,¹⁹ *The Watcher* influences our lives, relationships, and memories as we consume these shows. Jenkins counters the naysayer's argument that, as a commercial mass medium, television isn't capable of anything but reaffirming the hegemonic hierarchies of the late industrial capitalism which spawned it. He acknowledges that "the emergent knowledge culture will never fully escape the influence of commodity culture, no more than commodity culture can totally function outside the constraints of the nation state" (Jenkins 27). Just because, though, the connections are inescapable, this does not necessarily mean that these connections are the only influences on the new collective intelligence. In fact, it is through the myriad of mediated connections made possible by the influence of commodity culture that the way was paved for consumers to reshape and reform these very connections. The concern, then, is less that commodity culture plays a role in *Prestige TV*, but, instead, figuring out how to harness that role for the progressive ends I locate in *Prestige*'s visual rhetorics. Jenkins asserts that "we are trying to hammer out the ethical codes and social contracts that will determine how this power will insert itself into the entertainment system or into the political process" (Jenkins 256). If "some see a world without gatekeepers, others a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power" (Jenkins 18), then we must be careful that "a politics of participation starts from the assumption that we have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities" (Jenkins 260). In other words, using this power for good rather than

¹⁹ Here, I use "flow" as most traditional media scholars do, referring to the continual stream of information across technologies and ideologies that television relies upon. Richard Dienst's revision of flow, much more divorced from the industrial and commercial concerns underlying traditional "flow" from programming to advertisement to channel change and on, is so unusual as to exist in its own lexicographical space distinct from the wider conversation in media studies. Whereas Dienst is concerned with theoretical ideas about hypothetical television content, I consider the specificity of the particular and the real much more productive for thinking about the actual disciplining powers of television as a mass-media.

ill requires those of us participating in these convergence cultures to reach out beyond our own private screens and join in on wider conversations in wider communities.

To demonstrate some of the ways that my project joins these wider conversations, I will devote a chapter each to examining how *The Watcher* mutates across different popular series and distribution forms. In chronological order of their development in the TV industry, the four distribution models are: Broadcast, Basic Cable, Subscription Cable, and Streaming Video On Demand. Each model has its own affordances. I have selected prominent examples of series distributed through each of these models because of the subtleties in how such affordances inform the aesthetics of their varying series. Though their chronological development order provides one method of organizing my case study chapters and are important to note for the larger history of American TV's development, I have elected to follow a more theoretical hierarchy. Each case study demonstrates how *The Watcher* builds a new visual rhetoric on to of the techniques highlighted in preceding chapters. In other words, the fullest picture of what *The Watcher* is trying to accomplish does not necessarily follow any strictly linear chronological plan. My organizing structure follows the incremental accumulation of techniques across *The Watcher*'s development. I open with *Breaking Bad*, a basic cable awards champion following the path of one man into a life of crime and the ripple effect of his choice upon everyone in his path. Next, I turn to one of SVOD's early darlings, *Orange Is The New Black*, and look at the series' attempts to dissect the complexities of the American prison-industrial complex on the lives of affected women. Following that is a focus on *The Good Wife*, the standard bearer of broadcast Prestige and a potent exploration of race, class, and gender masquerading as an addictive legal soap opera. I wind things up with a chapter on crime drama meets city-as-character-study that has been called the best show ever on American TV, HBO's *The Wire*. With each case study, I

detail the various ways that The Watcher works within Prestige to influence viewers and reshape our understanding of otherness by making us “see” differently. Ultimately, I argue, Prestige TV wants to train viewers in empathy and uses The Watcher to re-center our acts of vision. Prestige uses The Watcher to make ideal viewers of us all.

2. *Breaking Bad*

Seeing The Other Through The Watcher

As a metaphor for the ways that the creative intelligences of people crafting Prestige television shows manifests through cinematography, The Watcher guides viewers in how to look at the televisual world contained within our TV screens. It also trains us in how to interpret meaning in those things we see. With *Breaking Bad*, The Watcher will ask us to take on the perspectives of The Other in the hopes that we can begin to empathize and identify with the types of figures generally ignored and elided by traditional television narratives. It disciplines our viewing habits by aligning our vision with those elided figures and then hopes we will make the conceptual leap to empathy with that cinematographic nudge.

***Breaking Bad*: A Prestige Primer**

Breaking Bad, which ran on the basic cable channel AMC from 2008 to 2013, tells the story of the rise and fall of Walter White. Perhaps more accurately, we might describe the show as the story of how Walt's true self was revealed through his decision to "break bad" and of all of the consequences that followed. The show challenges audience presumptions that a series' protagonist is necessarily then also a series' hero. The Watcher demonstrates that, in Walt's case, the two are very much not interchangeable. *Breaking Bad* introduces Walt as a one-time scientific researcher now turned mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher hiding a recent

diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer from his family:²⁰ his pregnant wife, Skylar; teenage son, Walt Jr; brother-in-law Hank; and sister-in-law Marie. Rather than turn to his family for support in this time of crisis, Walt turns to Jesse Pinkman, a former student of his who is now a small-time meth cook. A gifted scientist, Walt seeks the assistance of this kid he once wrote off as going nowhere in life in a plan to manufacture and sell only enough crystal meth to allow Walt to earn only enough money to provide for his family after his death. The limited aims of Walt's original plan quickly metastasize into grander and darker ambitions. Though Walt will remain convinced of his own good intentions almost to his death at the end of the series, *Breaking Bad* reveals just how well all such good intentions pave the road to hell. The regular cast is made up of Bryan Cranston as Walt, Anna Gunn as Skylar, Aaron Paul as Jesse, Dean Norris as Hank, Betsy Brandt as Marie, and RJ Mitte as Walt Jr. As the series progresses, Bob Odenkirk (Saul Goodman), Steven Michael Quezada (Gomez), Jonathan Banks (Mike), and Giancarlo Esposito (Gus) will also join the series regulars.

Heralded by popular critics as one of the greatest television shows in American history and featuring a series finale that broke ratings records for cable channels, *Breaking Bad* was one of the first of the new breed of shows identified as Prestige TV by the journalists who coined the term.²¹ While most scholars have chosen to focus on the show's depictions of masculinity and its

²⁰ For an interesting take on the role cancer plays in Walt's decision-making, see Mark Lewis' analysis, which focuses on how *Breaking Bad* plays with audience expectations about cancer patients in response to the "survivor" metaphor promoted by real world groups like "Livestrong" (and addresses the irony of that organization being founded by now-renowned cheat Lance Armstrong). In an echo of the "protagonist versus hero" dichotomy at the heart of the show, Lewis notes that, "the series subverts the notion of the cancer patient made noble through struggle by portraying a man betrayed by his own body who then becomes willing to betray everything else in the amoral service of his pride" (656). Playing with the literal Latin meaning of "malignant," Lewis notes that "the greatest subversion of the entire series is that Walt's diagnosis, rather than ennobling him as the survivorship movement would propose, catalyzes his transformation into a monster, his 'badly born' tumor causing him to 'break bad'" (664).

²¹ Noel Murray's article on how viewers and critics decide what is actually good on tv, is especially worthwhile in conjunction with discussions of Prestige given the way it acknowledges how the tropes of this genre have become institutional and some of the industrial forces shaping the wide televisual landscape.

relationship with the millennial White Male Anti-Hero trope,²² I instead focus on the series' stylistic choices as reflections of and responses to broader issues of identity and social power in contemporary American culture.²³

What I find most intriguing is how *Breaking Bad*'s visual rhetoric appears designed to engage with and challenge the already-calcifying image of that White Male Anti-Hero even as the show perhaps inadvertently helped to define the trope. Where other series might have privileged and romanticized a WMAH perspective,²⁴ *Breaking Bad* manages to keep Walt at the center of its storylines while decentering his point of view in the show's aesthetics. He remains

²² Jason Ruiz's work represents the group of critics who call *Breaking Bad* to task for limiting its depictions of Latinidad to stereotypes. For these critics, the limited portrayals of Latinidad are a result of "the white body politic of the United States" fearing Latinidad as a threat to its hegemonic dominance (Ruiz 38). Ruiz highlights, the ways "representations of Latinas and Latinos (the characters) have shifted [while] underlying presumptions about *latinidad* (the conceptualization of 'Latinoness') have remained intact" (Ruiz 41). Recognizing how different their stories are, Ruiz reads Tuco Salamanca and Gus Fring as characters providing "visions of *latinidad* that sharply contrast with each other, but [that] nonetheless both fit with longstanding views of Latinos and their relationships to White America that circulate in popular culture" (ibid). Tuco is the stereotypical image of toxic *machismo*, whereas Gus' characterization represents a growing complexity in that vision of Latin identity as the show goes along. Ruiz, however, ultimately reads in Gus Fring a character who "embodies a Latino threat, but... whose motivations exceed the mere fact of his *latinidad*" (Ruiz 54). I read the show's aesthetics as trying to present the pair, Gus and Tuco, on a continuum. For Ruiz, that continuum is less important in the long run than the dangerous ways a character like Tuco can continue and reify stereotypes about Latinidad. For him, it is the show's reliance on lazy and nefarious depictions of Latinidad through Tuco, Emilio, or Krazy 8 that matter, not Gus' complexity, because it keeps alive stereotypes and perpetuates the toxic notion that "brown threat" is all that Latinidad can mean.

Andrew Howe's "Not Your Average Mexican" offers a counter-reading. Citing the ways Latinidad has become enmeshed with criminality and the narcotics trade, Howe claims that *Breaking Bad* attempts to depict a wider variety of Latinx identities than are normally allowed in American media. Though Vince Gilligan's show is not an example of the sort of oppositional filmmaking advocated by Ruiz, Howe insists that *Breaking Bad* can still improve the perception of Latinidad via its cultural complexity. Howe points out that Tuco is a satire of Latin machismo and notes how limited Tuco's time on the show is in contrast with *Breaking Bad*'s less stereotypical characters, like Gus Fring. Ruiz assumes that Tuco's toxic masculinity is what the show considers an authentic portrait of Latinidad and that Gus is a caricature defined by everything he is not. Howe refocuses these claims that Tuco is a cartoon of the worst Latinx stereotypes and that Gus is an Uncle Tom-esque character designed by "well-meaning" white men to cover over their institutional racism with a Band-Aid or salve of a novel characterization. Rahter, for Howe, Tuco is the *caricature* and Fring the *man*. They assume the attention to minute detail present in every aspect of the series is but happenstance or hell-way-paving good intentions rather than an attempt to craft a fully realized character.

²³ There is a fascinating example of what a non-American version might have looked like in the Colombian television shot-for-shot remake of *Breaking Bad*, *Metástasis*. It aired for one season in the summer of 2014 on Caracol Television. This admittedly poor-quality show simply plugged in Latinx versions of the main characters on the original series. "Walter White" became "Walter Blanco," his wife, "Cielo Blanco," and his partner, "José Miguel Rosas," and so on.

²⁴ As, arguably, done with Tony Soprano and Don Draper on *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* respectively

the ostensible protagonist in the narrative, but it is the cinematography that reveals how the show's creators position Walt as villainous rather than heroic. The Watcher, as a rhetorical trope that metaphorically stands in for the creative intelligences guiding the television camera and which can thus pivot our attentions towards Otherness, instead invites us viewers into the perspectives of the people pushed to the margins of more typical WMAH-focused programming *Breaking Bad* is in conversation with. By involving us in Walt's crimes, The Watcher teaches us to empathize with the Others Walt leaves in his wake.

The Hero Metaphor

I argue that the specifically televisual techniques used in *Breaking Bad* create a sense of constantly shifting perspectives that ultimately implicate the viewer in how we interact with Otherness. When I say The Watcher acts as the unseen presence represented by the camera and bridges the metaphorical gap between the world of the show and the reality of the viewer, it is because the show's cinematography undercuts any potential hero edit the basic narrative of the series might suggest by continually reminding viewers that other people (Other People) populate the edges of this WMAH story. I believe this cinematography highlights the elision of minority communities like the Latinx and American Indian groups on the fringes of the show's narrative or the "women of circumstance" haunting the show's storylines. The Watcher's role in shaping our understanding of such elision evolves across the five years of the show's run and will highlight its own part in the othering of these minority communities while showing us viewers how we might all be able to change such thinking in our own reality. The Watcher does so by situating viewers within the heightened reality of *Breaking Bad*'s New Mexico, be it through elaborate Steadicam tracking shots or returning from commercial breaks via ambiguously

anchored Point-of-View framing. The televisual metaphors in *Breaking Bad* go beyond Aristotle's mere "bringing-before-the-eyes."²⁵ They implicate the viewer in the way identity politics are marked across the narrative. They also engage directly with traditional cinematographic tropes and motifs. Again, unlike many scholars²⁶ working with the series, I argue that this engagement ultimately reinforces a specifically televisual style of meaning making because of the way it defines itself through ostentatious cinematographic visual tropes. The ways *Breaking Bad*'s version of The Watcher self-consciously both manipulates viewers and plays with visual tropes clearly aligns it with the metatelevisuality of *Prestige*; the consequences of that playful manipulation also underline the implications of *Prestige* upon

²⁵ This famous description of metaphor comes from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, section III, lines 1411B per George A. Kennedy's translation.

²⁶ In a fascinating article, Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard read the aesthetics of the series in response to Roland Barthes' idea of Zero Degree Style. They claim that "zero-degree style in television is the sign of a passive act of creation whose aim is to best show what is taking place before it and which often takes the form of a high degree of theatricality" (Barrette and Picard 123). This counters a Second Degree Style that, in critical terms "takes the form of a commentary, editorial, or critique: a point of view that stands out, evaluates and judges, and thus contributes to public debate" (Barrette and Picard 124). If Zero-Degree attempts absolute verisimilitude, then Second-Degree style imposes an editorial objective onto a cultural artifact. For them, *Breaking Bad* heralds an aesthetic revolution in American television style because of that editorial objective. I would argue that the show's "theatricality" also plays a role in *Breaking Bad*'s culture critique, much like the style of sitcoms and soap operas also paints a complex picture of how the world works. Art need not be "journalistic" in order to contribute to public debate.

Brett Martin has noted in his book, *Difficult Men*, that "*Breaking Bad* is by far the most visually stylized show of the Third Golden Age. It employs and empties the entire filmic bag of tricks – from high-speed time-lapse montage to wide-open landscapes that are more John Ford than anything a revisionist western like *Deadwood* could ever allow itself. The signature shot, used at least once per episode, is a fish-eye view up from under or inside some improbable place – a table, a toilet, a bag, a massive chemical boiler. Seen once, it is a cool effect; twice through ten times, a self-conscious gimmick; sixty-five times, something approaching a guiding ethic" (Martin 276). The show's ostentatious style, here, serves a specific political purpose, forcing viewers to reconsider the meaning of such a visual tic like these wide-angle shots. Martin also seems to suggest that the story *Breaking Bad* showrunner Vince Gilligan wanted to tell was always meant to be a specifically televisual story. In *Difficult Men*, Martin discusses the work of some of the series creators who helped define early *Prestige* TV and notes that most of them thought of themselves as failed filmmakers turning defeated to television instead. Gilligan, however, chose the TV industry specifically over the older and more officially legitimated film industry. Martin's history reveals that Walt's story was always meant to be told through television. If Don Draper and Tony Soprano were "supposed" to be characters in films and not *Mad Men* or *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire* was supposedly an attempt to keep alive a story initially designed to be expressed through long-form print journalism, *Breaking Bad*, then, escapes some of the genre baggage that haunts those other shows. As Martin puts it, what "Gilligan had in mind, though, was something deeper – a radical extension of the antihero trend that had by then become the signature of the decade's TV" (Martin 267). This hits at the heart of *Breaking Bad*'s aesthetic, its direct engagement with television as television. The show was founded on an engagement with what TV means as TV, so it is little surprise that the series' aesthetic will also help come to define televisuality.

American cultural production in general through the ways the series' aesthetics engage with racial and gender construction.

Learning to Read A Style Bible

I believe we can look at the formal, visual features of the series to see how *The Watcher*, as a rhetorical tool for positing new ways of seeing difference on TV, reconstructs race and gender. From season one, episode one, *Breaking Bad* establishes a house style followed by directors of future episodes and seasons. A so-called "Style Bible" lays down the ground rules for filming a television series. *Breaking Bad*'s features the prominent use of hand-held and Steadicam cameras for spontaneous movement within the frame as well as numerous medium and medium close-up shots keeping attention on the faces of actors. The Directors of Photography will avoid establishing-wide-shots to further stress how attention should be on the personal and intimate relationships between characters, again emphasizing how insular is Walt's world and how little room those in his orbit afford marginalized members of their wider community. The occasional yet consistent use of time-lapse and time-acceleration frame rates during montage sequences privileges psychological and emotional truth above supposedly objective chronological truth. Through color timing, a desaturated neutral desert-scape color palette visually echoing the desert landscape of the show's location shoots conveys the sense that the characters are perpetually in the same emotional location, whether indoors or out. Also, frequent framing angles set within literal frames (like through car windows and in the reflections from the glass facings of paintings) remind us always of the camera's presence itself. Director (as well as series creator and showrunner) Vince Gilligan and Director of Photography John Toll lay the groundwork of all of these rules for the rest of the series in the pilot episode. The

aesthetic mission statement for *Breaking Bad* could be termed as “affecting emotional naturalism through hyper-stylization.” The shooting bible, along with set- and character-design, suggests not a depiction of real life in Albuquerque, New Mexico so much as a version of that reality skewed just a bit by the perspectives of its characters. So-called emotional naturalism comes into play in as much as the hyper-stylized visual elements are not a part of the narrative’s reality. The actors’ performances tend toward naturalistic and restrained instead of theatrical and histrionic; the sets used are generally meant to appear realistic, as if you walked into a real suburban home or commercial car wash; the lighting design suggests ambient diegetic sources as much as possible. The Watcher’s camera, in contrast, embraces affect and in turn generates new frames of vision to be read as affects. The Watcher depicts pointedly those very elements of *mise-en-scene* which appear most distinctly manipulated by the artists creating these frames. The way all of the naturalistic elements are captured by the camera and then represented back to the viewer insists upon them being noticed as acts of artistic choice.

Breaking Bad is a narrative very deliberately framed, drawing attention to itself as an act of framing, an act of visioning. Whereas other self-reflexive shows (like one of *Breaking Bad*’s televisual predecessors, *Miami Vice*) point back only at themselves with their elaborate framing displays, *Breaking Bad* wants viewers to notice its style so it can change the way we understand our relationship to the show and to our society. Here The Watcher refuses to let us forget its presence, because it needs us to pay attention to how it is changing us. To use a colloquialism that would be right at home on *Breaking Bad*, The Watcher shows us how the sausage of social consciousness gets made.

The series is able, in large part, to challenge social conventions because it so freely experiments with televisual conventions. For example, it has fun with the “bottle episode” trope

in S02E06, “Peekaboo.”²⁷ Bottle episodes have traditionally been a way for productions to save money by limiting filming to a single set for the entirety of an episode (hence, “bottling” in all the action). Using the formal boundaries of a “bottle: as a launching point, S02E06 traps Jesse in a single set, the disheveled house of a couple he has been charged with intimidating. The limited location echoes and amplifies Jesse’s anxieties, holding him in something like an emotional pressure cooker. The joke here, though, lies in the set where Jesse is stuck having been constructed only for this episode and then expensively struck thereafter. *Breaking Bad* uses the rules of the “bottle” to play with form while also spending time developing Jesse’s character.

Similarly, the show rewrites the rules for cold-opens, taking these short pre-credit sequences to unexpected creative heights. Critic Rossend Sánchez-Baró pays extremely close attention to the show’s visual elements as he reads closely the way the show uses these opening teasers, because, “complexity is revealed through the ambiguity of decontextualized images, most of which are concentrated in the cold open sequences” (Sánchez-Baró 143). In these cold opens, the show disrupts both temporal and narrative expectations, often to the point of the teasers functioning like stand-alone short films.²⁸ They act as a metonymy for the show at large, short capsule versions of the genre hybridity deployed throughout the show’s run. Like the larger

²⁷ I will discuss to the specific visual rhetoric of this episode shortly, the show will return to a more traditional approach to a “bottle” in a famous episode, “Fly,” S03E10. Directed by Rian Johnson and shot by Michael Slovis, S03E10 is set almost entirely inside Gus Fring’s meth superlab as Walt obsessively chases down an insect that threatens to corrupt an important batch of methamphetamine. The episode rather delightfully turns the insect into a metaphor for Walt’s deteriorating mental state, punning on his psychological “interiority” and the multiple physical forms of “interiority” found throughout the filming set.

²⁸ In S02E07, “Negro y Azul,” the cold open is in fact a standalone music video otherwise divorced from the narrative world of the series. It features none of the recurring cast and is not acknowledged by characters once the storyline-proper begins following the title card break. The song in the video tells a version of Walt’s story, a sort of “previously on” segment found on many TV shows. For a more thorough exploration of the series’ use of formal play in this cold open and the genre of *narcocorridos* music video show in this sequence, see Deborah L. Jaramillo’s work on *narcocorridos* and “Negro y Azul” specifically. This video/cold open sequence has developed a life of its own, making its way into regular rotation by *narcocorrido* bands and on other television shows. Interestingly, the Mexican television show Jaramillo examines, *La Reina del Sur*, has now been remade for American audiences by the basic cable channel USA as *Queen of the South*.

series, these opening acts disorientate the viewer by disrupting standard serial generic expectations. Not only do the cold opens stoke curiosity and create suspense about what might happen narratively, they are also another instance of *The Watcher's* pedagogical cinematography retraining the viewer in how to consume the series. They help rewrite televisuality by retraining us in what to pay attention to on screen.

In *Breaking Bad's* new televisuality, we viewers are never able to sit comfortably in our knowledge and expectations. The show challenges us, instead, to get comfortable with uncertainty. Using Walt's chosen *nom-de-guerre*, Heisenberg, and its intentional reference to the scientist and his famed principle of uncertainty, *Breaking Bad* refuses to let viewers get comfortable with even our understanding of how time works on the series. The series deploys flashbacks like strategic weapons, keeping us off balance and watching always from a realm of uncertainty. Within a given episode, flashbacks interrupt Walt's present storylines, introducing temporal confusion into the story's narrative trajectory, even if only for a moment when we once again regain our temporal bearings. Their unpredictability within the larger structure of episodic time follows the unpredictable and uncertain path Walt carves through his world. Walt himself exists within that realm of uncertainty, temporal and narrative. Like Schrödinger's poor cat, the Walt we witness in the series is never fully alive or dead, moral or amoral, always somehow both at once on a metaphorical level. He is a rationally minded man acting in increasingly irrational ways. Walt's amoral behaviors all stem from his uncertain mortality. Alberto Brodesco notes that, "present-day American TV series incorporate in their narrative the complexity or incomprehensibility of the world, admitting an essential cognitive frailty" (Brodesco 65). Uncertainty is a vital feature of American televisuality for Brodesco, and *Breaking Bad* embodies that mystery in Walt as Heisenberg.

While Brodesco focuses specifically on character portraits, his argument can be extended across Prestige TV and the ways its narrative tropes mimic the puzzle box.²⁹ Everything becomes a sort of mystery, not necessarily to be solved but to be struggled with. I believe this refigures temporality: instead of a focus on the past (repeating history in an eternal return) or obsessing about the future (worries and anxieties over what might come to pass in that eternal return), the puzzle box grounds us in the present, playing over the mechanics of the here and now. Past causality and future potentiality blur into a presentist insistence on the now.

All Style, No Substance?: *Miami Vice* As A Precursor to *Breaking Bad*

That conscious insistence surfaces through many guises, revealing itself through the ways *Breaking Bad* toys with conventional televisuality. However, *Breaking Bad* and Prestige TV in general are not the first to employ complex visual storytelling techniques, just like Prestige is not the first genre to challenge expectations about what TV can mean in America. Both the show and the new genre make great strides by building up from innovations that came before. They together begin the process of transforming what the medium could be and express for the culture at large to pave the way for *The Watcher*'s complex rhetorical maneuvers, and both Prestige and *Breaking Bad* do this in conversation with the creative work done for the medium in prior TV golden ages. I argue that *The Watcher*, as a metaphor for understanding the way Prestige evolves televisuality, came into existence after many earlier series had long since left the airwaves, but its underlying mechanics have evolved from narrative and aesthetic concerns raised by such

²⁹ According to general usage amongst the sort of online TV critics who first coined the notion of Prestige TV as a genre, a "puzzle box" or "mystery box" show has come to be known as a series built around a central mystery meant to play out over the course of a series rather than an episode. Instead of the traditional "procedural" formula for mysteries, the Puzzle Box Show is a modern invention designed to amplify fan engagement through inviting speculation about possible ways minute details might fit into the long-term narrative of a show. ABC's *Lost* is typically cited as both progenitor and zenith of Puzzle Box series. For more discussion of how this trope is growing within the industry and how critics use the term, see Chaney, Rahaman, and Wells.

antecedent shows. In *Breaking Bad*, I see The Watcher building upon and extending the cinematographic moves made by these prior series.

One of the most significant antecedents for *Breaking Bad* is Michael Mann's *Miami Vice*. Beyond the more superficial connections between the shows, like focuses on crime and drug storylines, ostentatious cinematography and *mise-en-scene*, the shows are also linked through the ways race and masculinity are variously coded into the logics of each series. Mann's visually ingenuity changed the way a standard classical genre like the cop show could look on American television, though it unfortunately failed to connect those stylistic innovations with the sort of political social moves *Breaking Bad* is able to make. *Miami Vice* never made the turn towards understanding its relationship with the viewer, as a social act, which left its metanarrative reflexivity pointing to nothing so much as itself. Perhaps unintentionally, this stylistic navel gazing reinforces a racist visual code.

For *Miami Vice*, this racial logic actually puts its aesthetics and narrative into conflict. This show's "look" was built on and further deepened a glamorized image of the drug economy in south Florida during the Reagan era. The conspicuous consumption of products like clothes and cars, which made the show famous, was bound to the almost obscene amounts of money circulating through Miami's drug economy. Crocket and Tubbs,³⁰ the protagonists who worked as undercover vice detectives, drove supercars seized from captured drug dealers and wore flashy suits in order, ironically, to blend in with those drug dealers. Their whole aesthetic performance was predicated on the idea that the criminals they were chasing led alluring hyper-capitalist lifestyles that American viewers should want to emulate, at least according to marketing

³⁰ Ricardo Tubbs, played by Philip Michael Thomas, always received second billing on the show, both in world and our world, behind Don Johnson's Sonny Crockett. Tubbs' status as an AfroLatino going undercover within the predominantly Latino world of *Miami*'s Miami drug trade was occasionally hinted at but never explored in any truly productive way. The white character, Crockett, pulled too much focus instead. I will return to this problem shortly.

strategists trying to sell those same luxury goods to *Miami Vice* viewers during commercial breaks.³¹ Crucially, the overwhelming majority of these fashion role-models, the cartel figures, were presented as Not White. Most were Latino, many were foreign (often Colombian). This sets up the Brown characters as Other and fetishizes them through these fashions. Their “exotic otherness” made the characters and their world exciting and attractive to the typically white, middle class viewer prefigured by the show through main character Sonny Crocket, played by Don Johnson.

Johnson’s Crocket was considered a trendsetter for American men in the 1980s. The beachy casual suits created for the character by Giovanni Versace, a virtual unknown until his work on the show made him a household name, became the *de facto* uniform for fashionable young men across the country. Crocket’s backstory and professional clout positioned the character as the model of (White) American masculinity, all of which was pointedly set off by the (Brown) villains he typically bested episode to episode. This whitewashed paragon of machismo was built from the stuff of unexamined cultural appropriation. That Crocket’s creators never really stopped to consider what such appropriation said about and did to the Brown bodies they stole from lend credence to the sense that *Miami Vice* was, in the end, all style and no substance.

The show’s creators built a glamorous world of flashy surfaces, a seeming embrace of a postmodern fascination with style. When that style, however, meets the hard-boiled narratives of a police procedural, the dangerous othering of non-white figures only amplifies. As Jon Stratton

³¹ As Cathy Schwichtenberg notes in her critique of *Miami Vice* in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, the show: Is like a fourth dimensional commodity catalogue or a kind of ‘through the looking glass’ from which there is no exit. Here, Freud’s ‘uncanny’ animates the pages of *Vogue* and *Gentleman’s Quarterly* which meet at the interstices of *Architectural Digest* and drive off in a BMW commercial. This is the ‘twilight zone’ of late capitalism as scripted by Armani and Versace. Indeed, *Miami Vice* is a shimmering, iridescent confluence of commodities. As such, it doubles as a showcase for the display of sensual commodity surfaces which whisper the pleasures of excess. (Schwichtenberg 48)

notes, *Miami Vice* “played to growing (white) American anxieties in the early 1980s over the increase in the number of Hispanics entering and taking up residence in the US” (Stratton 196).

These anxieties manifest aesthetically, because

What appeared as a cutting-edge show when read in terms of a postmodern preoccupation with style, was, in terms of its values, a very conservative program that was in consonance with the anxieties and attitudes that marked the early years of the Reagan presidency. (Stratton 197)

Steven Sanders echoes Stratton’s reading when he observes that “*Miami Vice* locates the dissolution of the American dream in the corruption of US foreign policy – specifically in its aim to achieve hemispheric if not global hegemony” (Sanders 73-74). White Americans want access to the wealth of the Brown foreigners while simultaneously fearing and blaming those Others as a destabilizing force. In the Miami of *Miami Vice*, Brown bodies are illicit, dangerous objects to be fetishized and thus contained before they can unsettle a White status quo. Again, despite making significant leaps in what televisuality could look like, *Miami Vice* was unable to do more than highlight its own “coolness.” At best, it allowed a flawed system of representation to continue. At worst, it fostered an understanding in its viewers that their racist fears were well-founded and justifiable.

The difference, then, between *Miami Vice* and *Breaking Bad*’s complex aesthetics of race seems to lie in the former show itself being complicit in racist othering while the surveilling Watcher aesthetic of the latter functions to try to indict racial othering. To see the difference in how a voyeuristic, as opposed to surveilling, camera makes meaning in *Miami Vice*, I turn to Nurit Seewi’s observations about the visual and acoustic voyeurisms on display in the earlier series. Seewi notes that the watching of bodies on display figures prominently in many *Miami*

Vice episodes where viewers “very often share [the protagonists’] perspective by looking with them through gun barrel or binoculars” and that characters’ knowledge of being watched themselves often determines plot outcomes (Seewi 156). For Seewi, “since the protagonist in *Miami Vice* usually remains distant from his objectified target [i.e. the Latino criminal] by observing rather than getting in touch with it, the *Miami Vice* audience shares in this dissociation and is even further remote” (Seewi 157). This critic insists that all of this observing in *Miami Vice* is an act of narcissism, allowing for fantasy and wish-fulfillment on the part of the characters and the viewers. Because the show’s style provides no real room for a sense of the racial Other as anything beyond an Object for the Subject’s proxy pleasures, the show itself is not capable of the engaged observational stance that will help define later Prestige TV. Quality TV, the prior golden age genre to which *Miami Vice* belonged, initially engages with voyeurism and the televisual in ways that lay a formalist foundation upon which will be built the disciplining surveillance of Prestige’s Watcher style, but it could not make the final conceptual leap to disrupt hegemonic practices. Its flashy cinematography and *mise-en-scene* merely reified those practices. *Breaking Bad*, however, combines ostentatious visuals with the crime drama’s narrative tropes to complicate and dissect those hegemonic practices.

The Style Bible Evolves

The deconstruction of such hegemonic practices is built into *Breaking Bad*’s Style Bible, the patterns of cinematography set forth for the series by the creators in the pilot episode. With heavy use of hand-held cameras, generally emphasizing shakiness rather than trying to minimize that effect, the Style Bible suggests that the camera itself is a constant and unseen presence within the world of the show. It is always watching. It is always choosing what to look at. This is

an active role, the sense that the camera is selecting rather than merely recording images; there is an intelligence behind the images that imply active *watching* rather than passive *seeing*. This camera is not merely all-seeing; it is intelligently choosing how it makes its observations. The Watcher is a metaphor of this intelligence. In *Breaking Bad*, The Watcher underscores the role of the actual camera and camera operator in the meaning making process by emphasizing the camera's presence as an analog for social interaction with and amongst viewers. The shakiness of hand-held photography anthropomorphizes the camera, emphasizing the human operator behind it while also trying to mask the existence of said specific human observer. In the rare instances where long- and extreme-long shots are used during filming, the hand-held motion effect is tempered and converted into a stabilized Steadicam or dolly tracking shot, but the telephoto lenses used to capture these shots still suggest *a* watcher, someone surveilling the scene at a distance, now, instead of up close with the characters. This reads as still close, personal somehow, like the camera in documentary *cinema vérité*. It is not as clinical or distanced as we will find with the telephoto-lensed extreme-long shots in something like *The Wire* (which show is the subject of Chapter Five). Even at a distance, the *Breaking Bad* camera still *feels* intimate and human, like a person eavesdropping on the misadventures of Walter White and company.

In S01E02, Reynaldo Villalobos takes over as Director of Photography for the rest of the season. Villalobos will extend and complicate the aesthetics laid forth in the S01E01 bible in ways that will also extend and complicate the thematic and political implications of those aesthetics. In particular, Villalobos' camera will literally locate people lingering around the edges of both the frame and the narrative who are otherwise unnoticed by the characters in the story. He shows the audience, through his camera, that real people are in fact watching along

with The Watcher's camera. His camera reveals that the supposedly empty desert is actually peopled by American Indians and Mexican nationals often forgotten or elided within White consciousness. These native figures stand at the edges of the story like the camera lurks at the edges of the scene.

This tendency is literalized within the plot of the show beginning in episode S01E06, "Crazy Handful of Nothin'," directed by Bronwen Hughes. The scene opens with an oddly dramatic shot: the camera peers at the foot of a bathroom stall, spying Walt's shoes as he vomits into the small toilet in the high school boy's restroom. The shot is framed to mimic the motion someone would make upon entering a public restroom to check and see if it is occupied. The upper two thirds of the frame are filled with the flat, faded pink of the stall wall; the bottom third of the frame is composed of the concrete floor, the base of an industrial toilet, and Walt's shoes and pant cuffs. The image is an immediate contrast to the brightly lit and more traditionally framed classroom scene that proceeds it. Shortly after the bathroom scene starts, just long enough for the image to register but before any aural context to have kicked in for the viewer, we hear the sounds of Walt retching. They correspond to subtle movements of his feet within the two frames of the shot, stall-and-floor and our home TV screen. The shot then cuts to a wider full-length view now from the implied far corner of the bathroom, as if The Watcher backed away from the stall at the sudden sound of sickness. This is quickly followed by a cut to a close-up shot, now at head height rather than foot, of the top of the stall as Walt stands and grasps the stall wall for support, the camera lens focusing on Walt's fingers as they grip the fleshy-colored metal. We hear Walt make more sounds of quiet distress as the hand-held camera shifts slightly, as if The Watcher is a little embarrassed to be intruding on such a private personal moment. From this framing, at the end of this shot, we hear a voice from behind and off screen ask, "You

okay?” The shot then abruptly cuts to a medium wide angle from shoulder height tilted down toward waist height. Walt crosses the frame, somehow exiting the stall in the temporal space of the cut, heading toward the sink with Hugo, the school’s American Indian custodian, in the background. The shot seemingly violates the 180-degree rule as well as temporal chronology. This shot is distractingly odd, the temporal and spatial discontinuities reaching out to us viewers as if to scream, “Pay attention to this! It means something!”

I would argue that this shot, when taken in conjunction with the previous three, suggests that the camera is acting in the stead of another person stumbling upon Walt at a vulnerable moment. This weird shot will eventually reveal the physical presence of Hugo, first as a set of legs in frame and then as a reflection in a mirror as the shot shifts to observe the two figures through the looking glass. It also strongly implies that Hugo is also the physical presence recoiling from the sound of vomiting but who then kindly steps forward to help via the sound bridge of his dialogue line. We see a moment of the two men’s interactions through their mirror reflection, Hugo comforting Walt with a gentle “I got it, Mr. White,” the hand-held camera shakily panning and tilting up to look at the men’s faces through the mirror. The camera can’t bear to look directly at them, though. As Hugo says, “don’t worry, you got kids to teach” while he cleans up Walt’s mess, the camera turns away to provide Walt some privacy in his embarrassment, echoing Hugo’s own movements out of both mirror- and camera-frame so Walt might feel less painfully self-conscious. This odd shot sequence continues, pulling back slightly and tilting down to follow Walt’s hangdog face as he leans down to rinse his mouth at the sink before returning to his classroom.

Hugo then offers the sick protagonist a stick of chewing gum in an act of compassion lingered over by The Watcher. This lingering reminds us viewers that there are people behind the

camera and subtly guides us toward contemplating our relationship to both these creators and to their creation, Hugo. As the camera pauses to observe Hugo's kindness, we do, too. Later on in the episode, when the lab equipment Walt has stolen from the chemistry supply room is discovered missing and its theft is immediately blamed on Hugo, we feel the sting of that injustice against this kind, and innocent, man. He is an ancillary figure at the school and, thus, becomes an easy scapegoat. A small amount of marijuana found in his personal vehicle is enough to convince the authorities that he committed Walt's crime, even leading some of the police to suspect that Hugo might be behind the newer, more potent methamphetamine flooding the Albuquerque market. There is a running joke throughout the episode that everyone seems to assume that possessing and using pot are the worst of crimes even while they are dealing with meth kingpins, real and imagined. This joke, and the storyline behind it, underlines the point established by Villalobos' camera in: the native peoples populating the margins of this community are not considered real people by those at the heart of this tale. They are not considered potential witnesses to crimes committed in the desert; they are not considered innocent before being proven guilty; they are not considered full members of society. The Watcher's camera-work reminds us that such people *are* present, *are* part of this community, *are* witness to the actions of the more privileged people in established positions of power and authority around them (like the police or the school board, or the showrunners behind the series itself). Hugo's storyline and The Watcher's cinematography, in response, demonstrate the ways native peoples are socially and narratively elided throughout the world inside *Breaking Bad* and real-world Albuquerque.

As the series progresses, however, this aesthetic tendency of the camera to capture images of ignored human beings who witness the actions of central characters drops away as The

Watcher begins to use instead objects typically assumed to be devoid of their own “perspectives” rather than humans as the camera’s perspectival anchors. The Watcher moves away from literalizing a character’s observational stance through embodied Point-of-View. Instead, the camera looks out into *Breaking Bad* from more abstracted POV. It moves us viewers metaphorically closer to the camera’s own “perspective” as the motivated gaze of human beings is replaced by the disinterested position of objects. The Watcher, in effect, cuts out the proverbial middle man. As he takes over DP duties from Villalobos at the start of season 2, Michael Slovis oversees this transition away from using living human figures as the filming camera’s perspectival proxy. In their stead, Slovis employs inanimate objects as witnesses. More specifically, he frames shots from the perspective of the object as if it were consciously watching the plot unfold.

Perhaps the show was adapting its bible to account for the greater racial and ethnic diversity amongst its recurring cast, with the introduction of Tuco Salamanca (played by Raymond Cruz) at the end of S01E06, for example. After touting his “connections” up to Walt, in this episode Jesse must follow through on his claims and actually make a business connection with Tuco to move more of the new meth Jesse and Walt are now making. Because he doesn’t actually have the clout to pull this off on his own, Jesse is forced to rely on his friend, Skinny Pete, to set up this dangerous introduction to the notorious drug lord. In a scene that must relay all of these complex psychological motivations, The Watcher resists aligning us with our typical hero, Jesse. Instead, this sequence is focalized through our villain, Tuco. But before we can understand the importance of how The Watcher focalizes characters, we need to look at how this sequence works cinematographically.

Eschewing a traditional wide-establishing shot, this sequence opens with a medium-wide frame in an exterior daylight set-up. The Watcher's camera, with its tell-tale handheld shake reminding us of the way *Breaking Bad* suggests rhetorically the embodied intelligence behind these cinematographic choices, follows behind Jesse from shoulder height as Skinny Pete leads them across a street and approaches a non-descript white two-story building. Several men are loitering outside the building's entrance, clearly acting as guards for the place. The camera cuts to the reverse medium-wide shot, now from the POV of the door guards as they watch Pete and Jesse approach. Without The Watcher changing the overall framing, Pete steps toward the camera to transform what had been a medium into an extreme close-up, his body taking over the frame in an echo of his macho posturing as he steps to the guards.

Across the next edit, the reverse-shot of the main door guards is in extreme close-up, too, throwing Pete's aggressive stance back at him. This shot underscores that the guards are not intimidated by Pete no matter how tough he tries to appear. The extreme close-up cuts to a medium two-shot, bringing a henchman and Pete into frame together to capture the way the guard physically pushes Pete out of frame-center. Pete retorts, "Yo, man, I'm Skinny Pete!" as the camera tracks back wider to reveal a wary Jesse now within frame at Pete's side. The guard's visual power position is echoed by a quick insert shot of the other henchmen watching the interaction (where they had been in a different depth plane in of the blurry background for the previous sequence). We cut back to an extreme close-up of the door guard as he makes a jerking gesture with his thumb up to the top left of frame, implying the presence of a security camera. Then The Watcher's camera shakily tilts up to look at its said security counterpart. The Watcher returns to Pete for his response in a medium shot at a profile side angle as the thin man's gaze follows the guard's gesture up to the CCTV camera.

The Watcher intervenes into the POV's of the scene now, as the next edit takes us to a view of that CCTV camera's footage. Our own TV frames fill with a blue-shifted monochrome image of Skinny Pete's face, a downward angle that finds Pete positioned slightly right of center frame. Jesse slowly enters the edge of the frame as both characters make direct "eye contact" with the CCTV camera lens, and, by extension, us home TV viewers as well. Initially, this CCTV insert seems unmotivated, not associated with any particular character's perspective. As the scene continues, and as repeated viewings underscore, this CCTV insert shot will prove to be aligned with the man controlling the security (camera and henchmen). I believe that from this insert shot on, the rest of this scene is focalized through Tuco Salamanca even as he remains off-screen for the majority of the sequence.

All of the "real" footage³² suggests the presence of a physical body observing Jesse and Pete's entre to Tuco's den, with the framing heights and handheld motion mimicking the idea of an invisible man roving around the periphery of the action/frame. We know all of the henchmen are already on watch, having seen them in establishing shots, so this camera presence isn't aligned to any of these specific characters (and certainly not with Jesse or his friend). This roving observer seems somehow superfluous to the meaning of the sequence's cinematography unless it is aligned instead with the perspective of an as-yet unseen character: The Drug Boss.³³ And so the CCTV camera, an inanimate object with no will of its own, becomes a proxy for the Drug Boss. It acts as his literal stand-in, its physical presence in the scene allowing the Boss to remain protected from view. The inserted shots from the POV of the CCTV camera itself, pointedly

³² Unmediated by the CCTV camera footage

³³ Since the Style Bible equates this sort of observational force with either the sort of people and objects ignored by characters within the plot, like the Mesoamerican Indians in the deserts or the mirrors and windows that reflect the action back onto the characters in the plot, this then hints that this boss will be a person of color, unlike Jesse, Walt, or Skinny Pete. Through focalization and the use of the mediated CCTV footage, The Watcher puts us viewers once again into the perspective of a person of color, much as it did earlier through Hugo.

filling our entire TV frame without revealing the physical edges of any security monitor, mean that we viewers are looking at the CCTV footage as if our own TV screens were the monitor of this unseen yet implied Boss observer. We take on the POV of the man in charge of this particular criminal enterprise whenever our TV screens switch from the “real” to the mediated-CCTV footage. Retroactively, this also changes how the roving observer of the “real” footage functions in relationship to these insert shots for the overall scene and for us home viewers. This roving observer, a sort of henchman of vision, moves around to gather the detail and information for the Boss that the CCTV’s limited angles can’t alone provide. Here, The Watcher functions like the Boss’ will embodied. The Watcher moves to see and observe what the Boss wishes he could but can’t via just his security feed.

As the roving eye of the Boss, The Watcher also seems to suggest the psychological state of this as yet unseen crime lord. Constantly moving and jostling for a better view, the cinematography seems to imply that the off-screen Boss doesn’t fully trust the observational prowess of his on-screen henchmen, human and CCTV alike. Their reports back to him cannot satisfy his anxious curiosity; they cannot tell him as much as he demands to know. The cinematography also implies that the Boss is physically jittery, on edge, perhaps (!) on drugs. He can’t stop fidgeting even as he refuses to risk leaving the safety of his room to reveal himself just yet to the interlopers, Jesse and Pete. This character we viewers are aligned with through The Watcher here is dangerous: anxious and suspicious, even paranoid, but still powerful enough to command all of these underlings despite his nervousness.

Given that the CCTV camera footage is eventually revealed within frame as an image being viewed by Tuco, the other characters gazing into these cameras are also making a sort of eye contact with him via his security feed. This transposes, then, Tuco’s POV onto all of us

viewers. We become Tuco through this vision, his act of seeing embodied in ours. Perhaps this bridges the gap suggested by Villalobos' camera in previous episodes, finally allowing a place within the narrative for people of color. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem that American Indian characters, so often the silenced witnesses in season 1, find a voice in later seasons. In their absence from the edges of the frame and from the center of the plot, the series reinforces the elision suggested by the camera. The continued elision of Native Americans inside *Breaking Bad*'s world is highlighted by the increase in Latinx actors and characters on the show, complicating the questions of race and who still exists at the edges of social constructions and definitions of privilege. The Watcher will continue to ask these questions while highlighting the many Mexican (of both Spanish and native descent) ancillary figures as the series progresses.

One of the most significant moments when the series turns its attentions directly towards its Mexican characters comes during the cold open of the season 3 premiere episode. The cold open for S03E01, "*No Más*," directed by series star Bryan Cranston, subtly depicts the melding of Spanish and native Mesoamerican cultures while also signaling that these cultural practices occur outside the normal environment of the show's main action. Here The Watcher, that cinematographic metaphor for Prestige's progressive social pedagogy, lets viewers know that we are witnessing something special, arguably even unique for the series, as "*No Más*" opens with a vibrantly saturated golden sky. The color palette change instantly marks the location of this cold open apart from the desaturated neutral Albuquerque, New Mexico we have come to know. Though the desert scrub around mysterious figures crawling on their bellies in the dirt looks similar to the desertscapes the show has typically associated with Native peoples, the shifted color timing suggests this desert is Sonoran rather than the American expanse of Chihuahuan we

have already encountered on the show. It is Mexico rather than New Mexico, and the implications are that *Breaking Bad* has entered uncharted territories.

The cold open is also our first introduction to The Cousins, who we will learn are related to Tuco, who was eventually killed by DEA agent Hank Schrader after the kidnapping of Walt and Jesse. We also will learn that these two fearsome cousins are more intimately entwined with the Mexican drug cartel than even their not-so-dearly departed psychotic relation. Just as the scene's color palette tells us that we are dealing with some new place, The Cousins' behaviors alongside the crawling figures signal that we are encountering a wholly new way of looking at the world. As the Cousins join those *campesinos* making their way down a dirt road, the camera tracks alongside the road to reveal that all of these people are pilgrims to a *Santa Muerte* shrine. The specter of this Holy Death will haunt The Cousins and metaphorically color all of their time on the show. Spooky, uncanny, and still somewhat inscrutable even when explained, The Cousins' version of Latinidad is bound to those same qualities in their patroness. Where the American Indians at the edges of the New Mexican desert are unseen and unobserved, these cultural *mestizos*, then, are inscrutable and unknowable.

Santa Muerte, officially condemned by the Catholic Church and no longer formally recognized by the Mexican government, is considered the patron saint of cops and criminals and the LGBTQ.³⁴ She protects her followers against violence, specifically the violent deaths that tend to follow with the illicit drug trade. Though venerated for generations in the privacy of Mesoamerican homes, public perception of *La Santa Muerte* is a 20th century phenomenon. Be it through depictions and appropriations of José Guadalupe Posada's "La Calavera Catrina" image or through tabloid news reports of things like the discovery of a *Santa Muerte* shrine in the home

³⁴ Among many other things. She protects a lot.

of notorious gangster Daniel Arizmendi López, the belief has become a sort of iconographic shorthand for a very particular type of mediated mystical Mexican culture.

In *Breaking Bad*, her presence has a two-fold function: it allows the show to introduce the terrifying characters of The Cousins in a deeply uncanny way that demonstrates their focus on revenge against Walt's Heisenberg persona, and it adds a new wrinkle to the way native peoples are represented on the show. The camera toys with us as viewers in this scene. At first, the crawling figures appear strange, their behaviors disorienting viewers just like the unexpected shift in color timing had. Then the camera shifts perspective, dropping down from standing height to share space at road level and follow The Cousins. The two men are immediately identifiable as significant to the story because they look so different from the other figures on the ground.

With that vertical shift in perspective, however, comes a shift in meaning. The peasants stop being the *strange* ones; The Cousins take on that mantle. They don't seem to fit in with this golden-hued world, so as the camera tracks along beside them, our confusion grows about what is happening and what the action means. However, once The Cousins place Heisenberg's image on the *Santa Muerte* altar, that confusion dissipates. Suddenly, the whole scene becomes clear, its meaning legible, but now through The Cousins' perspective; the *campesinos* will remain ancillary figures, and their personal motivations are still shrouded from our view. As the narrative becomes legible through The Cousins' relationship to our known reality (i.e. Walt), hindsight then shines a light onto these ancillary peoples. We have a glimpse into their worldview because we can place The Cousins in both the New Mexican world we have come to know in previous *Breaking Bad* seasons and this new Mexican world we have not yet begun to explore. The Watcher has taken note of and shown us another group of native peoples, even as

the show's storyline will continue to ignore them. As a rhetorical stand-in for the Prestige showrunner's attempt to forge new social relationships between content and consumers, The Watcher has given us a new frame of reference that even it cannot fully comprehend. So closely aligned with the typical American *Breaking Bad* viewer, The Watcher here still requires a known known in the Cousins through which to orientate the world of the Mexican *campesinos*. Nevertheless, The Watcher and the show recognize that they are not prepared to understand these farmers as fully as they do characters at the heart of *Breaking Bad*, but it is important that The Watcher draws our attention to these Others and acknowledges the separation in its stead as our cinematographic social mediator. These pilgrims are worth being seen and noticed, even as (or perhaps because) they seem so different to who we have known before. What's more, it is also important that The Watcher and the viewer acknowledge without fetishizing or exoticizing the lives of these people that may seem unfamiliar in the moment. *Breaking Bad* relies on this sense of perspective, the unexpected repositioning of the televisual frame, for challenging viewer expectations. Doing so puts the viewer into a new social relationship with another society.

In a much more literal way, Michael Slovis' camera³⁵ uses mediated imagery of physically bounded frames like windows and mirrors and surveillance cameras, often placing the viewing audience in unexpected positions of "embodied" perspective.³⁶ As we watch, his camera aligns us with characters or perspectives that the narrative itself doesn't allow for or explain. Sometimes this means we get a glimpse into the POV of recurring characters: in S02E01, for the DEA agents watching recorded security footage from Walt and Jesse's

³⁵ I draw attention to Slovis' work in particular here because he seems to be directly responsible for this revision to the Shooting Bible. Rather than being a technique developed by many artists over the course of the series, this change can be traced back to a single, specific hand. Slovis himself is literally redirecting The Watcher's focus and changing its relationship to both the story it is telling and the viewers following along with it at home.

³⁶ The home viewer's television screen becomes another framed image, as Slovis' camera finds reflections within which to watch the event play out. Our screens become sites of the perspectives of images themselves.

methamphetamine robbery, the feed itself is alternately the shot and is in the shot, allowing us to experience simultaneously both Hank and Gomez' viewing perspective and the perspective of the event they are witnessing. The way this security feed both creates meaning for the audience and is understood by in-world characters shifts depending on its stance from the home viewer's perspective. When we watch Hank and Gomez watch the feed, these images are simply plot points, narrative beats in the crime story Hank and Gomez believe they are in. We home-viewers simply watch a narrative unfold before us. When, however, the feed fills our screen entirely and the monitor frame disappears from our view, we are more intimately aligned with Hank and Gomez; we are inside their perspective and inside their story. Given that we as viewers have already experienced the events displayed through this feed, the redundant oscillation between watching Hank watch a screen and being Hank watching a screen implicates us in those events. By repeating an image in multiple framing contexts, I believe *The Watcher*, as the showrunner's most powerful visual rhetorical tool for retraining how we viewers see our TVs, draws our attentions to the differences between these acts of viewing. Compounding this, we home-viewers are also privy to things that Hank and Gomez are not, and this knowledge thus also aligns us with those committing the crimes seen in the feed. Even though he isn't in the room anymore, the back-and-forth of point-of-view shots brings Walt (or Heisenberg) into the plot through us as home-viewers. This oscillation, however, only becomes apparent when both narrative and visual storytelling techniques are examined together. Too often, visual cues like these are overlooked by scholars trying to read meaning in the show.

Protagonist Versus Hero: How *Breaking Bad* Redefines Both

While critics like Jason Ruiz would claim an insistence on channeling everything through Walt's perspective is the show relying too heavily on white protagonists to tell Latinx stories (Ruiz 45), I would counter that such claims are predicated on the conflation of "protagonist" with "hero." The Watcher has been working to establish its own suspicions about Walter White from the first episode, and it challenges the seemingly automatic way the story positions him as good simply because he is central to the narrative. For instance, in S01E01, when Walt interacts with the drug dealers, Emilio and Krazy 8, Jesse's employers and Walt's entry into the wider world of drug distribution in Albuquerque, Ruiz reads the exchanges as "simply the first time in which [Walt meets] terrifying Latino nemeses and then [outsmart] them" (ibid). If you pay attention to how The Watcher frames these interactions, though, you can actually see the show resisting this cliché. Walt is consistently framed off center, even if just subtly in some shots, suggesting that the camera is shooting from the perspective of someone outside of his periphery and just outside of his conversations. This unseen figure, The Watcher, actually occupies the center of the screen, and it uses its central position to push Walt into the margin of his own story. The Watcher is literally resisting framing the show's protagonist heroically.

One reason for this is because The Watcher and the *Breaking Bad* are much more interested in presenting Jesse Pinkman as the complicated hero figure. An early fan favorite, we meet him accidentally falling out a window as he flees both cops and the partner of the woman he was having sex with in that upstairs bedroom. He is a buffoon from frame one. The show reinforces this characterization in this moment as Walt recognizes his old student. Jesse is set up as a bumbling and lazy fool. The camera will catch him loudly proclaiming his secret recipe for making meth (which absurdly includes adding chili powder to the formula) and then driving

around in a car with a vanity plate advertising his street name (“THE CAPN” for Cap’n Cook). Toward the end of this episode, Jesse ignores Walt’s specific instructions and forgoes his former teacher’s cautions about chemical reactions, leading to Jesse to try dissolving a human body in his bath tub only to send that then disintegrated tub crashing through the floor in beginning of the next episode. Jesse is a clown, the mirror image to Walt’s brilliant and calculating protagonist. It is in this precarious balance, though, that *The Watcher* begins to defy traditional narrative expectations, guiding us viewers to see the underlying *true* archetypes for the characters by guiding us in how to look at them on our screens. The Watcher is our cinematographic teacher, training us to read in visual rhetoric that which plot and dialogue only hint at in the show’s earliest stages. Walt becomes the villain, and Jesse becomes the hero, though neither are ever painted in such broad or black-and-white strokes. Instead, through its manipulation of audience expectations by way of cinematography, *The Watcher* shows us how to see the hero within the clown (and the bastard within the scientist).

For Jesse, his hero turn begins in S01E04, “Cancer Man,” directed by Jim McCay and written by Vince Gilligan. Growing paranoid and anxious after using the potent meth that he and Walt cooked, Jesse seeks comfort and attempts to reconcile with his estranged family, returning to their home and hanging out with his considerably younger brother, Jake. When their parents find marijuana in the house, they angrily assume that it belongs to Jesse, who immediately takes the fall for his beloved little brother. We have seen the quiet joy and peace he felt in the home, and we then watch as he stoically leaves behind a possible chance at a normal life so his family can continue to pretend that Jake is the “golden child” to Jesse’s “black sheep.” In this same episode, Walt, struggling with the financial burden of cancer treatments, sets an obnoxious man’s car on fire in retaliation for the driver’s rude behavior. The moment plays as empowering and

exciting for Walt, as if he is taking back some of the agency he felt he lost in admitting he has cancer, but it is pointedly set against Jesse's more quiet family drama. Walt's actions make the more dramatic splash, but Jesse's sacrifice reveals his more heroic character.

While I argue *The Watcher* has been positioning Walt as a villain from the start through the ways sequences like these undercut the more simplistic wise man/clown dynamic between White and his protégé, many fans of the show consider the death of Jesse's girlfriend, Jane Margolis, as the most obvious turning point. Over the course of season two, Jesse falls in love with Jane, who is his neighbor/landlord and also a recovering heroin addict. The pair fall back into drug abuse together, leading them to collapse in Jesse's bedroom in S02E12, "Phoenix," directed by Colin Bucksey and shot by Slovis. This scene, arguably one of the most important across the entire series, is constructed out of a variety of oddly motivated framing set-ups. Though Walt carries the narrative weight of the sequence, the individual shots appear narratologically distributed between him and, for lack of a better word, no one in particular. The focalizing back-and-forth begins once Walt makes his way to Jesse's back door and breaks into the younger man's bedroom. We cut from a medium nighttime exterior shot alongside Walt as he fumbles with a cardboard patch on Jesse's busted door, a shot which feels aligned with Walt's interiority even if not his literal first-person perspective. An edit takes us to our first unmotivated framing, an interior wide shot looking back at the door as if from someone seated at the foot of Jesse's bed. The previous Walt shots have made clear that neither Jesse nor his girlfriend, Jane, could be focalizing this camera angle, as we previously see both lying unconscious on his bed.³⁷

³⁷This was courtesy of an insert first-person shot from Walt's POV as the older man peeks through window blinds to see if Jesse was home. The image features the blinds in a blurry extreme foreground depth plane with significant shake from the handheld camera mimicking Walt's motions as he angles for a clearer look.

Within this unmotivated frame is one of Slovis' patented sub-frames of Walt's face peering in at "us" through the space created by the broken door panel.

Across the next edit, the camera repositions to an extreme close-up of the door's knob as Walt's hand reaches through the space of that empty window pane. Without cutting, the camera³⁸ pulls back slightly and pushes off to screen left as Walt opens the door and enters, then resolving the push/pull move to end up at shoulder height in an extreme close-up of Walt's face. The movement in this shot resembles a kneeling person standing and backing up inside the bedroom to make space for Walt's entry, a sense that the shake of the handheld camera reinforces. We return to Walt's POV in the next shot as he stares down at Jesse and Jane from above at the foot of their bed. A quick insert shot of an extreme close-up on Walt's face follows before jumping to a new set-up that I refer to as the "pillow POV." A low angle wide shot peers up at Walt from the other side of the room, the camera sitting right behind Jesse's pillow at the head of the bed. Jesse's head and dangling hand are visible but blurry in the foreground of the frame as the depth of field focuses our attention on Walt further away. Crucially, there is a subtle shake visible, telling us viewers that this camera is handheld and not secured in a dolly or on a tripod. This shake, like the standing movement in that earlier shot, suggests here less the camera-as-machine than the camera-as-embodied-observer I call *The Watcher*. Building from this very human movement, *The Watcher* here tilts up as Walt approaches the camera in order to rouse the unconscious Jesse.

When we cut back to a "Walt" shot, the focalization feels different, as if no longer aligned with his interiority. The camera rests just behind and slightly above Walt's left shoulder, as if this new perspective is now focalized through the unseen observer who had to get out of

³⁸Which had been hovering just above doorknob height

Walt's way earlier. This Watcher gazes over Walt's shoulder as the older man tries to nudge the younger awake. I refer to this new framing as "standing POV." From "standing," we cut back to "pillow," Walt now sitting on the bed and bringing the wide shot into a medium-close-up. It's then back to "standing" and the narratological distance from Walt highlighted: the older man is seated now but our camera-observer remains standing. From here, The Watcher sees Jane roll onto her back as Walt fails to notice.

We then cut to a quick "pillow" shot as Walt forcefully shakes Jesse, a shot that seems to function primarily as a set-up to a new unmotivated framing with the next cut. From an extreme close-up of Walt's face, the camera tilts and pans down to the left to track Walt's gaze to the nightstand where Jesse and Jane's drug paraphernalia rests. This is quickly followed by a new unmotivated angle seemingly from said nightstand looking over in a straight shot, not at Walt but at Jesse's face. We cut back to "pillow" for a moment before transitioning to yet another new unmotivated angle. I call this one "ceiling fan," as it appears to be an overhead wide shot of the whole room framed from somewhere near the center of the room's ceiling. It's in "ceiling fan" that Walt puts two and two together, story-wise. It is also the framing in which Jane vomits, aspirates, and begins to choke.

A quick cut back to "pillow" shows Walt finally noticing Jane in distress, though The Watcher allows us home viewers to keep focus on her rather than Walt when it cuts not back to "standing" but rather to a "ceiling fan" now pushed into a medium two-shot of Jane and Jesse that totally excises Walt. He returns to frame in the next shot, a "pillow" that watches him cross the room to Jane's side of the bed. As Walt walks, "pillow" smoothly tracks right to perch behind Jane's pillow instead of Jesse's. A quick unmotivated extreme close-up on Walt is followed by Jane's "pillow" in medium to watch him hunch over her softly writhing figure.

Here, *The Watcher* enters the strangest yet most narratively salient portion of the scene. From Jane's "pillow," we cut to a Dutch-tilt angle looking out to a wide of Walt with Jane a blur in the extreme foreground. Had Jesse been conscious and awake, this would be his first-person POV, watching his estranged mentor struggle to decide how to respond to Jane's dangerous situation. From seeing what Jesse should have, *The Watcher* cuts to an overhead close-up of Jane that, when her awkward diagonal position across the frame is taken into account, appears to be Walt's first-person perspective looking down at her from the bedside. In the midst of a series of embodied yet disinterested shots, *The Watcher* remarkably drops in first-person views from our two series leads. Sort of. Walt *sees* his shot, but Jesse remains unconscious throughout. Only we viewers are privy to the information that Jesse would be desperate to have in our place.

Over the next seven shots that end the scene, we cut back and forth between unmotivated close-ups on Walt, Walt's first-person POV, Jesse's would-be first-person, and "ceiling fan." Throughout these, *The Watcher* keeps our attention on Walt's actions after the dramatic climax of Jane's death. We see him slowly acknowledge her, see him gasp and even cry, but we also see him collect himself and grimace as the scene cuts to black and the episode ends. I argue that all of this, the first-person perspectives in particular, work to assure that we viewers know that Walt has made a specific choice in this moment. He has elected to let a young woman die in order to advance his own plans. Jesse doesn't know about this decision; Walt never really tells any other character about it either.³⁹ *The Watcher*, though, makes sure we watch it happen. Seeing what Jesse should have, observing from the edges of the scene, both suggest that Walt is consciously letting Jane die. The shots, however, from Walt's direct perspective underscore and prove that he is aware of what is happening and how he could have intervened. Walt will go on in future

³⁹ Walt does admit to Jesse, in the series finale, that he played a role in Jane's death, but even then he doesn't fully own his responsibility.

episodes to tell himself a new story about what happened, to assuage his guilt and make the whole affair somehow less his responsibility, but The Watcher has assured that we know the truth. We know what evil Walt is capable of, even before the rest of the characters around him do. The Watcher's camera captures White's inner struggle and ultimate choice to let the young woman die. Walt will convince himself that he acted in Jesse's best interest, but The Watcher observes the selfishness of the act. The Watcher, this embodied presence that metaphorically observes what characters won't, takes note while Jesse cannot and makes sure that we home viewers pay attention to Walt's villainy.

Protagonist Versus Hero: Jesse & Gale & Toxic Masculinity

That villainy comes to a head later when Walt manipulates Jesse into doing the unconscionable and The Watcher makes sure to position us viewers in the most uncomfortable way for the act. In S03E13, "Full Measure," the talented if odd chemist assigned to assist Walt and replace Jesse in cartel kingpin Gus Fring's meth superlab, Gale Boetticher, answers his apartment door expecting a friendly face. The scene opens inside Gale's apartment with an extreme close-up shot, not of the man himself but of his ringing cellphone as it sits unnoticed on a smattering of compact discs on his coffee table. Gale fails to hear his phone, a call presumably from Fring's fixer, Mike Ehrmantraut, warning the painfully sincere chemist of the darkness about to fall; Gale's phone is drowned out by the twee "world music" on his stereo and the wailing of a tea kettle on his stove. We enter the scene and Gale's private world through extreme close-ups on these seemingly innocuous inanimate objects, phone and kettle, as Gale remains a blur at the periphery of his own story. The previous scene between Ehrmantraut and Walt laid out the latter's brutal plan for forcing Jesse to murder Gale by convincing the young meth cook

that the goofy older lab assistant was secretly plotting to murder both Jesse and Walt. Needless to say, the quaint domesticity of Gale's home routine gives the lie to Walt's manipulations of Jesse. The Watcher here makes certain that we viewers understand that Gale is no true threat, focusing on that forgotten phone to underline how tragic the rest of the scene truly is, for both Gale and Jesse who knocks on Gale's door a few shots later.

By the time a sound bridge connects that knock with Gale's motion across his apartment, The Watcher's camera has moved from its tight framing on objects to a position mimicking the embodied perspective of a person standing alongside Gale. Initially this Watcher stands to Gale's right just beyond the arcing swing of his opening front door. With the movement of the door, masking a wipe edit, The Watcher takes a new position just behind Gale's left shoulder. From this observational vantage point, *we* see Jesse revealed within the open doorway, a sound bridge of Gale tentatively saying "Hi" linking the shot to the next, an extreme close-up of Jesse's back as he draws a pistol from his waistband. The camera, handheld shake evident in the tilting push up, tracks with Jesse's hand as he points the gun at Gale's face. The gun here is the focus, clear in its own isolated depth plane as Jesse's foreground- and Gale's background-bodies blur. The gun is the center of frame vertically and horizontally, though the shake of the handheld keeps that center in subtle motion. From this framing, we viewers are watching, through The Watcher, the gun over Jesse's right shoulder. Gale's shocked face slowly comes into focus as the field depth expands to include his reaction along with the menacing weapon.

After a quick cut back to the tea kettle shot framing from earlier to place the drama of the gun in contrast with the gentle pleasantries it destroyed, the gun-and-Gale shot returns as the older man tries to calm and placate Jesse in what he assumes is an attempted robbery. Gale tries to be as charming and unthreatening as he can and clearly has no idea what is really happening. We

then cut to a shot of Jesse from very tight over Gale's left shoulder, as if The Watcher stepped in to try and intervene but couldn't figure out how. Instead we watch as the gun blurs out in center-of-frame, the depth field intensely focused on Jesse's face instead. From this view, The Watcher has us devote our attention to Jesse's emotions rather than the dramatic action of the gun. In contrast, the gun-and-Gale shots seem to emphasize the action, the physical threat against a man rather than that man's emotional experience of the event. The back-and-forth of these two framing set-ups asks us viewers to consider how Jesse feels in performing the action, moving Gale again to the edges of what should be his scene according to traditional narrative logic. We are instead asked to focus on what being tasked with shooting Gale does to Jesse.⁴⁰

Once the camera assures we are watching Jesse's psychological journey, The Watcher only then introduces Gale's emotional state in the next shot, an extreme close-up on his face with a very blurry gun in foreground left. Gale begins to understand what's going on, the realization dawning across his face. A sound bridge of Gale quietly pleading "Don't do this" links to the

⁴⁰ This scene, then, summarizes all of the various and toxic forms of "manliness" on display in this world. Walt and Gus, through their relative and relatively-stable positions of power, see themselves as *appropriately* masculine. They both condone and are capable of shocking violence, though they insist on remaining removed from violent acts and demean the underlings they force to carry out such brutal business. When Jesse breaks down in response to murdering the awkward and effete Gale, his masculinity is called into question by both of his bosses. Jesse's masculinity is feminized while he's crashing. His inability to remain stoic and impassive in the face of his trauma leads many of more violent and aggressive men around him to question his manhood.

It is the feminine aspects of Jesse's character, though, that redeem him from the evil in which he participates. The compassion he shows to others and the empathy he expresses, both regularly gendered as feminine, may get him caught up in horrible situations but also allow him to escape at the end of the series when all of the supposedly "masculine" men around him are dead. It is the toxic nature of that masculinity that makes villains of characters like Tuco, Gus and Walter. Walt is driven by his narcissism and his need to control everything around him, and this drive is positioned on the show as "manliness" in the same way that Tuco's psychotic unpredictability is. Because, though, we know Tuco exists as a caricature of the worst of Latino stereotypes, we know his masculinity, and thus Walt's, is not held up as a shining example of what the series thinks men should be. Though feminized (it is not coincidence that his catch phrase is "yeah, bitch," after all), Jesse's emotionality is presented as entirely justified by The Watcher: he is under near constant physical threat as soon as Walt returns to his life. He is made to suffer, but he is not shamed by the show itself for responding to that suffering. His value to the larger *Breaking Bad* narrative lay in his openness to his emotions. He is punished because of his relationship with Walt but escapes (ultimately) because he is the heart of the show. Walt, in contrast, dies because he is so fully committed to his selfish sense of masculine accomplishment that he can never really understand how badly he fails everyone around him.

next shot of an extreme close-up on Jesse, the gun a blur in the far right foreground, as huge tears well up in the young man's eyes. Gale is unable to maintain eye contact in the next shot as he murmurs helplessly. Jesse's face is partially obscured in his next extreme close-up, as if he can't bear to show himself and hides behind the gun. Gale, also hidden by the blur of the pistol which offers him no such protection as for Jesse, ventures a quick glance back up into his assassin's face before the final cut back to Jesse. In this last shot, that extreme close-up with the gun in right foreground obscuring part of Jesse's face, the full weight of the moment crashes down. Jesse's jaw trembles, tears flow down his cheeks, and The Watcher's camera pushes in and right to face Jesse head on. Making direct eye contact now with The Watcher's lens, Jesse's gun muzzle points straight ahead dead on at center frame. The camera pulls focus, moving from Jesse's eyes to the muzzle of the gun. As the muzzle resolves into clarity, the shot cuts to black and a gunshot bridges the gap, echoing into the blackness of the end of the episode.

Here, Jesse's blocking does not move him to face the camera. Rather, the camera moves to completely displace Gale in the sequence. It does not *become* Gale, though, since the camera is established at the top of the sequence standing just next to him and no editing cut masks the reframing. Instead, The Watcher moves into Gale's place and "occupies" the frame so that Jesse is shooting The Watcher, not Gale. However, because Jesse is making direct eye contact with the camera lens, thus now with The Watcher, he is also making eye contact with the viewer. He shoots us.

Jesse had been sent to murder a seemingly harmless man on Walt's order, because Walt had grown paranoid and convinced of a Gus Fring plan to have Gale ferret out all the secrets to their special meth formula and then have Walt executed. He had promised Jesse that he would handle this horrible act himself, but instead Walt forces the young man to commit murder

essentially because it was the most expedient and efficient way of getting what Walt wanted in that moment. Walt completely ignores the psychological toll all of his manipulations and machinations take on Jesse, who The Watcher observes breaking down under the trauma of his relationship with his former teacher.

Protagonist Versus Hero: Women of Circumstance Get a Hero's Edit

Though Jesse's destructive relationship to Walt is the core of the series, Gilligan and his team make sure we viewers pay close attention to the ways *Breaking Bad*'s men also abuse their relationships with women across the show's world as well. The series returns frequently to images of the way toxic masculinity destroys the lives of the women within its orbit. Be it through Walt's relationship with his wife Skylar, Jesse's fleeting relationships with women like Jane or Andrea, or even one-off stories about purely ancillary figures, *Breaking Bad* attempts to dissect through The Watcher's cinematography some of the ways that conflating *power* with *right* is both misguided and destructive.

Vince Gilligan's series challenges both hegemonic social and televisual standards in as entertaining a manner as possible. Its central figure is a charismatic man who slowly reveals the narcissistic monster at his core. An unfortunate downside, though, of structuring *Breaking Bad*'s challenging narrative around such a charming bastard is that many fans misinterpret Walt's behavior as heroic, misinterpreting Walt's use of his power. Audiences have been so trained to read characters at the center of a story as the heroes of those stories that it can be difficult for us to see how someone like Walt exists in a more complex relationship with narrative and viewer. For *Breaking Bad* in particular, this played out with many fans over-identifying with Walt to the point that they lashed out even at the actor portraying a woman confronting their hero for his

misdeeds. Anna Gunn, the actor behind Walt's much put-upon wife, was tormented by viewers and labeled the villain of the show by these overzealous fans. Her treatment, while utterly unwarranted, illustrates the very toxic masculinity and hegemony that *Breaking Bad* sought to depict and dismantle.

In the words of scholars Holly Jeanine Boux and Courtney W. Daum, Skylar is a "woman of circumstance" (568). She is an entry point for the plight of women enmeshed in the criminal justice system, trapped between the intimates directly involved in the drug trade putting them into sometimes unknowing danger and the law enforcement officials threatening them with punishment for tacit involvement in their intimate's crimes. For Boux and Daum, Skylar stands as an example of "the double-bind faced by thousands of real women who find themselves in similar situations" (Boux and Daum 568). Thanks to the infamous negative audience response to Skylar, Anna Gunn is a woman of circumstance now, too.

Crucially, there is a vital difference between Skylar, Gunn, and the "thousands of real women" represented: being white and middle class affords Skylar a level of privilege within these cultural systems that the more typically poor, undereducated, women of color experience as women of circumstance. In effect, Skylar exists as a bridge back to a discussion about the women taken advantage of and silenced by the cultural apparatus of our carceral state while also taking advantage of some of those institutions, suggesting that Skylar's race and class actually allow the story in *Breaking Bad* to continue far longer than would have been possible for more typical real women and, "likely contributed to Walter and Skylar's ability to elude government detection" for as long as the show needed to tell its story (Boux and Daum 587). As we saw earlier with Hugo the janitor, the American carceral state would have intervened faster for a woman of color and circumstance.

Boux and Daum's reading of the role of family's circumstances in Skylar's decision-making forms an interesting counterpoint to Amanda Lotz's take on a masculine drive to protect fatherhood. In her book *Cable Guys*, Lotz finds characters like Walt motivated, in part, by their need to be better fathers than were their own, whereas Boux and Daum find Skylar trapped by her impulse to be a good mother and protect her children. Often forced to choose to betray her role as either "dutiful wife" or "devoted mother," fans castigated Skylar no matter which path she followed. This response, viewers over-identifying with Walt as a hero despite the show's aesthetic setting him up as a villain, echoes the double-bind real women of circumstance face.

In a closer analog for those real women, *Breaking Bad* introduces a new Latina character. Andrea (played by Emily Rios) is Jessie Pinkman's girlfriend and is the mother of Brock,⁴¹ the little boy at the center of the fracturing of Jessie and Walt's relationship. This woman of circumstance (triply so through her romance with Jessie, the murder of her little brother Tomás, and her own drug addiction) is also a woman of color struggling to make ends meet. Admittedly, the show spends less time with her than with Skylar, but the situations in which her character are thrust because of her circumstances are potentially even more productive than Skylar's, if for no other reason than that the show is explicit about Andrea's desire to extricate herself from those circumstances. The camera is sympathetic towards both women, tending toward favoring their perspectives in scenes over the men in their lives, but the camera's sympathy for Jessie competes with Andrea's. It is a little more difficult to pinpoint how, in, say, the scene during S03E11, "Abiquiu," of Jessie and Andrea making out on the couch after their first NA meeting together. When Brock comes home unexpectedly, the way the camera judges Jessie's manipulative motivations by focusing in on the guilt he betrays on his face at discovering his mark is a mother

⁴¹ Brock unwittingly discovers, and is sickened by, ricin that Walt derives from castor beans. When the ricin goes missing, it is Brock's sudden illness that reveals Walt's lies to Jesse.

could suggest that the scene favors Jesse. However, we can see *The Watcher* favor Andrea in the subtle asymmetrical visual weight behind Andrea in shots or the way more light from the window or open door falls more on her than on him. The asymmetry of framing and lighting act as visual metaphors for how the pair approach the interaction. *The Watcher* notes the sincerity of Andrea's actions and the subterfuge of Jesse's. Even as he remains a beloved figure within *Breaking Bad*'s dangerous world, *The Watcher*'s metaphorically embodied camera asks us to see and sympathize with the women that even this man takes advantage of. This cinematography demonstrates how *The Watcher* takes a rhetorical stance meant to demonstrate to viewers how to see more clearly the struggles faced by this woman of circumstance.

It is unsurprising that a show devoted to revealing the costs of criminal ambition would try to highlight the plight of women swept up by such ambition. As Stacey A. McKenna reminds us, methamphetamine (the drug upon which Walter White builds his empire) has long been gendered as feminine in popular culture, noting that "media artefacts [sic] portray the specific enhancement-related motivations for amphetamine use as distinct for men and women, reflecting and reinforcing gendered social roles" (McKenna 458). In "Peekaboo", S02E06, we see these gendered dynamics manifest in a self-contained episode highlighting Jesse's complex masculinity, a one-off character embodying a more traditional and toxic form of masculinity, and a woman of circumstance reaching her breaking point with both. Jesse has been sent by Walt to "take care" of the meth addicts who robbed his friend and employee, Skinny Pete, in the previous episode. What follows is almost an episode within an episode, the camera staying with Pinkman as he psyches himself up to play the heavy, only to find a house filled with trash and a dirty, non-verbal toddler instead of the thieves he expected. Choosing to wait for his quarry to return and tend to their child in the interim, the show then delves into the daily lives of those most affected

by the drug trade, the addicts. Spoooge and “Spoooge’s Woman”⁴² return home after failing to pull off another robbery to feed their drug habits; Jessie then attempts to extort back the money he’s owed, and a pathetic comedy of errors ensues. These scenes are all shot as if focalized through Jesse’s perspective, sympathizing with him while the virtual aliens that are the tweakers confound and outsmart the protagonist.

These scenes would seem to continue the trend noticed by McKenna, judging the addicted woman more harshly for her choices than her intimate’s in a reversal of the sort of framing and lighting used in Andrea’s favor in S03E11. However, at the end of S02E06, the camera begins to linger, and the audio track to hone in, as Spoooge insults his woman one time too many. She takes her revenge via the stolen ATM all three characters had been failing to crack open throughout the episode. Spoooge’s Woman crushes her man’s head underneath the cash machine. The sympathies of the show shift ever so slightly now to include her alongside Jesse, if only for this moment of her victory. Again, this cinematographic stand-in for Prestige TV’s desire to have viewers empathize with Other figures, which I call The Watcher, takes the time to acknowledge someone overlooked or dismissed by our main characters, expanding the world just a bit beyond the limited frame of references of a white male experience.

A Disciplining Aesthetic

In making the viewer think about how *Breaking Bad* doesn’t work like most shows do, The Watcher teaches the viewer to begin thinking about and paying attention to how television

⁴² Never given a name, and thus always only acknowledged by the other characters through her relationship with the man called Spoooge, she is played by respected character actor Dale Dickey. Though I argue that the episode does try to sympathize with her character, much of that work is accomplished by Dickey’s powerful performance. She brings to life a character that on the page is nothing more than a stereotype. In a very real way, it is Dickey’s performance that allows The Watcher to take note of “Spoooge’s Woman’s” lived experience.

itself works. In order to follow the narrative of the series, the viewer must adapt her habits to The Watcher's lessons. She learns that she must pay attention to the details across the screen like context clues for parsing a mystery or playing out a puzzle box. In forcing the viewer to do different mental work to read *Breaking Bad*, the show's aesthetic and narrative play combine to discipline the viewer under a new paradigm. Whether or not the viewer is aware of how The Watcher molds her, she either participates in its new disciplining order, or she rejects it in favor of the traditional when she chooses not to watch the series any further.

Ironically, even if she chooses to reject the new discipline, it still affects her. Because *Breaking Bad* was so successful, winning awards and garnering huge ratings, other television content producers began to mimic its style. In a dilute form for sure, these acts of appropriation (or, in some cases, outright theft) have changed the wider televised landscape in America. Though few capture the full intent or impact of *Breaking Bad*'s new disciplining aesthetic, often choosing to ape a style whose mechanics they don't fully understand or care about, these imitators spread aesthetic elements that continue to work as disruptions in traditional American televisuality. Fans of the original series will take their new understanding of how TV shows can work to their viewing of other new shows. They may now pay attention to the margins of these other stories when they read the next series. Slowly but surely, The Watcher's discipline gets reinforced, the novelty becomes the standard, and what it means to watch TV in America changes. The same process happens even for viewers who initially rejected *Breaking Bad* or those who never paid it any attention at all. For these non-fans, the process is subtler, taking longer while also incorporating the new disciplines of other popular and profitable shows, but the DNA of *Breaking Bad*'s revolution remains like an ancestral trace.

3. Orange Is the New Black

The Watcher, Cinematographic Classics, and Revising Genre

As a metaphor for the ways that the creative intelligences of people crafting Prestige television shows manifest through cinematography, The Watcher guides us viewers in how to look again at the televisual worlds contained within our TV screens, even as we grow accustomed to the ebb and flow of how TV traditionally appears. With *Orange Is The New Black*, The Watcher will ask us to reconsider what we have grown used to from TV genres and how those standardized expectations might be subverted to present anew the images of people generally ignored or elided by traditional television narratives. The Watcher wants to teach us how to see clichés and tropes in a whole new light.

Orange Is The New Black's Place in the Prestige Landscape

Orange is the New Black (OITNB) is an hour-long “comedy”⁴³ series produced and distributed by the subscription streaming service Netflix, created by Jenji Kohan, and based on

⁴³ There has been quite a lot of talk in the industry about what exactly OITNB is: is it a drama that happens to foreground its humor more than traditionally expected, or is it a comedy stretched to run in hour-long chunks that build up its dramatic elements? The Emmys seemed to weigh in on the controversy when the academy changed its submission policy in response to OITNB's debut season hitting the awards circuit in 2015. They formally defined comedies as half-hour long, pushing hour-long shows like OITNB or FOX's *Glee* into the drama category. Producers then had to petition the academy to allow a series of non-standard length to submit in the other category.

Though it could hardly be called a direct reaction to these changes, the era of “Peak TV” that followed saw the rise of a new type of comedy series, one which writer Matt Zoller Seitz of *Vulture* calls “comedy in theory,” half-hour long shows run by creators known for their comedic work but featuring storylines that might have otherwise been traditionally labelled as drama. He identifies several shows that fall into this new category, including FX's *You're the Worst* by Stephen Falk, Netflix's *Lady Dynamite* from Maria Bramford, ABC's *Black-ish* by Kenya Barris, and HBO's *Veep* from Armando Iannucci. Zoller Seitz writes, “It runs 30 minutes (minus ads) and boasts eccentric, energetic characters. But it's not consistently light, and it shows no interest in being lovable or comforting. Sometimes it's ha-ha funny. Sometimes it's funny-strange. Other times it's defiantly not funny” (Zoller

the eponymous memoir of Piper Kerman. The show looks at life inside a women's federal prison in upstate New York's fictional Litchfield Penitentiary and opens with Kerman's fictional counterpart, Piper Chapman, surrendering herself to begin a prison sentence, having been convicted of participating in a drug cartel 10 years prior. With her earlier comedy series, *Weeds*, Kohan made a name for herself as a showrunner on a series about another woman who ends up involved in the drug trade. While *Weeds* focused on its protagonist's criminal enterprise, Kohan has said that she wanted to make a show from Kerman's book to shine a light specifically on the experiences of women inside America's prisons system. Audiences have made OITNB one of Netflix's most popular original series,⁴⁴ but some viewer and critics object to Chapman's being the focus of the story. As a white, affluent, young woman, she is not representative of the average incarcerated woman in America. The typical woman in prison in this country is poor and a member of a racial minority. The Watcher's goal with OITNB is to justify through cinematography using Chapman as an entry point for the larger stories Kohan seeks to tell. The Watcher, that metaphorical stand-in for the cinematographic choices made by a show's creators, will demonstrate how the show subverts expectations about whose stories should be told on television and how those stories should look on TV screens as it challenges viewers to empathize with the Other through visual rhetorics.

Seitz). He is referring to *You're the Worst*, but his description could apply to all of these new comedy shows. Hour-long OITNB, though, doesn't quite fit this new descriptor either. The somewhat ungainly term "dramedy" perhaps best fits Kohan's series despite the revolution away from the term that the show helped inspire. I will discuss the significance of this dramedy hybrid to the show's sociopolitical aims shortly.

⁴⁴ Netflix, as a subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) streaming service, does not participate in the demographic ratings systems that the other distribution models do. The company does not currently allow The Nielsen Company access to its subscriber base or viewing numbers, and though the demographics firm has experimented with several technologies for estimating Netflix viewership, they do not yet have a reliable method for determining how many people within their statistical sample sets are actually watching Netflix content. Currently, Nielsen is only really able to gauge how deeply SVOD has penetrated the overall American media market. For more information on how Nielsen collects exactly what type of information, please refer to their quarterly "Total Audience" report.

How this challenging subversion works depends in large part on what audiences and critics expect from a comedy about women in prison. Kohan and her team felt that TV shows have not paid enough attention to poor women of color. In particular, shows about crime and prison often fail to address the experiences of the “women of circumstance”⁴⁵ who often find themselves swept into the American carceral system by factors beyond their control. Kohan tries to reposition these typically unseen women as the focus of her show, but she uses Piper as an introduction for audiences more used to watching stories about nice, blonde ladies.

Critics have been divided on Kohan’s approach. There are two main camps in OITNB critical scholarship. The first criticizes the show for making a wealthy white woman its star at the expense of poor women of color. The second camp tries to point out ways that OITNB does attempt to tell stories about these Other women. Ultimately, both camps see the show as flawed because of the narrative focus on Piper Chapman. For the former group of critics, the flaws are so profound that the show cannot be saved. For the latter, the flaws are part of an important cultural change that is still only in its early stages. Even critics who want to emphasize the progressive potential in the show must acknowledge why those who dismiss it entirely push back against Kohan’s claim that she is enacting “activism through entertainment” (*Fresh Air*). Those dismissing the show mostly abandoned it after only a single season.⁴⁶ Those who read it more

⁴⁵ Echoing some of the storylines found in *Breaking Bad* and how that show depicts women caught up in various aspects of the drug trade.

⁴⁶ Jane Caputi is one such critic. She claims that, “although OITNB intends to be progressive, it enacts cultural imperialism” (Caputi 1133). Caputi focuses on plot and dialogue in certain storylines from the first season only. For Caputi, OITNB’s story works as a sort of carpetbagger’s tale of Othered experiences filtered through Piper Chapman’s whiteness, assuming, for example, that the show is aligned with Piper’s mother’s perception of her daughter when she visits and insists that Piper is somehow different from the rest of the women around her. For Caputi, S01E06, “WAC Pack,” is an affirmation of the series’ hypocritical whitewashing of minority women’s prison experience. However, telling her mother off is a rebuttal to her mother’s racism. She resists her mother’s narrative by throwing the opposite back in her face. It is an impulsive and emotional act that the show itself immediately counters in the next scene. Piper relates the incident to Nicky, who in turn reminds Piper that she still has it easier than most other inmates, saying “some shit stinks worse than others,” before the scene cuts to a flashback to Nicky’s toxic relationship with her own mother.

positively, tellingly, often write in response to multiple seasons. Something must have changed for those watching across subsequent seasons. I argue that they have been trained by The Watcher's camera to adapt their expectations and to read more properly the alignment between the show's narrative and visual design. Viewers learned how to read the show's story through its style, and they now see how Kohan's purported aims function within the mechanics of the series. The narrative storylines and characterizations exist in a more complex relationship with the show's multifaceted if very classical-seeming cinematographic elements. Viewers need to relearn how to associate story and style in order to understand how OITNB tries to revolutionize television storytelling.

Establishing A Pattern So You Can Break It Later

In OITNB's pilot episode, The Watcher establishes an aesthetic pattern that the show will follow consistently even as it breaks its narrative routines in various seasons. This is remarkable amongst Prestige programming, as pilot episodes are more often tests or experiments for later episodes that settle on a style eventually. However, pilots are critical for all new television

Christina Belcher reads the series as fostering a neoliberal environment of "multiculturalism" that reifies racist and classist ideologies in her examination of some of the show's most significant problem areas. Such multiculturalism is a form of institutionalized non-racism that stresses diversity for its own sake and delegitimizes any other form of anti-racism that would seek to complicate multiculturalism's narrative. Belcher observes that, while the protagonist's anti-racism, and OITNB's commitment to multiculturalism, may initially seem progressive, the show's representations of race hinge on class difference, ultimately making whiteness and capitalist wealth commensurate with liberal freedom" (Belcher 492). She continues, "as a matter of course, given the show's commitment to diversity, OITNB's most tangible representations of villainy are overwhelmingly monoculturalist characters engaged in the preservation of the cultural or racial group with which they identify, avoiding external contact and influence" (Belcher 495-496).

Because "the neoliberal model of white benevolence presents color blindness as a quality of good character that allows the white savior to emerge," Belcher finds OITNB putting Piper on a sort of pedestal as a model of good whiteness for the other characters to follow and for audiences to emulate. Belcher's reading presumes that the series views Piper as its hero. However, I see the show constructing its narrative visually, which allows us to see that Piper is being satirized. She is not heralded as a savior; she's instead perpetually screwing things up for everyone else. Belcher makes several important and valid complaints, like "the structural racism that lands a skewed sample of black and Hispanic women in prison is ultimately left without much interrogation", but she overlooks the ways the mechanics of the show complicate the plotlines that she analyzes (Belcher 494). Reading the visual rhetoric of the series, allows us to respond to and complicate Belcher's arguments.

programs. They lay out what those who make a show intend, what those who might distribute a show will want, and what viewers who might invest a great deal of time watching a show can expect. A pilot episode must please all of these disparate masters and more. As such, they are difficult things to make and are often retooled or overhauled entirely when a show is taken to series by a distributor. Aesthetically, nothing in OITNB's pilot was changed for subsequent episodes. Though OITNB's pilot, "I Wasn't Ready," satisfied Kohan and Netflix's expectations, it seems it did not immediately convince many of the viewer critics who would try to work through what the show means as a cultural artifact. I argue that these critics did not yet understand how to read the show's visual rhetoric. They were expecting traditional dialogue and plotting because they saw traditional television comedy cinematography, but their preconceptions caused them to miss the ways that the series ironically juxtaposes the classical with the revolutionary in order to address the very problems the critics would cite. By paying attention to cinematographic elements, which I will lay out shortly, we can begin to *see* the ways that OITNB engages with televisual history and the traditional ways that televisual style has been used by previous shows to construct meaning.

OITNB takes those lessons and deploys these classical motifs ironically so as to unsettle those traditional meaning constructions. As a sort of synecdoche of Kohan and crew's attempts to present Otherness to American viewers by way of the show's visual rhetorics, *The Watcher* trains us in how to re-read these visual rhetorical elements on this newer show. *The Watcher* uses Netflix's binge-viewing-friendly distribution model⁴⁷ and the ease with which this model lends itself to repeat viewings, building up its OITNB lessons slowly. When we watch several episodes at once or go back to quickly rewatch a previous one, we can begin to absorb the visual

⁴⁷ Releasing all episodes of a season at once and allowing audiences to choose how much they consume in a sitting, though encouraging viewers to consume multiple episodes in a single sitting

information relayed by *The Watcher* and see how revolutionary *OITNB*'s aesthetic moves are. Classic TV traditions have trained our eyes to expect certain visual images to correspond to certain types of stories, but *The Watcher* reverses some of those expectations on this show, and plays a joke on us for our expectations. I will delve deeper into the specifics of how *The Watcher*, which is itself a sort of punning joke about how cameras work in Prestige television, pulls off this rhetorical joke shortly.

Once we learn to reread *OITNB*'s take on classical situation comedy style, it becomes clear that the show's joke has always been on the "nice blonde lady" Piper assumed she was supposed to be (S01E01).⁴⁸ Additionally, because this joke plays out through traditional sitcom visual rhetorics, we can see that the notion of a supposedly cool girl like Piper being the hero of a story about the American prison system is also a joke about the American television industry.⁴⁹ *OITNB* deconstructs the classed and raced expectations about gendered criminality in this country while simultaneously deconstructing the stylistic conventions of televisuality in America. We see more clearly how those TV conventions have shaped expectations about criminality when the two concepts are juxtaposed on this show.

In a move that is still unusual in the American television industry, these stylistic conventions and this juxtaposition are present from *OITNB*'s earliest moments in its pilot. Very few TV shows stick as closely to the Style Bible established in their pilot episodes as *OITNB* does. "I Wasn't Ready." S01E01 is directed by Michael Trim, who will go on to direct eleven episodes for the show. It is shot by Vanja Cernjul, who will act as the Director of Photography

⁴⁸ The show doubles down on this joke in season two. In S02E04, Brook Soso is introduced as a caricature of the persona Piper thought she was (or was supposed to be). Though annoying, the show quickly begins to reveal a sympathy for Brook that it never had for Piper, and the other women in Litchfield accept her and pity her in a way they never do for Piper.

⁴⁹ Though it remains to be seen if distributor, Netflix, is in on this one, too.

throughout the first season. S01E01 embraces classical sitcom TV cinematographic tropes from the get-go. The episode establishes a reliance on classical framing styles in particular. For example, early TV screens were so small that the technology itself places limitations on what could be seen on its screen. Early television relied on medium, close-up, and extreme close-up shots of actors' faces, because they were the most efficient method of conveying the most visual information at a time on the small screen area. When screens were only a handful of inches wide, faces had to dominate the screen. Little else would have been visible within those comparably tiny black and white frames.⁵⁰

Though conceived in an age of exponentially larger and higher-definition screens, OITNB embraces these classical limitation and puts the human face literally front and center within its frame. Likewise, most of the close-up and medium close-up shots comprising the pilot are also symmetrically balanced around an imaginary central vertical line bisecting the frame. We can see this by examining two scenes from S01E01. First, when Piper and her fiancé, Larry, have a big meal together with their best friends, Pete and Polly, before surrendering herself to prison, each couple appears on screen together in straight facing medium close-ups. With each pairing, be it Piper-Larry/Pete-Polly or Piper-Polly/Larry-Pete, one character sits on one side of the frame with his or her body equally distributed with respect to the other person in the shot around that central vertical axis. When the scene features all four characters simultaneously, two figures will fall symmetrically about either side of that imaginary central vertical line. It acts as a

⁵⁰ Early television set technology demanded a very small screen, as the analog system of vacuum ray tubes necessary to translate an electronic signal into pixelated image and radio sound severely limited the size of the television machine for home use. The set was already one of the largest pieces of furniture a family might have in their home due to the need to accommodate all of those tubes necessary to produce such a comparably tiny image. Because it was unreasonable and unfeasible to expect consumers to accept exponentially larger devices for a relatively small increase in screen size, content producers instead embraced the aesthetic potential of that screen which was approximately the size of an adult's face. The extreme close-up became the industry standard because it allowed the most legible detail to be transmitted and received at once. TV became a medium of faces and objects rather than landscapes and spaces.

pivot point for their conversations when the scene then cuts back and forth between Piper-Polly and Larry-Pete. In the second sequence later in the episode, Piper calling Larry at home from a prison administrator's office, she and her fiancé occupy the same screen space within the frame even as the shots alternate and cut between the two characters in their far-apart and separate locations. Piper sits to the right of the central vertical in the prison office; Larry sits to the right of the central vertical in their living room. They are in two distinct physical locations and can only interact over the phone, but the way the scene is constructed to maintain that vertical balance suggests that they are intimately bonded as they fill the same visual space within the frame. Here, as well as in the earlier group meal scene, the central vertical line lends a sense of stability and consistency to these sequences, ordering the visual world being established by Kohan, Trim, and Cernjul. This visual balance and stability allow the DP, then, room to manipulate other aspects of the show's cinematography that might have slipped our notice had the foundational framing style been less consistent or more unpredictable.

Namely, the vertical balance allows viewers to pay more attention to the subtle ways differences between camera rig set-ups appear on the screen and how those set-ups effect the emotional reality of scenes. The DP uses two different rigs, one for scenes outside the prison and a different one for those inside. For scenes set inside Litchfield Women's Correctional Facility, the pilot exclusively features hand-held rigs. Scenes shot in the "free world" are captured by cameras on dolly tracks. Hand-held rigs allow the camera operator to move freely and quickly through a space, and their images tend to be more dynamic and often seem "jittery."⁵¹ Shooting from dolly tracks means all camera movements are smooth and fluid but confined to the edges of spaces (so as not to capture images of the filming apparatus within the frame). The consistent

⁵¹ Recall how such camera rigs did the same in *Breaking Bad*'s introduction of the skittish Tuco Salamance

centralized balance of S01E01's overall frame makes more visible the movements of cameras within its spaces. We can see the visualized distinction between "captivity" and "home" because the consistent use of the central vertical lets our eyes notice movement, or lack thereof, around it.

The show will slowly move away from this rule about camera rigs in later seasons, as characters' relationships to space change.⁵² Initially, the hand-held set-up echoes Piper's anxiety and fear as she enters the unknown at Litchfield, and the more static and calm dolly rig set-up in her outside scenes reflects the stability and security of home for her. I argue that *The Watcher*, as a stand-in for the creative intelligences directing the cameras here, uses the emotional connotation of these different camera set-ups ironically. The irony rests in and relies on Piper Chapman's role as presumed narrative focalizer, particularly in the early run of the series. Hers is not really the story that OITNB is most interested in telling, and *The Watcher* shows us this through ironic juxtaposition. Piper's security in the staid stability of her "home" life in the city with Larry and their friends results in static and predictable cinematography. The scenes set outside of prison look dull because they feature very little dynamic aesthetic action. The camera moves only in slow, pre-ordained arcs that mimic the mundane routine of Piper's supposedly "perfect" life with her fiancé. By contrast, the cinematography of OITNB's Litchfield scenes is filled with a sense of spontaneous movement. The hand-held and Steadicam rigs used to shoot these scenes allow the camera to roam freely, to follow wherever the narrative might suddenly

⁵² According to Ludovic Littee, Director of Photography starting mid-way through the series third season, the show moves away from the dolly/Steadicam binary as Litchfield becomes home for the characters. "There are a lot of moments in the prison where it doesn't need to be hand-held, where people find peace and are happy ... The camera has to represent that" (Thompson 72). Though more and more of the prison scenes would be shot using dollies on tracks for clean and fluid movements, Littee insists that handheld rigging is vital to connecting the show's logistics to the story's emotional beats:

A HaloRig handheld stabilizer is one item that can help create subtle emotional cues. 'The interesting thing about it,' says Littee, 'is that you can arrange the Halo so you have a static feel, and then as the scene progresses into a shakier world, you can slowly start to move the camera so you're changing the emotion within the scene.' This technique has been used several times in the prison visitation room, during scenes when tensions develop between characters. (Thompson 77)

swerve in an unexpected direction. Where Piper's home scenes are more boring visually because they are bounded by the limits of the dolly track, the Litchfield scenes are more exciting and interesting to look at because the camera and The Watcher have freedom to pursue the unexpected.⁵³

Authenticity and Performance in Identity Via Cinematography

Near the end of S01E01, Piper discusses this balance between predictability and spontaneity when she tries to explain why she could be simultaneously attracted to a mundane life with Larry and a more adventurous love affair with Alex Vause, the former girlfriend who Piper claims seduced her into participating in her life of crime. The Watcher turns the visual pun of the two camera set-ups into an explicit component of OITNB's meaning making process by focusing our attention on Piper's face in this moment of dialogue. She states that she turned her back on an exciting and dangerous life with Alex for the chance to settle down into a socially acceptable routine with Larry, "and then [she] became the nice, blonde lady [she] was supposed to be" (S01E01). This line of dialogue reveals that Piper views both of her personae (the passionate femme bisexual willing to smuggle drugs through customs to please her glamorous girlfriend as well as the Whole Foods-shopping Brooklynite-yuppie who says she is happy in a conventional relationship with a conventional boyfriend) are an act of performance.

⁵³ As Littee says, this dichotomy does fall away as Litchfield becomes more like "home" to all of the show's characters, but the sense of activity and motion does not. In S03E05, "Fake It Till You Fake It Some More," directed by Nicole Holofcener and shot by Manuel Billiter, this activity comes through blocking instead of framing. As assistant warden Joe Caputo and Danny Pearson, the liaison between the prison and the private corporation now running Litchfield, discuss issues in the prison, Holofcener stages the conversation in a classic "walk and talk" scene. The two actors carry on their conversation while walking down various hallways on the set. This sort of scene is really only possible because of the dolly tracks now used for the camera, as hand-held camerawork would have a tendency to make such sustained motion feel distracting at best and nauseating for the viewer at worst. As the prison has become home, the dynamism of the camera eases into a more traditional and measured style that would be "boring" like season one's outside-prison scenes, but the directors use staging to replace the sense of activity that defined the inside-prison shots in the Shooting Bible.

In S01E01 and across much of the first season, Piper struggles to reconcile in herself which of these performed personae are *her* authentic self. She fights to claim her “nice, blonde lady” identity as her most important, but the show makes this part of a larger joke at Piper’s expense. She can’t see how much more interesting the bits of her life in Litchfield look compared to those in her time outside prison, but *The Watcher* notices. The different visual rhetorics at play underline that the choices Piper made to define herself in her relationship with Alex, and the questions those choices raise about why a woman would willingly risk her freedom by participating in her romantic partner’s criminal activities and why anyone would ever feel compelled to commit “crimes” more generally, are much more intriguing than those about why Piper would gravitate toward a more conventional life with Larry. Boring visuals reveal a boring life, and lively visual uncover the stories of women who are denied access to the privileged boredom Piper is able to experience at “home.”

With these two distinct cinematographic styles, *The Watcher* asks us viewers to see these two worlds differently and suggests that the one worthy of more of our attention is the more visually dynamic one (that also happens to be populated with characters we rarely ever get to see on more conventional television). Though much of S01E01’s runtime is devoted to Piper’s experience, *The Watcher*’s cinematographic pun shows us that *OITNB* invests more of its attention in the stories of the women Piper encounters at Litchfield. For example, by the time we meet a near-silent Dayanara Diaz and see her slapped across the face by her already incarcerated mother as both Dayanara and Piper enter the prison for the first time, Dayanara is already more interesting than the privileged white women we have spent the better part of an hour getting to know. That’s *The Watcher*’s joke. Everyone and everything inside prison will be more entertaining, fascinating, and even more sympathetic than the show’s ostensible protagonist. The

Watcher, my cinematographic metaphor for a showrunner's intervention into the possible social relationships created by TV, makes this joke through the visual drama that makes the prison scenes more aesthetically interesting. I argue that this visual effect reinforces the narrative dramatics and shows viewers that Piper's "home drama" should be read as mere histrionics comparatively.

Cinematography Representing Interiority

The power of this joke ultimately stems from the general affection the show feels for all of its characters, particularly its women, and even the preternaturally annoying Piper. We see this affection because of *The Watcher*'s adherence to traditional sitcom framing styles and shooting techniques. Not only does the consistent balance around a central vertical let us see the camera rig pun, it also allows *The Watcher* to maintain the medium-close and close-up shots that emphasize and focus on the faces of the women the show so clearly adores. The woman's face is the most important image on screen at any given time. The depth of focus used underlines this importance. Even when the framing goes wide, the field depth typically remains shallow to isolate faces in focus on a single plane within the frame. For example, in S01E02, "Tit Punch," directed by renowned cinematographer Uta Briesewitz, *The Watcher* focalizes via Piper our introduction to a pair of inmates who will prove to be important characters over the course of the series. Taystee is an extremely charismatic young Black woman. Flaca is a young Latina with an abiding love for the singer Morrissey. They come from different "tribes" in the social hierarchy of Litchfield. Such tribal alliances fuel many of the disputes between inmates. S01E02 finds Taystee and Flaca brawling over the proper etiquette for storing food in the prison's communal spaces: Flaca is upset that Taystee has left an unwrapped ice cream cone in the communal ice

machine. Their fight is exacerbated by their tribes, members of which watch and encourage the fistfight that breaks out over the dessert disagreement.

The cinematography helps amplify the tension in the scene, selling the idea that these two women really could come to blows over something as seemingly inconsequential as an ice cream cone, while also building toward an opportunity to isolate Piper for a moment within the action. Starting from a wide shot of Taystee and her friend, Poussey, at a table in the common room, The Watcher's camera begins pushing in closer and closer with each cut. The wide shot from the corner reverses angles to a medium shot on Flaca as she approaches the ice chest, and then the camera tracks down and backs up as Flaca confronts the room with the offending cone and a disgusted, "the fuck is this?" The next edit takes us back to the initial set-up on Taystee but pushed into a medium, the camera echoing the earlier tracking move with Flaca again with the same now as Taystee crosses the space toward the freezer. The argument itself then begins in a medium-close two-shot of Taystee and Flaca from over Taystee's shoulder, allowing for a volley of shot-reverse-shot edits to establish the door Piper enters through in the background depth plane and the corner she retreats to during the rest of the scene.

The Watcher shifts our viewing focus from the argument momentarily to Piper as she occupies space just at the edge of the Taystee-Flaca zone, the unsuspecting blonde's eyeline making it appear like Piper's attention has been immediately drawn to Taystee's "King Kone" rather than the brewing fight.⁵⁴ When, a couple of shots later, Flaca knocks the ice cream from Taystee's hand and sends it arcing across the room, The Watcher makes sure we viewers

⁵⁴ It's not, not really. The trick of the shot makes it look like Piper's attentions remain on the dessert, though the rest of the scene confirms that the character isn't so consumed with her own problems not to notice the melee that breaks out around here. Piper is awful, but the show isn't ready yet to say she's quite that awful. Piper pays attention to the fight because she is starving and would like to eat the quickly forgotten treat. She is hungry because she has not been allowed to eat in the dining hall by the other inmates since she inadvertently disrespected the cooking of the head of her own tribe, Red, a powerful Russian matriarch who runs the prison's kitchens as if they were her own kingdom.

recognize that Piper gasps in shock at the violence while the cinematography repeats the joke that her focus is on the food. Her eyes follow the flying food rather than the flying fist. However, because *The Watcher* also wants us to see how decentering the narrative of someone like Piper can allow us viewers to understand better the experiences of more traditionally marginalized figures, this fight scene employs a cool blonde lady's hunger to cut the tension of what is actually a terrifying and fraught scene for everyone involved. As Piper secludes herself in the corner with her 1-shots and internal debate about dessert, *The Watcher* amps up the tension in the wider room for all the rest of the women who don't care about the ice cream. These women see the fight for what it really is: an explosion of tribal tensions exacerbated by the dehumanizing experience of life in a cage. The scene builds on a series of quick two-shots that pair off tribe members (like Taystee and Poussey or Flaca and Gloria) jumping into the fray to stop the violence, not escalate it. The way *The Watcher* frames the scene builds an ironic tension, then, cutting and framing as if the action is ramping up instead of down. This irony hits home as the scene ends by returning to Piper's dilemma. She was alone with her thoughts throughout the fight and ends the scene in an extreme close-up gazing down at the ice cream cone, the remnants of which we see from her POV in a quick insert shot. The last image of the great King Kone Debacle is of Piper licking her lips and swallowing hard in that extreme close-up frame.

As the argument over the ice cream becomes a physical fight and the cone falls to the floor near her, Piper's face remains in focus while the melee blurs into chaos on different planes of field depth around her. *The Watcher* uses the isolation created by these different planes to highlight the struggle Piper goes through in her mind. Her face in close-up is all we can clearly see as she weighs her options. If she takes the snack and satisfies her hunger in the moment, Piper will be in even worse standing with a woman with ties to the Russian mob and so much

clout inside Litchfield that she can run a smuggling operation with almost no impunity.

However, if Piper leaves the food where it is in order to curry favor with Red, she runs the risk of continuing to starve with no guarantee that the head of her tribe will relent and allow her to eat in the mess hall again.

By isolating Piper's face in the frame while she is surrounded by a storm of activity, The Watcher emphasizes her specific emotional state while simultaneously raising the stakes on an ostensibly petty fight. Piper is in this predicament because she failed to consider Red's feelings or how life in prison demands different standards of expectation before she insulted Red's hard work for failing to live up to Piper's personal "home" life standards. She is in this position because it didn't occur to her that she should consider someone else's feelings before her own. Thus, the scene now becomes about the very real physical consequences of Piper's unexamined sense of privilege. By focusing on faces, The Watcher underscores the corporeal reality of the women presented on screen. This scene trains viewers how to read such focus so we can see how the metaphorical cinematographic intermediary between the physical TV camera and the liminal social spaces of our TV screens that I call The Watcher makes visible and physical the lived experience of OITNB's characters. That most of the women on the show made the focal point through this technique are also typically ignored by outside society and rarely appear on television screens foregrounds The Watcher's mission to make them more important on TV by manipulating the tropes and techniques of the kinds of programming that ignores their stories. OITNB thus uses classical sitcom style to tell the stories of characters elided by classical sitcoms.

The show will continue to emphasize women's faces and their emotional states as focal points even as it moves away from other tropes like the strict hierarchy of the different camera

rig set-ups. As the show spends less energy delineating between inside and outside for Piper, it spends more attention on how the other women around her feel in the moments where their faces fill the frame. However, like training wheels on a bike, *The Watcher* again uses another moment with Piper as the focalizer to show us how to read future moments with the other women. In S01E02, Piper makes a deal with Taystee to trade locks of her blonde hair (that Taystee wants to weave into her own so she can have a different and more glamorous hairstyle than any of her peers). In exchange, Taystee procures for Piper the supplies the latter needs to make a lotion that might appease a still wrathful Red. Once again, the camera isolates Piper in the frame by focusing in on her face and allowing her surroundings to blur out on different field planes. Whereas the earlier scene with the fight traps her in a moment of desperation, this scene affords Piper a quiet moment “alone” to revel in her success navigating Litchfield’s economies. *The Watcher* uses these shallow focus extreme close-up shots to create physical and psychological bubbles for the inmates. They become metaphorical places and moments of privacy in an environment designed to prevent such. Thanks to *The Watcher*’s intervention, ironic liminal spaces provide the inmates emotional freedom behind bars.

When used during flashback sequences, such shots also often presage the anxiety of confinement to come for all characters. For example, this form of the technique is used several times during Red’s flashbacks in, “Tit Punch.” *The Watcher* focuses on Red’s face and blurs out the vapid blonde gangster’s wives her feckless husband forces Red to befriend. Her husband wants these wives to influence their well-connected husbands to help his business, but Red would rather not have anything to do with these women who look down on her for not conforming to their ideal of femininity. *The Watcher* captures Red’s distress as she tries to navigate the wives’ world, blurring them out in a different focal plane because Red’s experience

is what *The Watcher* wants us to pay attention to, not the demands of these mean women. In these flashbacks, Red knows full well that she is more capable of making in-roads with the mobsters on her own, but she gives in to her pathetic husband and tries to conform herself to the wives' image to please him. Her nervousness and discomfort are translated through the camera's lens. Her awkward attempts at bonding leave her humiliated and angry, which leads to her losing control and hitting one of the wives in the episode's titular "punch." We knew something like this was coming because *The Watcher* made sure we were focusing on how Red's emotions developed and played out across her face when it was isolated in its own focal plane.

However, while *The Watcher* uses shallow focus close-ups to highlight Red's negative emotions in her life outside Litchfield, the technique creates opportunities for Dayanara to experience positive emotions in her scenes inside the prison. Dayanara takes tentative first steps toward a love affair with one of the guards, Bennett. The two exchange notes and gifts that they try to hide from the other inmates and guards. This budding relationship provides Dayanara with beauty and hope in a world bereft of both.⁵⁵ *The Watcher* captures her in these moments, isolates her face in frame, and allows her some "alone time" to savor the joy they bring her. Combined with Red's scenes, *The Watcher* uses these different emotional experiences to change the way we viewers see these women as well as change the way we understand their lives with respect to how they've ended up behind bars. These are regular women with normal emotions, not vicious fiends, whose circumstances led them to transgress the law, but they still deserve to be able to experience a full range of those regular emotions just like anyone else does. *The Watcher* tries to give them that chance, to let them have their full humanity even as the American carceral system and conventional television programming would deny it them. *The Watcher* lets us viewers see

⁵⁵ The show will later address the extreme power imbalance between these two lovers. The inappropriateness of a CO having sex with an inmate becomes a central plotline once Dayanara becomes pregnant with Bennett's child.

on their faces their struggles in the outside world as well as the way they make the best of a bad situation inside prison.

By applying this technique to all the show's characters, the metaphorical intelligence behind *The Watcher* is able to de-center Piper's narrative and bring the marginalized women around her closer to the power position she is privileged to hold outside Litchfield. With these examples in S01E02, Red's particularly, *OITNB* is also suggesting that these marginalized women are victims of circumstance in ways Piper is not. Even this early in the series, Piper herself asserts that she got involved with the woman who would get her involved with the drug trade because she was experimenting with her sense of self. Though she is swayed, led, and seduced into participating in a crime by her romantic partner like many of her fellow inmates, Piper acknowledges that she acted not out of a desperation like theirs but from her more secure sense of personal agency. She had access to a form of power denied to the incarcerated women. *The Watcher* sees this and asks us viewers to see it, too. Piper's story is decentered to make room for the women who also deserve access to the narrative power position that she claims so easily outside Litchfield. By drawing explicit focus to how they feel in their important moments, *The Watcher* attempts to balance out some of the disproportionate power dynamics inside the prison, if not outside, through its role as cinematographic stand-in for the show's creators and their Progressive ideals.

Using Televisuality to Deconstruct Power within Litchfield's Closed Societies

The Watcher also allows these creators to transform some of the most foundational televisual techniques into new tools for explaining power dynamics and social relationships on *OITNB*. The series plays with traditional cinematography by approaching the classic two-shot

(two-shot) much as it has approached field depth. Arguably the most conventional of all cinematographic framing set-ups, the standard shot-reverse-shot (SRS) two-shot editing sequence cuts between two people on screen, typically in conversation. The SRS two-shot volleys back and forth during dialogue sequences. SRS generally requires that scenes be shot twice, once for each participating actor, getting coverage for each performance throughout their part of the conversation. Even with this duplication and repetition, however, the SRS remains one of the cheapest and more narratively efficient means of structuring a scene, not the least reason of which is because talk has always been cheaper to shoot than action. If the close-up allowed early television to deliver the most visual information for its proverbial buck, the SRS two-shot has done the same for exposition. It delivers narrative information to the audience expediently. That is why the technique has been a televisual staple since the medium's birth. It has been the saving grace of many budget-minded filmmakers as well.

In OITNB, *The Watcher* transforms the budgetary expedience of the 2 shot into a defining ethos. We can see the way the SRS two-shot is used as a meaning-maker in S01E03, “Lesbian Request Denied,” directed by Jodie Foster. As correctional officers Bennett and Mendez talk in the CO's cage overlooking one of the prison's dormitories, Foster and DP Vanja Cernjul have the camera bounce back and forth as each man speaks. The camera hovers just over one character's shoulder as the other speaks, so that the speaker's face dominates the frame. While the oafish Mendez rants, the blur of Bennett's shoulder occupies the bottom foreground of the frame, and vice-versa. We see the technique again in scenes as Piper and Alex, now also an inmate at Litchfield, hold their many *détentes*. The out-of-focus body of the listener is always present, but only the speaker's face is ever fully in focus. There is an implied gulf between them that the camera can't breach as each character sits in his or her own depth plane in the frame.

Again, riffing on the central vertical balance governing most shots, the speaker's face also typically fills the central axis of the screen in these sequences. With these SRS two-shots and the central balance, *The Watcher* creates the sense that, though they share a physical space, the characters are isolated and alone within their own emotional space. No real intimacy can exist, much less thrive, within these set-ups.

Nearly every, but not all, conversation at Litchfield takes place inside these emotionally isolating shallow field SRS two-shots. However, when the series sets aside the SRS two-shot for a shallow field medium close-up with two faces in focus on the same plane at once, *The Watcher* creates a counterpart to the ironic freedom found in the shallow focus extreme close-up on a single face discussed previously. Jenji Kohan and her crew take advantage of American television's traditional history of visual techniques to transform how such motifs like the SRS two-shot enact meaning in Prestige programming. It is this knowing manipulation of the televisual, the self-reflexive formalism on display, that I call *The Watcher*. Here, when the camera finds two faces in focus on the same depth plane within a shot, I say *The Watcher* is trying to show us viewers how to look at these faces anew in contrast to the show's more frequent framing. One example of these sequences is Dayanara and Bennett's romantic chat toward the end of S01E03, which acts as an echo of his unpleasant talk with Mendez. Here, the lovers are able to make a real emotional connection within the shot when they share the frame and depth plane together. They are isolated from the rest of the prison together, a sense of intimacy imbuing their conversation as they share the same depth plane.⁵⁶ Where the SRS two-

⁵⁶ The growing friendship between Alex Vause and Nicky Nichols, the charming heroin addict played by Natasha Lyonne, is built through these sorts of shots. They begin in S01E04, and as the characters become closer and begin to rely more on one another for support and comfort, the standard SRS 2-shots morph into more intimate frames. They begin to share the frame as they recognize the kindred spirit beside them.

shot kept Mendez and Bennett apart, the shallow field medium close-up two-shot brings Bennett and Dayanara together.

Later, in S03E03, “Empathy Is a Boner Killer,” directed by Michael Trim, we encounter what is arguably the most significant sequence relying on the juxtaposition of SRS isolation and medium close-up intimacy. In flashbacks, we see soon-to-be-inmate Nicky Nichols cut off from her wealthy, frustrated mother as they sit on opposite sides of a lawyer’s office desk to discuss possible plea bargains Nicky might take following her arrest on drug charges. Each woman sits isolated in her own side of the frame, as Nicky is on the left and her mother the right, though neither woman appears at the same time within the same frame with her family member. If you recall, this is the opposite of how Piper and Larry share a space despite being apart in S01E01. Here, for Nicky there is neither intimacy nor connection between a mother and child who should be sharing the deepest of both. When the episode returns to its main timeline, *The Watcher* juxtaposes these sad, cold shots with warm scenes of Nicky with Lorna and Red, two other inmates with whom Nicky has forged the emotional bond long denied to her by her own family. Nicky is about to be sent from Litchfield’s minimum to its maximum-security wing, and the three women share the same field plane as they comfort each other at her departure. All three remain together in frame and in focus, stressing the bond and love shared between them. With this sequence, *Kohan-through-The Watcher*’s plan is on full display: when compared, these two sequences demonstrate OITNB’s mission statement that though these women are in prison (and perhaps because of it), they deserve to feel something comforting and beautiful, particularly because most were denied the chance in their lives before Litchfield.

Piper Chapman: Televisual Trojan Horse

The Watcher wants viewers to realize that this aesthetic is initially focalized through Piper for a reason, even though her unexamined privilege is the butt of most of the visual jokes. Piper is more than just a white, middle-class gateway character most typically seen already on TV and thus most likely to be re-approved by the TV industry as worthy of being the center of yet another program. She is also more than the racist assumption, seen by some critics, that such an audience surrogate is necessary as a gateway if typical American audiences are to be made to care about stories featuring minority characters. Instead, Piper is The Watcher's tool for shifting the allegiances of those audiences precisely because she can be all of these things, just as The Watcher is showrunner Jenji Kohan's cinematographic tool for teaching her audience how to understand our own allegiances and biases. Like Piper, The Watcher is Kohan's trick for adjusting our "empathy meters." Kohan has frequently referred to Piper as her Trojan Horse, the thing that got the show through initial vetting that allows her and her staff to tell other Other stories.⁵⁷ Piper Chapman resembles more of Netflix's subscriber base than any of the other imprisoned characters on OITNB: she's white, young, and affluent.⁵⁸ When critics point out that

⁵⁷When asked about how closely the series would follow the book written by Chapman's real life analog, Kohan replied

You know, the book was really a launching point for us. We stuck to the book a little bit in the beginning, both for our creative process and Piper Kerman's comfort, and the fact that the book is relatively conflict-free, we took off from there and it became its own animal. It's not the book. It's its own entity and we've just been following our characters and our stories after starting in the book. But it was an amazing entree into this world. You took the blonde, blue-eyed girl-next-door and you put her into this world and, you know, you're not gonna go into a network and say, 'I want to talk about black women and Latina women and old women in prison.' You need a guide. You need a way in. She was our gateway drug. (Hitfix)

Additionally, in her oft quoted NPR Fresh Air interview, Kohan claimed that

In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse. You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina women, and old women and criminals. But if you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all of those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it's relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It's useful. (Fresh Air)

⁵⁸ All such presumptions do, admittedly, fail to account for the much wider variety of people who actually subscribe to and watch the SVOD service, but the assumption of a WASP viewer is part of the joke about a WASP hero.

audiences might more easily see themselves in her and her experiences than in many of the queer women of color the show loves so much, they're right. They are wrong, however, to view this as a shortcoming. It is, rather, a feature and not a bug. Here *The Watcher* uses the set of presumptions about how audiences identify with characters to instead tease out deeper connections between viewers and all of the show's characters.⁵⁹ I believe that the way the camera positions us in relationship to these characters creates an empathetic bridge between the "Pipers" in the audience and the Others on screen. As we are meant to relate to Piper, so to can we begin to relate to figures that may share very little demographically with us as presumed Netflix audience members, but we can begin to put ourselves in their othered psychic space thanks to *The Watcher*'s intervention. When we take on the anxiety of hand-held shots or feel the crush of boredom behind dolly shots, the camera mediates our emotional response as viewers through the implied emotions of the shots. *The Watcher*, as a cinematographic metaphor for a showrunner's attempts to challenge how TV audiences relate to the worlds on their screens, invites us into the character's interiority when we watch what happens inside their private psychic bubbles in shallow field extreme close-up.

⁵⁹ One of the more significant social side-effects of Prestige TV has been a growing sense that queer lives are more easily represented on television than in other mass media. The notion goes something like, the serialized slow-burn style of narrative on TV makes "niche" characters like LGBTQ and POC characters an easier sell to audiences and thus to advertisers because the lowered financial risks allow more room for social experimentation, as it were. As Mark Harris writes for *Film Comment* about the lack of queer representation in mainstream Hollywood movies:

That argument posits that TV can afford LGBT characters because there's now an economic universe that allows the medium to succeed by targeting niche audiences, whereas studio movies are still trying to please everyone and offend no one. There's some truth in that—a critically beloved series like *Transparent* can survive and even flourish with a relatively wee viewership. But it doesn't explain how a profusion of LGBT characters, many of them ethnic minorities—something the studios would surely dismiss as too niche—can also exist comfortably on *Empire* and *Orange Is the New Black*, two of television's highest-rated scripted series and, in *Empire*'s case, about as "mass" as TV gets. Surely something can't be mainstream enough for your living room but too fringe for the multiplex. Can it? (Harris 69)

Though we clearly have a long way to go before our fictional media fully and accurately represent all members of our society, contemporary critics are beginning to locate in television that progressive push towards more inclusive representation.

Likewise, *The Watcher* suggests we viewers might actually be somehow present behind a blurry listener as characters chat in SRS two-shots. When we read through Piper in particular, our presence with her in moments like these relies on and is compounded by all of those presumed similarities between us as viewers and OITNB's nominal lead. Jenji Kohan and her staff chose to center (or rather appear to center) their story around Piper because of the ways she can be read as a relatable surrogate for the average Netflix subscriber. She is able to act as Kohan's activism-through-entertainment Trojan horse because she is (presumably) so like us already that we viewers can connect to the unknown story through recognizing bits of ourselves in her. The argument goes, because we are *like* Piper, we can understand and relate to her emotions and actions. Because we are *like* her, we can imagine ourselves in her position, so we can *be* in prison, too.

“Our” Place in Prison

It is a short conceptual leap from empathizing with a protagonist to metaphorically sharing narrative space with her within the TV frame, but *The Watcher* has been laying the groundwork to help us make this jump, thanks to its role as metaphorical intermediary between the people behind and before the TV screen. Particularly in the many SRS two-shots that imply a physical camera watching scenes play out from just behind characters who exist within the fictive physical space of the show, *The Watcher* makes the viewer into a physical presence within the frame through the camera that acts as our eyes by proxy. We have a space just beyond the edges of the frame reserved for us, eavesdropping over the shoulders of inmates, guards, family, and more. Thanks to the connection we empathize through with Piper, this space we now occupy in OITNB's world is aligned with her and her privilege. As we observe its world and

relate to it through Piper (at least initially), we also become complicit in her place in this world. As the show moves away from focalizing predominantly through Piper, and we are further and further trained in how to read *The Watcher*'s visual rhetorics and understand and empathize with additional characters, *The Watcher* now expects us to take our own journey through our own privilege and examine our own roles in the institutions that led all of these Others to populate Litchfield.⁶⁰

The Watcher, though, has grander ambitions for OITNB than just fostering empathy and sympathy for characters not usually afforded screen time on America's television set. This special observational force connecting viewers to such ambitions by training us how to re-see the characters on our screens also wants to use this show to reshape our understanding and expectations of how television itself makes meaning. *The Watcher* uses visual rhetorical play to let us inside the minds of characters, and it devotes as much energy and attention to revising how we understand the way genre conventions and tropes can work televisually. This remarkably stylistically stable series sets into conversation the generic conventions of two specific types of

⁶⁰ The show seems to have underestimated the success of this strategy of empathy. In S04E12, "The Animals," fan favorite, Poussey Washington, is killed as part of a "#BlackLivesMatter"-inspired storyline. OITNB seems to have intended to build up empathetic identification for her as well as the young CO who eventually kills her. Audience response, however, was ferocious, refusing to identify in any part with Bayley, the CO. On the other hand, the show clearly overestimated how much empathy it could generate for other characters like Larry, Piper's fiancé, or Figueroa, the assistant warden at Litchfield. For "Fig" in particular, it is in S02E12 that the show tries to humanize its villain, as it reveals that she is forced to play the dutiful politician's wife to a man carrying on an affair behind her back, but we are too aligned with the prisoners by this point to care much for Fig's sad marriage. Likewise, though Larry clearly served a purpose at the start of the series, he quickly became superfluous, at best, in the eyes of fans, to the point that online communities dedicated to the show began discussing how hated the character was. In his overnight recaps for the series, *The AV Club*'s Myles McNutt even began sequestering talk about plot points or developments related to the character in "Ugh, Larry" footnotes, introduced alongside S02E09, "40 oz of Furlough." His recap opens with:

Why is Larry still a part of *Orange is the New Black*?

You may have noticed by now that my opinion of Larry is not particularly high. I've always found the character somewhat distasteful for his self-centeredness, and he's suffered further as Piper—once equally self-centered—has gained perspective that Larry hasn't. By the end of the first season, I was ready to be done with Larry, but then he shows up in season two even after breaking up with Piper, and he's been a frustrating presence all year. I've been relegating him to the stray observations, and dubbing the feature "Ugh, Larry," and I've never once hit an episode where I've felt like Larry's storyline was saying something integral to its theme, its plot, or anything else that could make him worthwhile or interesting.

classic American TV programs: multi-camera situation comedies and single-camera family dramas. As I've discussed, OITNB takes its framing and depth of field from the sitcoms that helped birth the medium. From the family drama, and its cousin genre the soap opera,⁶¹ however, OITNB takes its more naturalistic lighting and sound designs. These various elements would have been almost impossible to combine in the early days of television, as the same technical limitations that necessitated the *mise-en-scene* for the sitcom also led to a reliance on bright, artificial lighting (so the clunky TV cameras could capture enough light to have any image to broadcast) and high-fidelity, low-clarity soundtracks (where early omnidirectional mics picked up all noise on stage or in the live studio audience for broadcast whether directors wanted them to or not). It wasn't until the medium evolved more technically and room for new genres was made over the airwaves that shows were able to experiment with naturalism in light and sound. Much of this naturalistic experimentation occurred in the family drama. OITNB's visual rhetoric specifically references both of these early television-style eras at once in order to explore and manipulate the ways audiences respond emotionally to both. These varied emotional responses, though, depend in large part on how the *mise-en-scene* for each genre interacts with the ways each genre structures its narratives in relationship to duration and time. OITNB uses elements of both genres to create another new relationship with the audience.

⁶¹ Critical theorists have long sought to rehabilitate the image of Soap Operas in popular conception, divorcing the specifically feminine form of melodrama from its pejorative connotations. Tania Modleski and John Fiske, very early in the academic life of Television Studies, do excellent work breaking down the complex meaning-making at work in soap operas and reclaim the genre as sites of feminist storytelling potential. I draw attention to the work of these scholars not only because of the ways it laid foundations for the entire field, but also to again highlight how long academic has been wrestling with the pernicious feeling that TV (and women's TV specifically) still needs to justify its place in the scholarly canon.

Shining a Light on the Dramedy

High-key lighting, stage-like proscenium sets, and heavy focus on shallow field images of faces meant that sitcoms looked obviously fabricated with little resemblance to the spaces inhabited by viewers that the shows' sets were meant to mimic. Sitcom living rooms on TV looked little like viewers' actual living rooms, and their storylines matched this unreality. Problems are introduced and solved in the space of 22 minutes every week on sitcoms. While almost any sort of absurdist or seemingly impossible thing might happen during a sitcom's runtime, by the end of the episode the show's world always resets and returns to the "normal" from which it started. In contrast, the much more naturalistic style of family-dramas paved the way for much more realistic storylines. These series built worlds that look like an audience's own and follow the same kinds of narrative logics as the daily lives of its viewers, just with the dramatics turned up a bit. The status quo doesn't reset at the end of 44 minutes, and problems can take weeks to resolve, if they ever do.

This difference creates a comedy-drama binary in traditional television programming. Where sitcoms have typically been where the status quo is constantly broken only to be reestablished quickly, the open-ended family drama instead emphasizes the consistency of the mundane in the face of perpetually unfinished narratives. Anything can happen on a sitcom as long as everything returns to the known and accepted "normal" at the end of the episode, but the way resolution is forever being pushed back in dramas makes the appearance of "normal" reality more important as a balance for the perpetual uncertainty of family drama plotlines. Sitcoms can look outrageous because their storylines always return audiences back to the familiar in the end; family dramas tend to look familiar because their storylines deny viewers a stable status quo. Sitcoms, thus, are the unreality opposite of the supposed verisimilitude of the family drama.

OITNB manages to unite paradoxically these opposites. Excising sitcom *mise-en-scene* from its surreal “live studio audience” aesthetic, and re-forging Comedy’s (as a genre and as an industry) obsession with punchline finality through Drama’s mundanity, OITNB blends these sitcom and family drama tropes into “dramedy” perhaps more expressly and with more purpose than any other American TV show.

What this new genre blend provides aesthetically for OITNB is a stability of visual conventions and tropes that, much like the show’s central vertical balance framing motif, allows the eye to notice more readily when the show does choose to deviate from “dramedy’s” genre conventions. In terms of genre play in relationship to how we viewers relate to characters, the consistency of OITNB’s “dramedy” allows the show’s rare explorations of other genre styles to be both more obvious visually and more impactful narratively. I will discuss in more detail later some of the more crucial moments when the show employs other genres, like Horror and The Wester. Returning for now to the “Dramedy,” Piper and the other inmates begin to view Litchfield as their “home space,” many of the show’s directors and DPs will work to expand the show’s shooting bible, though the visual consistency of its framing styles and “dramedy” conventions will continue to provide those show creators a platform for exploring why those characters make prison into home and to unsettle and reposition us viewers in relationship with those characters.

Direct Address: Who Is The Watcher?

Season two features an important deviation and example of how stylistic play can dramatically change our viewing relationship with characters. A pair of episodes employ direct address interviews in two dramatically different contexts to upend our role as viewers in the

narrative reality of Litchfield. In the first episode of the set, S02E06, “And Also You Have a Pizza,” directed by Allison Anders and shot by Yoran Orbach, opens with an unexplained sequence of direct address shots. Various inmates make eye contact with the camera as they talk about what love means to them. Though more of these direct address interviews will be interspersed throughout the episode, it is only the episode’s final scenes that reveal Piper has been conducting these interviews with the inmates as part of her recent prison newsletter project. Her television-camera-as-video-camera is an excuse and cover for Piper to investigate conditions in the prison under the guise of writing a fluffy Valentine’s Day themed piece for the newsletter. Until this reveal at the end, S02E06 offers no context or explanation for these direct address interludes. Until Piper’s reveal, we are the interlocutors, fictional characters making sustained eye contact with us real viewers via The Watcher’s liminally-placed camera. As The Watcher metaphorically bridges the cinematographic space between the world in the frame and that without, we viewers are in these moments part of Litchfield directly. What’s more, thanks to Piper’s ruse, we are also privy to the innermost feelings of the interviewed inmates. They open themselves up to us, as if we were one of them, because in these sequences we are seeing through Piper’s mediated eyes.

By violating its shooting bible so dramatically, The Watcher brings us viewers directly into the world of OITNB. The reveal that the camera is also a stand-in for Piper reinforces our connection to her and once again underscores our complicity in her actions and her privileges. If, Piper is “the worst,” as she and many other characters claim, so now are we. Because of the ways the show played on and with presumed audience identification conventions before S02E06, the use of direct address and the Piper reveal mean that we viewers now more explicitly shoulder the weight of her foibles and failings. As an analogy for the showrunner’s intervention into our

social relationships with TV characters and their potential real-world analogs, *The Watcher* literalizes our identification with Piper and complicates Kohan's original joke about the protagonist. This is a new facet in our evolving viewing relationship with the show. Sometimes we side with the Othered characters by laughing along with them at Piper's privilege-skewed priorities. Sometimes we are drawn into Piper's interiority so we can understand a world to which we may have no other connection. Sometimes, too, when *The Watcher* plays with stylistic conventions, we take Piper's place in the frame and become her in the reality of OITNB.

In each iteration, the metaphor of *The Watcher* means to show us a new way of relating to and appreciating a side of our reality typically hidden from the American public's view: the American carceral system. As we experience these shifts in POV as viewers, we are also getting a fuller sense of what it can mean to live within that system and our relationship to some of the institutions that make it possible. Our relationship to Piper through these moments of shifting and manipulated perspective asks us to consider the justice or injustice of our carceral system. Here in this particular instance in S02E06, *The Watcher* makes our relationship to Piper so explicit as to turn the camera into her literal point of view and then situate us immediately within that POV. We are asked to think of ourselves as inmates without the intermediary presence of our ostensible protagonist. Here, our connection to Piper, and thus to what Litchfield represents, goes beyond the mere marketing concerns ("Piper Chapman: Progressive Trojan Horse") that would drive typical TV show character identification and becomes concrete and purposeful.

The second episode in this set and the other conspicuous example of direct address in this season occurs in S02E13, "We Have Manners, We're Polite," directed by Constantine Makris and shot by Orbach. Once again, quick bursts of direct address interview scenes put us viewers inside the world of the show. Now, however, they do not align us with a specific character as

they do in S02E06. Instead, Makris and Orbach position us through The Watcher's camera in the space between bodies, specifically between federal agents at Litchfield to interrogate the inmates in the wake of a vicious attack on Red. There is no grand reveal that we have been inhabiting the perspective of anyone on screen, but we remain a presence in these scenes even though no one expressly acknowledges us as such. When the inmates make eye contact with us through The Watcher's camera, within the diegetic plot they are avoiding the gaze of the federal agents by staring into the empty space before them. We fill that empty space, and we are aligned against the inmates. We are the antagonist they are willing to stare down even as they defer to those physically in the room with them. As such, we become a third agent sitting squarely between the other two who fill the left and right sides of the frame around the central vertical void that is "us." The Watcher makes sure that the inmates across the conference table are positioned in line with our central vertical. We will never share the frame with these women even as we co-opt their position within that frame across edits. We sit silently and observe these women as the other agents pressure and scrutinize them. Where we were aligned with Piper before in S02E06, in S02E13 we have become outsiders to this world again, aligned with the threatening institutional forces holding disproportionate power and authority over the characters we have come to know through the show.

The Watcher, in S02E06 and in its stead as cinematographic metaphor for the creative intelligences behind the episode, has made us complicit in its central character's privileged behavior only to complicate that relationship by doubling down and putting us into the perspective of a persecuting authority figure in S02E13. If "And Also You Have a Pizza" manipulated the POV of direct address to put us viewers in a position to see ourselves inside Litchfield (with the subject of its interviews forging bonds between us and the inmates through

its revealing conversations), the “We Have Manners, We’re Polite” now repositions us as their enemy, agents of the system locking the inmates away from their lives and loved ones. We take on the perspective of an authority generally unconcerned and unmoved by the sorts of intimate revelations we were privy to as Piper in S02E06. The use of direct address creates a bridge between these two episodes where the implications of our relationship in one revises our relationship through the other. As we once looked at these women through Piper’s camera-eye, *The Watcher* implies now that Piper looks at them through us and our position alongside the federal agents. As we sit there between members of the Special Intelligence Service and across from the queer women of color who are forced to call this prison their home, Piper sits there with us in absentia, too. The residual perspective bridge between episodes means that the unexamined privilege that makes Piper a proto-villain in the pilot follows us through the seasons. Because of the way these moments of direct address situate us in relationship to Piper and the interviewed inmates, Piper’s privilege (which is also our own) becomes a part of the institutional forces interrogating the women of Litchfield.

Such moments of visual play shine because of the otherwise consistent and stable “dramedy” aesthetic the show uses. It is *OITNB*’s relationship with classical forms and expectations that lets the showrunner and crew use a metaphor like *The Watcher* to unsettle and challenge contemporary audience-content relationships. Thanks to the classical forms at the heart of the show’s shooting bible, we can see the ways *The Watcher* positions us in our social relationship with the show and the traditionally underrepresented people at the heart of it.

The Watcher's Revisionist Feminist Lens: Beyond Dramedy

My understanding of how Prestige creators use cinematography and *mise-en-scene* to challenge the ways viewers understand and even empathize with Otherness allows us to see also how such metaphorical cinematography uses genre conventions and our expectations of what and how those conventions influence meaning to change our assumptions about how those conventions and expectations shape us as viewers. Playing with genre conventions specifically becomes a chance for Kohan and her team to put viewers into new viewing relationships with characters through the ways that the trends and standards of other genres affect how we understand how characters react within storylines through how we respond to generic differences. OITNB addresses genres traditionally coded as masculine through a revisionist feminist lens. I want to look specifically at instances where Horror, Psychological Thriller, and Western genre tropes are reclaimed and revised to reveal more about character interiority while subverting our expectations about those tropes to create new social relationships for us as viewers. All three of these genres have been traditionally considered to appeal more to male audiences than female, so their inclusion in this female-oriented series asks us to think about why “we” see them as masculine as it asks us to understand these characters in new ways.

Revised Genre: Horror

The Watcher is a metaphor for the ways Prestige TV creators intervene through cinematography with our understanding of our relationship to television as viewers. As such, it invites us to revisit what we know about Horror as a genre when OITNB embraces a new set of visual tropes, in S01E09, “Fucksgiving,” directed by Michael Trim. This episode finds Piper thrown in the Secure Housing Unit, or SHU, colloquially referred to as solitary confinement. Her

prison counselor, Healy, is furious with her for violating the bond he imagined between them. He saw her only as the “nice blonde lady” persona the show mocks so elegantly in the previous episodes, and when he learns that she is actually queer and in a romantic relationship again with Alex Vause, Healy’s image of Piper crumbles. He retaliates against her so-called betrayal by having her sequestered into SHU that has been a sort of boogeyman haunting Litchfield since episode one. The transition from GenPop to SHU is dramatic both narratively and cinematographically. Cutting from the bright and relatively cheery atmosphere⁶² of Taystee’s common room going home party, we cut to another inmate, Doggett, smirking over an ominous piano music sound bridge while guards escort Piper into the solitary confinement unit of the prison.

The lighting scheme shifts drastically. Gone are the bright natural white lights bouncing off cream-colored walls of the common area, replaced by sickly gray-green fluorescents in the windowless and dingy gray SHU hallway. Piper enters from frame left, the harsh lighting turning the dark circles under her eyes into caverns. The CO roughly guides her into the hallway in a medium two-shot. Their faces balance left (CO) and right (Piper) of the central vertical axis of the show’s standard frame, echoing the pristine balance of the pilot episode’s friendly meal scene. Now, though, familiar conversation is replaced with the echoes of women crying and shouting off-screen. Vanya Cernujl and Michael Trim show us Piper’s anxiety on her face and through an accelerating series of cuts, from her worried expression to the blood red doors lining the hallway, behind which emerge those shouts and cries as Piper is driven to her isolation cell.

⁶² Though augmented with florescent lighting, the series makes great use of the “natural light” that enters the set through the many windows in the prison. The role of this ambient light is most apparent in its absence in S02E12, “It Was the Change,” directed by Phil Abraham. Here, as a hurricane strikes New York state, the power outage at the prison allows the DP, Yaron Orbach, to play with chiaroscuro techniques to build tension around the confrontation between Red and Vee, but it also reveals how green and sallow the prison would look with florescent lighting alone. Once gone, the influence of the hot white sunlight on the show’s atmosphere becomes noticeable.

The back-and-forth editing continues as her cell door clangs open, the CO coolly remarking, “This is you,” and giving Piper a small shove into the cell. The camera set-ups alternate from hallway looking into the tight cell and then from the cell back out toward the hall. The run of shots ends on a vicious note as Piper begs of the CO, “how long am I gonna be in here?” He responds, “til we let you out” with a casualness crueler than a yell.

The camera cuts back out into the hallway set-up to capture Piper’s stunned and frightened expression within the sub-frame of the small porthole window of her closed cell door. With sickly-gray and blood-red accents, the too bright green-tint of flickering florescent overhead lights further washes out and over-exposes these scenes. From here, *The Watcher* abandons the straightforward “Dramedy” framing set-ups established in the show’s Style Bible and that even carried over through the beginning of this SHU sequence. In their place, the camera instead goes for full-on “Horror film.” Indebted to Gothic romances which foreground the psychological distress of their heroines, Horror films have classically relied upon conventions like chiaroscuro lighting, Dutch-tilt camera angles, frenetic cutting between shots, as well as the sort of embodied camera presence I refer to now as *The Watcher* in order to evoke similar psychological and emotional distress from characters and in viewers. In American “slasher” films from the late 1970s on, the specific threat of violence against the female body lurks behind the clichéd shooting techniques that *OITNB* employs for these SHU scenes.⁶³ In

⁶³ Horror is, obviously, not the only genre to deploy stylistic motifs and rhetorical techniques like these. Expressionism, Noir, and the Prison Drama in particular all use at least some of these methods to manipulate audiences’ emotional responses. I believe it is important, though, to acknowledge the on-screen characters’ emotional responses in these sequences. Piper’s terror governs these scenes. We are meant to feel her fear here in ways that Noir or the much more voyeuristic Prison Drama simply wouldn’t privilege. These other genres are also traditionally aligned with the male gaze, and as such tend to elide, fetishize, or belittle women’s experiences. I believe it is significant that Michael Trim attempts to bring Piper’s fear onto the screen itself. He is foregrounding the intense emotional reality of this woman, and doing so while using cinematographic techniques of a genre that so readily sexualizes violence against women rather than empathize with their fear is important for understanding how *OITNB* seeks to revise Horror as a genre here.

this cell, isolated from everyone and left to stew over Healy's cruelty, Piper is a roiling ball of fear and rage, her body and her mind both threatened because of one man's bigotry. She is terrified and furious, and this switch to Horror style accentuates such dark emotions.

While we might expect that watching our protagonist's terror would realign the show's sympathies with her and her now-justified anger, *The Watcher* instead uses these tropes to double down on Piper's powerlessness and the futility of her rebellions against Healy. He threw her into this hellscape because he was shocked and disgusted to realize that she was not the woman he imagined, and she tries to reclaim some sort of agency when she screams at him, "You don't get me! Ever!" confronting his homophobia. The scene, though, will not reset its aesthetics back to the comforting norm of *OITNB*'s house style. Instead, director Trim and DP Vanja Cernjul amplify the horror genre tropes in response to her attempt at defiance. The camera angles become more acute, the lighting harsher and sharper. We watch in our own horror as Piper's outburst only makes things worse for her: Healy still holds all of the power and still has all of the authority of the prison industrial complex on his side. The visual rhetoric of this scene makes it clear: no matter how she resists, the institution remains unmoved and unchanged even for this most privileged of figures.⁶⁴ That is the true horror, and *The Watcher* makes sure we feel it right alongside Piper.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Some critics have asked why it is only Piper's experience in SHU that *OITNB* chooses to show us, as Janae Watson, a black woman, is thrown into solitary almost immediately upon her arrival at Litchfield. I would argue that this can be read as an attempt by the show to avoid fetishizing the pain of a woman of color, though it does appear to privilege Piper once again at the expense of a minority figure. By delaying the reveal of SHU and presenting it to us through Piper's eyes, *The Watcher* is showing us the best possible version of this terrible place. Piper is seemingly the only character who could get away with fighting back against a prison authority, and the failure of that fight ironically lands harder with her because of her privilege. We would expect a woman of color to be tortured like this by such a corrupt system, which is an atrocious thing to admit, but the institutionalized racism that governs Litchfield has been well-established by this point.

⁶⁵ Piper's second trip to SHU, however, is not shot according to horror tropes. In S02E01, following her bloody fight with Doggett at the end of the previous season, director Jodie Foster blends the horror elements with motifs from *Psychological Thrillers à la Briana DePalma*. The end result ratchets up the anxiety instead of terror. Foster and Cernjul use wider shots with little establishing context to echo Piper's temporal disorientation and fear during her transfer from SHU in the middle of the night to "god knows where." They cut back and forth between these wide,

Revised Genre: Psychological Thriller

The Watcher does something similar using the psychological thriller as a template, when the show takes us into the prison's psychiatric ward in S01E11, "Tall Men with Feelings," directed by Constantine Makris. The episode follows Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett. This antagonistic woman, a divisive character in this early season, has been tricked by Piper and Alex into believing that she has miraculous healing powers. The prison authorities mostly ignored Doggett when she kept her religious zeal limited to insulting and ineffective sermons to her small band of meth-addict followers. When she falls for Piper and Alex's revenge-ruse, though, she finally captures Litchfield's attention, to her detriment. Up until this point, Doggett had been little more than a punchline for the show, an easy villain to stir up drama while Piper still looked like a hero. In a strange way, sending Doggett to Psych is almost the show's way of apologizing to the character for not taking her as seriously as it does the other inmates. This redemption is ironic because of the way Psych is presented. If SHU was a Horror film invading a Dramedy, Psych is the anxiety and tension of a Psychological Thriller chillingly destabilizing the consistency of the show's house style. The image of this tiny woman, played by very petite actor Taryn Manning, locked inside a cage that is itself set in the middle of a bare, severe, and cold room is astounding. The lighting here stands out in sharp contrast against the show's typical warm sun and the harsh green fluorescents in SHU. Rather, Psych is lit a chilly blue, echoing the blue tones throughout the set design. The lighting suggests a sort of freezer, as if Doggett is

confusing shots to extreme close-ups on Piper's face, making the connection between her anxiety and the tension in their frames explicit.

As an aside, this episode also builds around subverting a thriller narrative. Piper accidentally removes a screwdriver from the workroom, and when it goes missing, the prison goes haywire. Everyone becomes fearful and paranoid about what sort of punishment will be meted out by the CO's or who might be attacked with the tool-turned-weapon. The episode resolves this tension into comedy, however, when it reveals that Big Boo had the screwdriver the whole time and, rather than use it as a weapon, uses it as a dildo. The episode climaxes with the punchline of sex act instead of murder, but it needed the trappings of a thriller to pull off the reversal.

being forced to cool her passionate nature. The effect would be antiseptic were it not for the signs of wear and tear peppering the set. The paint is peeling, and some of the bars on the cage are rusting.⁶⁶ If Doggett is in a freezer, she has been abandoned there, unattended and uncared-for for a long time according to the genre logics of this Psychological Thriller in miniature.

The set design and the way *The Watcher*'s camera operates within it are so clinical yet cruel that they lay the groundwork for how disturbing a later scene occurring outside of *Psych* will be, still haunted by the effects of this thriller aesthetic. Back in the warmth of the dramedy aesthetic on the main set, Suzanne, an inmate with psychological issues of her own and dubbed "Crazy Eyes" by the others, elaborates on her own stressful experience with *Psych*. By this point, the show has built up a great deal of sympathy from the audience for Suzanne, so *The Watcher*, as intermediary between the creative minds behind the show and the minds of viewers of the show, transfers some of that sympathy now to Doggett. If a character we love tells us that *Psych* is bad, this can retroactively change the way we understand the experience of a character we had been trained to deride. Because we can visualize what Suzanne tries to avoid describing, and because we feel so bad for her, we begin to understand Doggett differently through our relationship with Suzanne. By using unusual genre tropes, *The Watcher* starts to build a connection between viewers and a character mistreated on and by the show. Our memory of the difference between aesthetics in these scenes reshapes our relationship to the characters.⁶⁷ The

⁶⁶ This sequence is meant to recall Milos Forman's film adaptation of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. The visual connection between these scenes in *OITNB* and Forman's film subtly aligns Doggett with Jack Nicholson's Randle McMurphy, underscoring the injustice of what Doggett is experiencing through the reference.

⁶⁷ That the show tries to backtrack from failing Doggett becomes explicit in the narrative in the next episode, S01E12, "Fool Me Once," directed by Andrew McCarthy. The episode starts with Suzanne very calmly telling off Piper, saying, "You're not a nice person. You're a mean person ... It's not your fault. You are who you are, like I am who I am," and then transitioning into a Doggett flashback that shows how she ended up in prison. Had her characterization in earlier episodes been less cartoonishly evil, I wonder whether this pair of episodes would have been more or less effective. Certainly, some of this is down to the choices Manning made in her performance, but the show creators seemed to recognize their mishandling of the character. The Doggett rehabilitation strategy returns in full force in S02E02, "Looks Blue, Tastes Red," directed and shot by Michael Trim. Here, Healy confronts

visual differences signal the multiple genres references in these sequences, and our affections for one character allow us to revise both our understanding of another and our understanding of the genres at play. This retroactive revision casts now the Psychological Thriller in a feminist light. Not only do we see Doggett through Suzanne's eyes, we also understand the traditionally male gaze of the thriller through both women's emotional reality.

Revised Genre: Westerns

With Western tropes, *The Watcher* relies on our understanding of the characters through OITNB's consistent Dramedy style in order to subvert our expectations of those characters by subverting our expectations of the genre. We find old and new characters alike performing revisionist versions of typical, and typically masculine, Western archetypes. OITNB uses elements of Classical, Revisionist, and Spaghetti Westerns to further the show's own feminist revisioning of television as a medium. In its stead as an embodied metaphor of the ways Prestige creators try to retrain TV viewers by redirecting our acts of vision to the ways a television show can productively reinterpret both its place in our lives as well as in TV tradition, *The Watcher* transforms the expected beats of Classical (masculine) westerns into a way to train us viewers to see how such gendered tropes can be limiting and stifling and to understand how OITNB complicates the "black and white" hero/villain dynamics of most classical storytelling.

S02E03, "Hugs Can Be Deceiving," directed and shot by Michael Trim, trains us how to see through the bounds of such a traditionally gendered genre to understand our Litchfield

Doggett about not revealing his role in her fight with Piper at the end of season one. He blackmails her into leaving out mention of him walking away as she threatened the other inmate with a shiv. The scene is staged in his office as a vicious echo of the standard SRS two-shot, only when Healy goes fully into his threat, he starts looming over Doggett and she disappears from the frame. The camera becomes her instead of looking over her. Healy attacks "us," too, as we are now aligned directly with her point of view.

women in new ways as well. This episode finds Red, the Russian matriarch, nervously sneaking around the prison to avoid interacting with a new arrival, Vee. Previous episodes have taught us that Red is a strong woman, brave, forthright, and self-assured, so her behavior here is shockingly out of character. This is our first sign that something unusual is afoot in S02E03. As the episode progresses and our sense grows of Vee as a looming threat powerful enough to frighten even Red, we slowly learn through flashbacks that these two women have a dark history together. In Vee's previous stint at Litchfield that coinciding with Red's entry to the prison, Vee convinced the Russian that she was the new inmate's friend and confidant, only to then threaten and betray Red. As her sentence was up, Vee then left the prison before Red could react to her supposed friend's betrayal. Michael Trim sets these flashbacks against current-timeline sequences of Red's reaction shots as she stalks around Vee.

The characters fall into the rhythms and roles out of the greatest Revisionist Western, *High Noon*⁶⁸: Red playing the hesitant Gary Cooper hero to Vee's sauntering Ian MacDonald villain. Trim amps up the tension, building toward their unavoidable reunion in present-day Litchfield. He stages the confrontation itself like a climactic showdown between two battle-tested gunslingers, Red in the proverbial white hat and Vee the black. Each character appears at opposite ends of a long, empty stretch of hallway as the camera pushes into alternating close-ups on their faces. An unexpected piece of music then rings out on the soundtrack, clearly inspired by Ennio Morricone's famous Spaghetti Western sores and that wouldn't sound out of place in *Once Upon A Time in the West*. As the music swells, each woman takes cautious steps towards

⁶⁸ That Trim references *High Noon* signals The Watcher's revisionist intent here. The simplistic archetypes of Classic forms in both TV and film Westerns are replaced by much more complex and nuanced versions of the old stand-by roles.

the other, the sounds of their shows against the flooring echoing the clang of a gunfighter's spurs in the dirt. We would expect this scene to end in violence per the rules of the genre it apes.

Instead, the scene resolves with the eponymous hug from the episode's title, the two women embracing as if as old friends. That's *The Watcher*'s punchline. Where the aesthetics of the genre on screen demands violence, *The Watcher* instead presents an embrace. Their hug undercuts both narrative expectations as well as the tension built up through Trim's punning on the Western. The confrontation scene still leads to catharsis, but now it is through laughter instead of slaughter. However, the creative minds behind *The Watcher*-as-metaphor have not used the Western idly, and it has not violated our understanding of Red's interiority only for the sake of a single joke. Rather, the show reveals that the women are trying to play nice and preserve standing within the prison instead of truly rekindling a friendship. Red's suspicions of Vee are shown to be well founded, as the newly returned inmate is seen up to her old tricks again with other unsuspecting women. Red knows how manipulative Vee's hugs can be, and *The Watcher* makes sure we understand this new character through our knowledge of an original. It uses the convention of a genre whose sense of justice is itself heavily coded as masculine just as its presumed audience is. Thus, *The Watcher*, as a way of understanding and describing the myriad complex creative choices made by showrunners and crew, demonstrates yet another way that OITNB tweaks the conventions of American television in order to tell a more complex and feminist sort of story than would traditionally be found in the genres it parodies. *The Watcher* asks us to look again at what these genres privilege through their gazes. For OITNB, what is privileged now is the emotional reality experienced by women. Their perspectives take center stage, and we viewers are asked to empathize with them rather than merely gaze upon them as

we would in traditional examples of all these genres: Horror, Psychological Thriller, and Western alike.

Piper's Not Your Hero; She's Your Villain

The Watcher, it seems, also allows OITNB to parody the lessons provided to its viewers. It appears that Piper Chapman herself learns some of the show's lessons about how better to understand characters, though OITNB turns Piper's lesson into an example of how such observational prowess might be used for ill. As she embraces her inner villain over the course of the series, Piper mimics The Watcher's way of seeking out stolen glances and isolated expressions in other characters, thus also mimicking the actions if not the intentions of the show's crew. She then manipulates others to further her own goals inside Litchfield. As I've discussed, in S02E06 she does this overtly through the ruse of her Valentine's Day newsletter report, interviewing the other inmates to provide a cover for her own foray into investigative journalism.⁶⁹ In most episodes, though, she is more subtle, watching the women around her carefully and using the knowledge she gleans about them to manipulate them into participating in and furthering her various schemes even to the point of unwittingly betraying their own self-interest.

Her relationship with Stella in season three is arguably the best example of this behavior. Stella is an alluring, androgynous woman working alongside Piper in the now-privatized prison's panty factory. Their relationship begins with an exchange of flirtatious yet sarcastic glances stolen back and forth during scenes where Piper's storyline revolves more explicitly around the

⁶⁹ Piper was gathering information for an outside newspaper reporter working on a story about corruption in the prison industry. Piper feeds the reporter secret information partly out of a spirit of prison reform and partly motivated by her then fiancé, Larry, who had recently garnered some notoriety for his own article about their relationship while she is incarcerated. No motive is ever pure for Piper Chapman.

forever-shifting ground of her romance with Alex. These glances are shot like long-distance versions of the show's classic SRS two-shots, the gulf between the women filled with sewing machines as well as the intruding body of another prisoner. As the teasing flirtation progresses, the distance between Piper and Stella shrinks over the course of several episodes. Once they become partners in business⁷⁰ and then in romance, they begin to share the frame like OITNB's other couples. Their glances now begin to take on new shades of meaning.

As Stella's glances reveal that she is legitimately falling in love with Piper, Piper's expressions reveal to the viewer that she is manipulating her new paramour through these stolen looks and shared frames. She lures the other woman deeper into a serious relationship, relying on Stella's belief that the emotions Piper lets her see are real. The Watcher knows Piper is lying. So do we. We have been trained to read through Piper's pantomime of affection. As we have learned, too has Piper Chapman learned just how powerful the mediation of expressions can be. She seems to have intuited the potential in what The Watcher has been teaching us viewers as our metaphoric/cinematographic guide to reading anew the rhetorical situations at play in this dramatic situation-comedy. She is making Stella care about her by using Stella's gaze against her. At the end of season three, Stella is shocked to discover Piper's perfidy and gets sent away to maximum security, framed by Piper for thefts around Litchfield to get Stella out of the way and to preserve Piper's burgeoning black market capitalism in their once-shared illicit panty business. Chapman's transition to open villainy is complete, and the joke running through

⁷⁰ Piper devises a scheme to profit off the forced-labor of the prisoners in the luxury underwear factory set up by Litchfield's private corporate owners in season three. The factory is inefficient, wasting a great deal of fabric for each pair of underwear constructed. Piper initially raises this concern to the CO's to suggest they could take advantage of the waste, but she begins to steal this waste fabric for her own enterprise when the corporate owners dismiss her suggestion. Stella is the first to catch on to what Piper is up to and convinces the budding venture capitalist to think bigger. In the final episode of this season, S03E13, "Trust No Bitch," directed by Phil Abraham and shot by Ludovic Littee, Stella is set to be released from Litchfield and steals Piper's profits. Piper retaliates by hiding all of the contraband she could find around Litchfield in Stella's bunk, so that the other woman would be sent to maximum security instead of released when the COs performed their routine check of her area.

OITNB since the pilot hits its punchline: Piper's "nice blonde lady" act is dangerous and not something to be romanticized.

Piper's dangerous privilege is more than simply a joke for OITNB. If the series never so forthrightly violates its proverbial "fourth wall" to state expressly our role as watchers in Piper's transformation, the aesthetic choices it makes intimate the connection. Through our bond with her (as our Trojan horse in the pilot, and then in a literalized connection in S02E06 that bridges into S02E13 and beyond), we viewers are implicated in her behavior. It was only after *The Watcher* brought us into Litchfield through direct address that Piper's manipulative streak grew into something so nakedly threatening. We watched as Piper learned to be so manipulative, but OITNB also suggests that our influence helped guide her tutelage. Through our visual relationship with Piper in particular, our viewing habits mean that we are also using the women of Litchfield to our own benefit and enjoyment. This, then, is how *The Watcher* reminds us viewers of our larger relationship to the parts of our society these women all represent as it reminds us of the sociopolitical goals of the series' creators behind the cinematographic metaphor. We have a responsibility to these Othered figures, on the show and off, as we play a role in their oppression. With OITNB, *The Watcher* and the real-world artists represented by this set of cinematographic choices want us to see and to acknowledge our part in the American carceral system and the ways that our "real world" indifference to the Othered women caught up in that system is bound to our privileges just like Piper's. Through *The Watcher*'s formalist experimentation, and against the backdrop of a Dramedy style born from classical TV tropes, we are implicated in our society's wider relationship with the carceral state in general.

Learning Lesson from An Earlier Time: *Good Times*

Just as OITNB is certainly not the first television show to manipulate genre conventions, it is also not the first to play with them in order to try to change the way viewers feel about traditionally marginalized persons. In fact, much of the impact of OITNB's genre-play can be traced back to the moves made by the "social relevance" sitcoms produced by Norman Lear's Tandem Productions in the 1970s. Perhaps more than any in that stable of now classic sitcom history, *Good Times* helped define the role of Black activism on TV that has, in turn, inspired Jenji Kohan and *The Mindy Project* in the 21st century. The aesthetic DNA of the multi-camera sitcom set in a Chicago housing project is clearly still present in Netflix's women's prison dramedy, but the shows share similar narrative concerns that inspire the same sort of critical concerns as well.

As I've explained before, television has traditionally been a medium of status quo. While programs from the very birth of the technology have actively challenged sociopolitical norms,⁷¹ the mechanisms of the medium itself have tended toward stability over change. We see this tendency deconstructed in OITNB's aesthetics and the numerous ways it builds its foundations on the tried and true generic conventions of situation comedies and family dramas, but the show's use of these conventions is actually a challenge to the stagnation that happens when such conventions are simply accepted without considering why they exist at all. OITNB seems to have learned some of the hard lessons about how powerful the pull toward the status quo can be from its predecessors like *Good Times*. Lear's show went on the air as a direct challenge to what American comedy could be and ultimately fell victim to the stagnating lull of "consistency" for its own sake. Lear and company tried to change the nature of whose story could be told on American TV only to see their racially empowering and feminist tale co-opted by industrial

⁷¹ In fact, the very first nationally broadcast sitcom, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, was the first series to show both a couple sharing a bed and a pregnant woman on American TV. The show ran from 1947 to 1950 on a variety of networks.

concerns that made a minstrel star of Jimmie Walker's buffoonish eldest son character. If OITNB highlights the representation of "women of circumstance," *Good Times* tried to highlight the representation of a non-stereotypical American Black family. Critics of both shows take issue with the supposed authenticity in each.

For *Good Times*, this means questioning who exactly gets to determine what Black means and what the mediation of Black images suggests about American culture. Writing contemporaneously with *Good Times*, Herbert Gans calls it an outsider show designed to tell a White majority viewership something about the Black minority but that is not particularly concerned with the expectations or desires of that minority (59). He finds that "*Good Times* is a conventionally silly TV family comedy with Black characters, which aims to tell the white majority that poor Blacks are really no different from it, either in life-style or values" (ibid). Thus, for Gans and critics like him, the show can only be read one of two ways: either as just a new Hollywood stereotype of the poor Black family made for a White audience or as a deviation from the original stereotype now meant to manipulate the sympathies of Black viewers (Gans

60).⁷² Critics want *Good Times* to do something very specific and very political,⁷³ and when it doesn't, they reject the show entirely. Gans' complaints came even before JJ's ascendancy on the sitcom, so we can only wonder how this critic would have reacted if the more cartoonish antics that dominated many of the later-season episodes were a part of *Tandem*'s original intent.

One character on *Good Times* that did manage to resist being dumbed down, thanks mostly to the continual interventions of the actor bringing her to life, was the show's mother. Writing in response to the show's impact today, Kimberly Springer and Christine Acham⁷⁴ each try to read some of the ways Florida Evans (played by Esther Rolle) has been variously received by people who expected something very specific and political from her. Springer examines how real-world activists responded to the show and how the show's female protagonist changed in

⁷² This in turn echoes some of what Labor Studies scholar Mil Liberthal also says about the patriarch of the show, James Evans, and the American labor movement. *Good Times* was a spin-off of *Maude*, which was itself a spin-off of *All In The Family*. Lieberthal looks at how prejudices against manual laborers and the working class by middle- and upper-class professionals manifests in TV and movies. Writing in the mid-1970s, Lieberthal briefly discusses *Good Times* as a contemporary depiction of the working class. Countering the animalist metaphors often used by middle-class scholars when discussing the working class, he finds that James Evans, *Good Times*' father, "is a strong, intelligent parent who, although puzzled by the problems of his children, more often turns out right than wrong. When he is wrong, he usually admits his error. In other words, James is very much as the audience would want to think of themselves as being" (164-165). It is James' Blackness that sets him apart from the more typical and typically prejudiced image of the working-class man on television. Though given only a passing mention by Lieberthal, the idea that James Evans' image is mediated differently because of the character's race is an interesting one. Why would James be painted with a different brush than Archie Bunker, the protagonist of the series that gave root to *Good Times*? Is there some sense that television couldn't handle the intersecting identities of a minority character who was also a bigot? If the worker was, him- or herself, a source of ridicule for the middle-class, is James' depiction a tacit acknowledgement of the racism haunting the American labor movement? Lieberthal's focus on labor studies and the image of the worker in general meant he spent little time on the racialized image of the worker in the particular, but his choice to lead off his discussion with James Evans instead of Archie Bunker is fascinating in what it doesn't go on to say.

⁷³ Patricia D Hopkins' concerns about "realism" and images of Black experience fall in this category. She calls out other critics who label *Good Times* as more realistic than other Black family sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, because claiming poverty as authentically Black denies the experiences of middle-class families like her own. Hopkins raises an important question about the gatekeepers of culture. Who has the power to determine what an authentic experience is, and why is American culture so obsessed with the idea of Black authenticity? Certainly, there are valid reasons to critique *Good Times* and OITNB for what they do choose to portray, as well as what those portraits say about and inspire others to say about Black lives, but that is different than dismissing one for not being authentic only to lift up the other as feeling authentic to you. The same can be asked of the experiences of any minority group within society. The fight over who gets to play gatekeeper is, in the end, a distraction over the ways that our current capitalist, racist, heteronormative, patriarchal social superstructure fosters discord and perpetuates the oppression of all those othered by that system.

⁷⁴ For more, see Springer 122-35 and Acham *Revolution Televised* Ch. 5

response to those activists, citing contemporaneous claims from the National Black Feminist Organization after meeting with Norman Lear and his production company. Florida's engagement with feminist ideals and the struggles of Black women with their mediated images then changed. In Acham's work, she resists impulses to dismiss so much of Black television from the 20th century for being little more than a compendium of negative representations and instead uses the pleasure she took when watching these shows as an entry point for examining how they might be reclaimed for Black agency and for the Black actor-activist seeking "to produce counternarratives to combat the co-optation of the television shows by a white-controlled industry" (Acham 110). For Acham, Esther Rolle was directly responsible for *Good Times*' engagement with the Moynihan Report,⁷⁵ refusing "to participate in furthering this legacy by placing the image of the matriarchal black family into the media forum and instead presented what she believed to be an uplifting image of the black family" (Acham 129). Esther Rolle did not want her work used as an excuse or a tool for justifying the racist governmental policy within the report. She struggled to assure that the stories she told were not reduced to stereotype. When she felt that her efforts no longer had an impact and the network's machinations to boost ratings by spotlighting breakout star Walker became the driving force on *Good Times*, Rolle left the

⁷⁵ The Moynihan Report is the colloquial name for Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, written for the US Department of Labor in 1965 under Johnson's administration. In it, sociologist Moynihan traced a rise in Black families headed by single mothers back to a ghetto culture stemming from systemic and continued racial discrimination in American society. Though Moynihan argued that the federal government should respond to the results of its own discriminatory practices by working to improve economic conditions and opportunities for Black Americans, particularly Black men, the report itself was immediately criticized for cultural bias and as an example of patronizing white racism. The report gave birth to the nefarious stereotype of the welfare queen and has been used to bolster and further racist ideology and legislation ever since. For *Good Times* in particular, Tandem sought to present a story of a Black nuclear family to counter the influence of the stereotypes that arose in response to the report. Sadly, with the death of John Amos' James Evans and the rise in popularity of Walker's simplistic comedic performance as JJ, "blaming the victim" (which was a term coined in response to the report) of systemic institutional racism became much easier for critics of the show.

show. Though she would eventually return,⁷⁶ many critics both then and now claim that the damage had already been done to the show. *Good Times* failed, in their eyes, to meet their demands for authentic Black representation. It was the policy at the heart of the Moynihan Report that they truly objected to, yet the sitcom became a scapegoat for their anger.⁷⁷

In her work with *Good Times*, Aniko Bodroghkozy takes to task the very notion of trying to force a cultural artifact to embody “authenticity.” All images of minority experiences are inherently mediated, and *Good Times* walked the fine line between the demands of its various audiences. She concludes that, “as a comedy and as an example of media culture reaching a diverse audience, the show worked gingerly to negotiate its representations in order to circulate empowering messages about African-Americans while not unduly discomforting more conservative white viewers” (Bodroghkozy 405). Bodroghkozy recognizes the way *Good Times* has been forced into “authenticity” games, writing:

calls for the ‘authentic’ smack of essentialism and also suggest a unitary and singular approach to blackness. But if black popular culture (if we can speak of such a thing) is a contradictory space, inevitably contaminated by previous representations that are themselves built on representations and are always in dialogue with generations of imagery produced in a racist environment, how can we interrogate more or less useful and empowering representations? (Bodroghkozy 410)

⁷⁶ Unlike when John Amos made his known concerns about the direction the show was heading only to see his character killed off-screen, Rolle was written off in such a way as to allow for her return. The producers knew how vital she was to the series, but they couldn’t keep her happy while also satisfying their network and ratings demands.

⁷⁷ Joseph Godlewski traces out such conflation between the report and the show, writing that, “what is striking is how a show like *Good Times*, so infused with progressive ideals and issues of social relevance was so easily able to convey a normative view of ‘the projects’ as an inherently failed space” (Godlewski 116). As he notes, “Lear’s parody of ‘the projects’ hinged on a derisive spatial logic, legitimizing normative notions of social housing as a public folly to be abandoned” (118). The supposed parody inadvertently reinforced the racist ideology being satirized. The popular culture depiction of racial and spatial segregation in this place, Chicago’s Cabrini-Green housing project where the series is set, perpetuated in American media the idea that all such spaces were notorious. The projects became infamous because they were presented as infamous.

The show was damned no matter which route it chose. The fact that conflict between producers and the cast led to less and less Black representation behind the scenes only worsened the situation for the series. Where JJ's clown act might have been, initially, a comic balance to the headier conversations about Blackness in America, his ascendancy cut the legs off any progressive political message the show could have made.⁷⁸

As a result, Bodroghkozy seems to follow John Fiske's assertion that television as a medium is not capable of radical change, that it is too conservative from both a cultural and mechanical standpoint for revolution. She writes that, "popular texts cannot be free of the power structures and racial regimes that dominate the social order and that attempt to privilege particular meanings" (Bodroghkozy 420). The ascendancy of JJ seems like an inevitability when one considers how conservative the mechanisms of television are. Classical sitcom characters in particular are designed to be the same at the end of 22 minutes as they are at the beginning; all

⁷⁸ For another take on how *Good Times* may not quite stick the proverbial landing with its satire, turn to Robert Staples and Terry Jones' "historical overview of black in television" meant to counter the racist stereotypes propagated across American TV screens in support of a racist media/mediated superstructure. They use Marxist theory to dissect the ways limited images of Black Americans on television work to reinforce white racism and, thus, capitalist ideology. Citing Neilson survey numbers from the early 1980s, they write that, "since a good percentage of this 15,000 hours of viewing [of the average child by the time she graduates high school] shows black people in a negatively, distorted light, it may not be unreasonable to argue that with all its promise, television serves no greater purpose than to create a false sense of superiority on the part of white people and a false sense of inferiority on the part of blacks" (ibid). Crucially, these critics do not isolate the blame for these racist images with the medium itself; rather, television was just another tool used by an already racist society that traps all of its members in an unproductive and toxic cycle.

Of *Good Times*, Staples and Jones find that the show may have had an all-black cast but relied far too heavily on so-called "black humor" that came dangerously close to being as demeaning and stereotypical as the old Amos 'n' Andy show" (14). Their complaint that even positive images of Black characters on television are ultimately just tools for perpetuating a racist system is valuable, but Staples and Jones seem to ignore the political potential of *Good Times*. They conclude with a call for realistic depictions of the real lives of Black Americans, writing "the entertainment complex is selling a fantasy for the mass public that obscures class inequalities in the economic substructure of American society. Most of the media reflects bourgeois values. Rarely are the lives of most working-class Americans, white or black, reflected accurately in films or television. Instead, we are shown the lives, loves and problems of the bourgeoisies and taught to identify with their lifestyles" (20). That they end on such a claim but refused to engage with the MTM and Tandem sitcoms from the 1970s, including *Good Times*, which, by all accounts, was an attempt to tell the very stories these critics demand, only undercuts their argument. Even writing in the mid-1980s before most of the accusations against him were as public as they are in the 21st century, looking as they do to Bill Cosby's *The Cosby Show* as a model for realigning the power structures behind American TV seems short-sighted, as if they are playing into the same racist ideology they claim to be tearing down.

the dynamism of the time between cannot touch the heart of a character meant to fulfil the same narrative function each of 24 episodes a season. What the network asked for from *Good Times* and what Walker and Tandem gave them was just a reaffirmation of the sort of consistency that defines the genre. Audiences loved to laugh at JJ, so the network wanted to see more opportunities for the audience to laugh. Likewise, JJ could never really learn or grow, because no one could guarantee that he would continue to generate the humor that the audience responded to were he to change. This ultimately led to a distillation of the character to his most straightforward and simplistic elements, and this uncomplicated version of a young Black man reified the very nasty stereotypes his creators had set out to overthrow. At the start, JJ was lazy only because he was a bit of a dreamer, an artist whose mind was often focused on something beyond the day to day of housing project life. Toward the end, the philosophical and creative elements of his personality had been glossed over to emphasize Walker's gift for broad physical comedy. With so few chances to make it big in the entertainment industry allowed to young Black men, it seems wrong to fault Walker for taking his shot once JJ became so popular with audiences, if not with critics.

It seems important to note that though Amos and Rolle were both very vocal about their dissatisfaction with Tandem and the network for the changes made to their show, they both seem to give Walker the benefit of the doubt that he was swept along in the process rather than an instigator of the changes. The controversy on set and in the press, however, still made an impact and challenged, if only slightly, the status quo of American sitcom history. *Good Times* may have tried and failed to revolutionize American television, but its introduction of a new type of discourse into the system remains, "a testament to the cultural effectiveness of the movement for black empowerment" (Bodroghkozy 428). It made a change, however small or subtle, to the

superstructure that eventually overwhelmed it. As such, it also paved the way for the sort of dramatic character growth and change possible on OITNB. Piper can go from looking like a hero to embracing being a villain because shows like *Good Times* started the process of chipping away at the monolith of generic convention that had defined American comedy for so long.

Tandem Productions seems to have operated under a similar mandate to Jenji Kohan. Both Norman Lear's company and Kohan's staff on OITNB set out to make socially conscious and provocative comedies for the American marketplace. *Good Times* and OITNB also seem to shoulder the same burden of trying to speak for or on behalf of groups that rarely have their stories told within that marketplace. Likewise, both shows have been accused of failing under that pressure of authentic representation. It seems that as *Good Times* might have succumbed more quickly to market pressures (leading away from "social relevance" and into near minstrel-show levels of clowning when JJ became the focus), many critics of OITNB see this newer show also falling into some of those same patterns. Not all, however, write off Kohan's series, just as many critics looking back on *Good Times* find much to admire within that series despite its shortcomings.

OITNB and Critical Engagement

For critics working with OITNB today, looking beyond supposed shortcomings⁷⁹ means looking more closely⁸⁰ at the series. Kathleen McHugh addresses the opening title sequence for OITNB, paying specific attention to the visual rhetoric established by the show, looking at its paratextual opener. She points to the ironic ways that perspective creates empathy even within the paratext, echoing the methods within the show, which set of creative political choices I term *The Watcher*. The title sequence works here not to transition viewers from their world into Litchfield but to transition “a certain privileged demographic (Netflix subscribers) through a documentary montage that marks the limits of the fiction that is about to unfold. It also transitions viewers in the other direction, emphasizing the world outside the show, its referent,

⁷⁹ Anne Schwan, without dismissing those shortcomings, finds that though the series appropriates “women’s prison experiences as a lifestyle choice rather than focusing on in-depth analyses of the root causes of incarceration [,] the series has the potential to mobilize social awareness and activist sensibilities among its target audience” (Schwan 474). To a certain extent, Schwan even buys Kohan’s argument that Piper is a Trojan horse, writing that “it is a tactical use of Piper’s subject position as an *access point* paving the way toward less-familiar perspectives and less-readily digestible material” (Schwan 475, emphasis original). She posits that the show participates in complicitous critique, playing out through intentional use of stereotypes and sensationalizing the most exploitative aspects of the “women in prison” genre to tear them down and rebuild a more authentic image of women’s prison experience in their place. This critic is not entirely convinced that the series is pulling off all that it claims it wants to accomplish, and she recognizes that Kohan and company certainly have room for growth and improvement in both their activism and their storytelling, but she also ultimately finds the show’s mission a valuable one for the American commercial television landscape. If audiences won’t watch hard-hitting documentaries about the “real” lives of “real” women behind bars, but they will tune in for a dramedy about fictionalized versions of those women, then we (the people who desire reform) should make use of what audiences will pay attention to in order to sneak a little bit of truth between the jokes and tears. I would argue that this is, essentially, the goal of *The Watcher* as well: to just so happen to change the way people view the world while they are busy being entertained.

⁸⁰ Michaela Weiss turns more specifically to OITNB’s mechanisms and looks at three characters important to OITNB to see some of the ways that queer female identities are portrayed on the show: Piper, Sophia, and Big Boo. Weiss tries to show the series resisting common stereotypes through these characters. Piper embodies all of the stereotypes about the femme bisexual with the power to pass as straight, playing the typical fragile and naïve femme to manipulate the straight men in her life while easily switching to an aggressive and controlling quasi-butche persona in her dealings with other inmates (Weiss 49). Sophia, on the other hand, consistently resists the typical mediated image of transgender women as fetishized sex objects, exotic or freakish but always somehow sexualized. Weiss points to the relative lack of Sophia’s sexuality and suggests that, though she isn’t given the same full sexual life as the ciswomen on the show, Sophia’s parental instincts and political activism present a much rounder image of trans experience than usually shown on American TV. Finally, Big Boo represents for Weiss a stereotypical yet well-rounded portrait of a bull-dyke butch lesbian whose “sexuality is constantly portrayed in humorous and therefore harmless and publicly acceptable ways” (Weiss 51). Over the course of the series, Big Boo in particular is allowed storylines that paint a complex and deep picture of someone introduced as a mere stereotype. OITNB will explore her sexuality, her family history, and the surprising birth of a friendship between this aggressive bull-dyke and Tiffany Doggett, the onetime homophobic and hyper-religious inmate I discussed earlier.

specifically the real women from whose experience its narrative derives” (McHugh 22).

Crucially, “the audience learns about and adapts to prison culture as Piper does, while also being made privy to the extent of her ignorance and its source in her prior lifestyle and entitlement” (McHugh 22). McHugh enacts *The Watcher*’s metaphorical cinematographic goal by demonstrating how paying attention to visual cues, even those outside of the formal boundaries of the show’s ongoing narratives, complicates more simplistic readings of the producers’ progressive intentions.⁸¹ *The Watcher* wants to retrain viewers to see TV differently, even from the opening title sequence of the show.

Similarly, Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez are also invested in reshaping the way viewers see and respond to OITNB. They use Lois McNay’s extensions of Foucault’s own models of power dynamics to demonstrate how the show can promote and foster consciousness-raising amongst audiences (Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez 534). Litchfield shares much with “Foucault’s classical prison, but, permeated by feminist thought, it offers its inhabitants the possibility of standing up against the domination of a system dramatically conditioned by gender, race, and class” (Fernández-Morales

⁸¹ Lauren J. DeCarvalho and Nicole B. Cox remind us that these intentions can still lead to distressing results. They examine two different advertising campaigns for the series. One campaign “emphasizes racist ideology and stereotypes that the program itself problematizes, and another uses native advertising [...] in the guise of humanized images of real-life incarcerated women” (DeCarvalho and Cox 505). The first campaign features a food truck called “Crazy Pies” in a pun on the cruel nickname given to mentally unstable character Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren. They find that the food truck staffed by women of color dressed like characters on the show who work in the kitchens leads to “the commodification of incarcerated women here [being] constructed by Netflix to entice and recruit viewers to tune into the latest season of OITNB” (DeCarvalho and Cox 508). Furthermore, they find this campaign hinges on making light of Suzanne’s mental issues, writing that “Netflix could have easily shown Suzanne eating with silverware and without pie on her face but instead resorts to using racist ideology in its marketing, that which – thanks to the lingering impact of colonialism – positions black individuals as uncivilized and primitive” (DeCarvalho and Cox 510). The second ad campaign addresses an elaborate sponsored article in *The New York Times* on women inmates. Though it at first appears to be an article on the hardships incarcerated women face, it is, in fact, an elaborate advertisement for the TV show directing readers to various OITNB related sites and products. The critics’ concern with this piece is with the way it confuses promotion and education, playing off the perceived integrity of *The New York Times* to “trick” readers into spending attention on a clever ad for a TV show rather than actually learning something that would inform and impact their understanding of the plight of real-world women

and Menéndez-Menéndez 536). Resistance itself is a condition of agency within a carceral system (Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez 538). According to these critics, it is the fiction at the heart of the series that actually allows audiences to empathize with the Other, because the more permeable boundary between “what is story” and “what is empathy” allows audiences to imagine their worlds interacting and overlapping with the fictive one in ways that more tightly bounded factual formats, like the news or the documentary, do not allow.

Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez write:

The show can be read as a form of feminist activism against a prison industrial complex that affects women in very particular ways. By providing protagonists with at least relative, intermittent agency, the series proposes alternatives that move away from the demonized criminal woman or the passive victim types to be found in androcentric narratives, potentially expanding the audience’s perspectives of women in prison and the takes that imprisoned viewers who have access to the show may have on themselves.

(Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez 543)

Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez locate the progressive potential of the series in the very fictive and mediated images that critics like Caputi and Belcher, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, have viewed as the source of inauthenticity for the show. Like *The Watcher*, Fernández-Morales and Menéndez-Menéndez seek to reclaim the power of particular conventions and tropes, repositioning them as sites of opportunity rather than oppression.

At the heart of all the genre play and the repositioning of classic American televisuality on the show sits a desire to reframe who is worthy of our attention. *The Watcher* seeks to draw us viewers into a world very rarely spotlighted on TV, and it uses the tools of massively popular genres ironically to do so. By subverting our expectations of Comedy and Drama, *The Watcher*

asks us to think critically about why we carry such expectations. OITNB's visual rhetoric also seeks to implicate us viewers in the show's challenges to how and why the television status quo has for so long elided the experiences of people who aren't like Piper Chapman. Much like the show's title sequence, *The Watcher* instead wants to spotlight the faces of the real women of circumstance our society pays so little attention.

4. *The Good Wife*

The Watcher and A Politic of Inscrutability

Thus far, I have demonstrated some of the ways that *The Watcher*, as a metaphor for Prestige TV cinematography, can train television audiences to empathize with Otherness. *The Watcher* intervenes in *Breaking Bad* through ostentatious stylization, into OITNB by disrupting our expectations for classic genre fare. Both shows seek to re-center Others and foreground people generally pushed out of traditional TV frames. With *The Good Wife*, however, *The Watcher* embraces stalwarts of that traditional center of privilege to show viewers a new form of political resistance.

This Good Wife Will Not Be Your Tabloid Fodder

Politician sex scandals have, alas, become a mundane and expected part of contemporary American media. It seems a week doesn't go by without some new and sordid tale of a politician caught "doing" someone he shouldn't have been. These stories, with their sensational headlines, feed the 24-hour news cycle with ever tawdrier, and in many ways predictable, scandalous fare. They have become almost laughably constant and consistent, these scandals. Though the details of one affair tend to bleed into those of another, media obsession with the sex version of "if it bleeds, it leads" fills the pages, airways, and bandwidth of American media. These stories, these scandals, start to seem like perpetual, never-ending repetitions of "second verse, same as the first" white noise. As soon as we've supposedly grown bored with one, another is pushed into the

spotlight. The people involved see their lives forever changed as we change the channel to choose the next salacious novelty story. Or, so goes the standard story of how these things work.

The Good Wife, created by married partners Robert King and Michelle King for national broadcaster CBS, asks, “what happens to those caught up against their will in these scandalous stories?” The series, which ran from 2009 to 2016, follows Alicia Florrick, the eponymous wife, from the onset of her husband Peter’s sex scandal through her own rise and fall as a public figure. *The Good Wife*’s is the story not shown on those thousands of screens or followed by mobs of reporters, the private side of sudden unwanted publicity. It also tells a “case-of-the-week” story about the professional lives of high-end Chicago city lawyers in a firm forever on the verge of financial collapse.

In many ways, *The Good Wife* resembles many of the broadcast network series that came before it. American TV has been as obsessed with stories about lawyers as it has been those about political scandal. The legal procedural has been a reliable genre since the earliest days of the medium, with drama inherently built into the very nature of its court-based proceedings. Those same proceedings also seem tailor made for a medium like television. Obsessed with closure, TV favors the simple and finite narrative structure inherent in two factions entering a room to argue about which side is right, guaranteed to receive some sort of answer when they leave. The Kings’ flagship series for CBS in the age of Peak TV embraces many of the features that keep audiences returning to the legal procedural:⁸² cases inspired by the day’s headlines,

⁸² In an early review of *The Good Wife* for *The AV Club*, critic Emily St. James hits on this very issue. Describing both the appeal of and problem with what she calls workplace drama, she writes:

Saying that a show adds a sense of “workplace drama” probably doesn’t sound too impressive on a television landscape where 95% of shows are set in or around workplaces, but I mean this in a very specific sense. The procedural series is almost solely concerned with the case of the week and how the regular characters come to solve it (or, in the case of *House*, cure it). There may be some spartan character interplay, but the true purpose of the series is to create a perpetual case-solving machine, so that you never need see every episode or even see the episodes in the correct order to know what’s going on. CBS has built its network brand on this sort of storytelling, and anything that deviates from it tends to get canceled.

clever verbal sparring and banter between attractive actors, and a moral center that suggests right and wrong might just be real things worth caring about.

What sets *The Good Wife* apart from these more traditional legal procedurals are the ways it foregrounds the emotional experiences and psychological perspectives of its characters, particularly its protagonist. Not only does this series focus on the wife rather than the politician husband, which is interesting in and of itself for a network procedural, the Kings' show focalizes through Alicia peculiarly. Similar to the way the interiority of Jane Austen's great heroines is only revealed through narratological focalization, *The Good Wife*'s central wife can only truly be known through the way The Watcher focalizes the aesthetics of the show through her otherwise reserved public persona. Alicia did not choose to become a public figure; the spotlight of public attention was forced upon her. As such, she challenges its glare by resisting its demand that she reveal herself to it, to allow her private life to become the subject of public speculation. Alicia Florrick doesn't just resist this spotlight. She seems to resist even the pressure of being known at all, of revealing her inner being to other characters or to her viewers, which is exactly what the pressure of being a TV protagonist demands of her. Within the reality of her Chicago and that of

Even the examples of these kinds of shows that did a better job at delving into the regular characters' lives – like *Without a Trace* – always reverted back to the procedural baseline at the end of the day. The workplace drama is slightly different (and not to be confused with the workplace soap – see *Grey's Anatomy*). Here, the focus of the series is less on the cases being solved and more on the people solving them. Though the cases are important and get more of the focus than they might on a workplace soap, the series is also interested in the emotions and passions of the people who work at the series' setting. It might examine how two characters very carefully come together into a relationship or it might tease out the office politics surrounding the characters. Similarly, it might devote several episodes to more serialized storytelling, to showing the cast coming together to work on one case that dominates their time. These sorts of shows dominated the drama landscape in the '80s and '90s, starting with *Hill Street Blues*, but the last prominent network example, *ER*, left the airwaves just this year. *The Good Wife* isn't as pure a workplace drama as *ER* was, but it certainly plants the seeds for going more in that direction if it wants to. We get the sense that some of the characters are in competition for a coveted position, and we see Baranski's character pull back from mentoring Alicia at a crucial moment. Charles' character is clearly still nursing a thing for Alicia, and Alicia slowly builds relationships with some of the people at the firm in an organic and realistic fashion. You've seen all of this before, but at a time when shows tend to embrace all serialized storytelling or all procedural storytelling (and especially on a network that has come down firmly on one side of that line), it's a bit jarring to see *The Good Wife* chart a course straight down the middle.

our viewing pleasure, Alicia Florrick is made the subject of media storylines. *The Good Wife*, I argue, uses The Watcher to let Alicia resist media's pressures to fit into a prescribed narrative of her life and expectations of how such a woman and character should feel and behave within that narrative. What I mean is this: The Kings' have envisioned a character that desires privacy above all, and they use the visual rhetorical tools I call The Watcher to find a way to provide their character that private life. Even as she is the narrative heart of virtually every scene in every storyline the show tackles, The Watcher's camera and frame find a way for Alicia to hold back a piece of herself from the chaos around her. The Watcher allows her to retain an interiority atypical of American TV characters, particularly those in genres like the legal procedural. Alicia is afforded the opportunity to remain inscrutable as the media around her clamor for her soul to be laid bare. The Watcher protects Alicia and allows her to reveal only what she chooses of herself to her viewers slowly, and only once The Watcher and the series earn her trust. As such, all of the significant developments in *The Good Wife*'s aesthetics occur gradually, using the industrial demands of an extended broadcast-network-series schedule as a chance to foster a trusting relationship between the show's character(s) and its viewers.

Suzanne Leonard's Influence

My reading of how Alicia's inscrutability works aesthetically owes a great debt to Suzanne Leonard's work with the series. In her piece, "Sexuality, Technology, and Sexual Scandal in *The Good Wife*," Leonard examines how the show stages its sexual scandal proxies, noting the ways that the show "reformulates silence as a strategy, transmuting it into an ethos of deliberate unknowability" (Leonard 944). She points to how the pilot opens with a sequence that "focalizes on [the] wife and the act of mediation itself" as the politician delivers his canned

apology (ibid). Leonard cites ways that *The Good Wife* reverses the typical gaze of most legal procedurals, but I would take her observations further and read the focalization and mediation as choices designed to change not only genre conventions (as Leonard states) but also our viewing relationship to those conventions, akin to the genre developments I discuss with regards to *Orange Is The New Black*. With *The Good Wife* and Alicia Florrick, these revisionist aesthetics model a new politics of resistance for viewers. We learn how to resist societal demands to be and behave in particular ways in our own lives through Alicia's example and The Watcher's tutelage.

Our lessons begin with the first scene of *The Good Wife*'s pilot. The cold open cleverly introduces us to Alicia's situation by staging a press conference addressing her husband's scandal. Our first entrée to this narrative reality unsettles us. Before we know who the characters are, we see them caught in a swirl of media chaos. I will delve into its significance more later, but the immediate distance and confusion a circus like this media event creates between the characters and viewers allows The Watcher the logical and logistical space to build a buffer between Alicia and all of the worlds of those watching her as she silently suffers through the scene. Alicia is afforded this opportunity to be seen yet not known, because so much of the weight of narrative focus rests on her husband, Peter, in this sequence. She appears on the stage with him, but she refuses to be made to speak and be thus laid bare before the media's gaze. This silence is her way of managing how much of her self will be shown and made known to the demanding public. All we viewers of any stripe are allowed to know about her now is her silence, her choice not to speak up, her choice to deny us any explanations. Though Suzanne Leonard will cite this silent demand to remain unknown as a retreat for both Alicia and her husband, I believe that the way the scene is constructed visually demonstrates that The Watcher is much more interested in Alicia's silence than Peter's own attempts to withhold parts of

himself from the media. Peter plays the media's game and reveals himself. Alicia does not. In particular, the show's efforts:

have the backhand effect of reasserting the unknowability of both those who commit breaches and those who suffer as a result. Faced with the difficulty of articulating compromises that the involved parties may not fully understand themselves, *The Good Wife* has taken a decidedly different approach, advocating instead for an ethos of inscrutability. (Leonard 953)

In refusing to be known, in refusing to explain her choices to a demanding public, Alicia might allow the media and the viewer to fashion our own stories about her, but we don't get to know her truth. This pattern extends throughout the seven-season run for the show, not just the pilot episode. Alicia's reserve, her refusal to make her private state public knowledge, informs virtually every storyline the character participates in on the show. Letting others (in the pilot, and characters outside her inner circle in episodes beyond) fabricate what they will about her may seem like sacrificing her own agency to their whims, but I believe *The Watcher* positions Alicia's silence as a means for protecting her inner life from our prying eyes.

She puts up with the false narrative created about her so long as it continues to allow Alicia to keep what she deems to be her authentic self both private and safe. I return to Leonard's work to underline how Alicia's resistance can be read as a feminist response. Leonard writes, "*The Good Wife* refuses to offer trite explanation for female sexual psychology or unquestioningly reaffirm monogamy, a particularly surprising stance given that the show is organized around exploring the collateral damage of a high-profile affair" (Leonard 954). This critic reminds us that what could look like capitulation to the expectations of patriarchy, that Alicia be a dutiful and faithful wife even as her husband admits publicly to betraying her, we can

instead read as a radical act of feminist resistance to those patriarchal demands thanks to the aesthetic interventions I site in The Watcher metaphor. Alicia sacrifices her public face in order to preserve her more important private being. In a balancing act performed between dramatically different forms of power, Alicia chooses to retain control over what she feels is her authentic self by ceding control of her public-yet-inauthentic persona to the media. Trying to wrest control of that public narrative back from gossipmongers would be a battle Alicia could never win, so she instead refuses to engage with them. Through The Watcher's rhetorical guidance, we will learn to read such a retreat as a victory. Our metaphorical observer will slowly train us to understand the mechanics of *The Good Wife*'s aesthetic and how this aesthetic codes silence as resistance. With all of these competing power dynamics in play, the show

mediates competing tensions [using] silence as a strategy of power rather than compliance. Preserving secrets is hence a feminist stance rather than a capitulation to patriarchal convention, particularly insofar as the series reformulates refusal as an ethos of deliberate unknowability. (Leonard 955)

To underscore this point, *The Good Wife* and The Watcher repeatedly return to the visual metaphor of media and "mediation" as they develop their new ideology of radical resistance through inscrutability.

Re-Mediation

I bring up the show's use of "mediation" here in response to Leonard's own reliance on the term in her reading. For her, and for most critics, this pun on the legal action of interceding and intervening between competing sides of a case in order to reach a suitable compromise for both parties is as far as the concept is taken. These critics do not delve deeper into the

complexity of the term with regards to its visual metaphor as used by the show. Despite the copia of literal media images abounding in the series, these critics instead treat such imagery as superficial and self-evident. They take mediation at face value and move on. Ironically, this is exactly what *The Good Wife*'s characters desire of the media within their narrative reality, for the simplest narrative to be taken as truth and then moved on from to leave the characters alone and in peace. When we risk misreading "mediation" as something more, we can start to see how the visual rhetorics I call The Watcher position these characters' actions as resistance. We have to look past the superficial puns to catch a glimpse of emotional authenticity behind them. Critics content with the surface level joke miss out on the show's "ethos of deliberate unknowability," in Leonard's own terms, and how The Watcher extends this ethos toward the viewer.

When we extend "mediation" beyond the pun on legal actions and images of those legal actions, we can vastly expand the political impact of the word play. The Watcher teaches viewers to see the pun and then to look deeper and see what the pun might be shielding from scrutiny. In this search, the acknowledgement that a "secret history" might run concurrently with the surface narrative intimates that all manner of meanings might lurk behind the initial pun.

As I discuss in my introduction, and as Foucault showed us a generation ago, modern society has long been predicated on the disciplining image. Whether we have been aware of it or not, the media we consume has been training us to read the world around us for meaning behind and beneath the superficial. For every image shown, another is hidden. In every word chosen, another is discarded. *The Good Wife*'s visual rhetorics, these particularly Prestige motifs, appear designed to make us viewers ponder this paradox through Alicia's story. One of the reasons I have chosen The Watcher as the name I use for these Prestige rhetorics is the way the phrase suggests the activity of choice behind these aesthetic tropes. I anthropomorphize the metaphor to

remind us both of the numerous human minds behind all of these cultural artifacts as well as how these texts become, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, extensions of our humanity. Behind all of these rhetorical choices are people trying to change the way other people see the world. This metaphor, like the relationships it creates between real people, works subtly, relying on our culturally-trained sense that the superficial answer might hide something more complex underneath. Here, with *The Good Wife*, as we watch mediated images of Alicia Florrick, we begin to wonder why she readily cedes her narrative control to the media outlets she dreads, and we begin to suspect that she has something to gain from the concession. We begin to wonder about what she isn't saying and why she isn't saying it. We begin to wonder about her choices and why she makes them. Then it dawns on us: Alicia is *choosing* not to speak. She is electing silence. What seems like passivity is actually activity. When we realize this, we begin to see how she is crafting her choices, her persona, her narrative in response to the media/mediated pressures thrust upon her. We start to see her silence as a stance. We start to see her silence as power. All the while, we compare her choices to our own, wondering how we would respond in her place. We then begin to realize that silence could also be our power stance. We see ourselves choosing to resist just like Alicia does. We see her inscrutability as a choice we could make as well. Like her, we can access this form of silent power in our own worlds. All thanks to the way we have learned over time to read and reread cultural artifacts for more than superficial meanings.

Building a Style Bible, Bit by Bit

This realization and this access only come to us through incremental exposure, however. Alicia and the other characters only allow The Watcher (and us alongside) to get to know them more fully over the course of many episodes. Likewise, The Watcher then only allows us to

understand these characters' interiority and take a place in their reality over the course of several seasons' worth of episodes. The Watcher uses the drawn-out pace of broadcast television's traditional 20-plus episode seasons to slowly accrue the subtle details that allow us as viewers to experience this politics of inscrutability on Alicia's terms. The Watcher introduces new lessons on how to understand refusal as an act of feminist empowerment as it introduces new visual rhetorical techniques to the show's Style Bible. Because it is teaching us how to conceive of passivity as agency, The Watcher's instruction plays out over a patient progression of episodes and seasons rather than all at once in *The Good Wife's* pilot.⁸³ Where other Prestige shows reveal themselves and their governing logics in their first early episodes, *The Good Wife* demands that its viewers invest time with this series before earning the right to understand Alicia's secrets.⁸⁴

We earn this right by watching, by sticking with the show as it balances the demands of its own internal concerns. Unlike the other series I discuss, *The Good Wife* follows the classic American broadcast seasonal pattern. This means that *The Good Wife's* producers are responsible for twice the number of episodes in a season than are their counterparts at *Breaking Bad* and the rest of the Prestige programming I cover. The Kings have turned what could potentially be an obstacle into an advantage. They use the necessarily slower pace and episode structure of the traditional broadcast-network legal procedural to support their slow burn approach to characterization. The higher episode count order gives them more space to reveal

⁸³ Compare this to the ways both *Breaking Bad* and *Orange Is The New Black* present the entirety of their aesthetic in their pilots.

⁸⁴ Such a risky and radical approach seems possible only in the Prestige "peak TV" landscape, where some of the pressure of attaining massive ratings instantly is let off in favor of a deluge of critical acclaim. For the network that originally broadcast *The Good Wife*, the Kings' series was CBS's only link to the sort of critical buzz desired by the high-end advertisers willing to pay premium to be associated with Prestige. Despite being home to some of the most watched series on television during *The Good Wife's* run (like the military-themed crime procedural *NCIS* or the classic multi-camera sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*), CBS kept the perpetually low-rated show on the air because of the critical conversations it generated amongst the new breed of TV journalists who would identify Prestige as a genre. The Kings could not have anticipated such patience on the part of their network, which just makes their decision to structure their show in such a radical way that much more impressive.

glimpses of Alicia without forcing the character into pedantic or histrionic emotional exposition dumps just to propel the show's serialized narratives at the speed expected of shorter-order cable and streaming series. In the way the Kings and The Watcher use their longer broadcast seasons, learning more about how *The Good Wife's* characters think when no one is watching them becomes a reward for viewers instead of an obligation for the series.

What I mean is, as the show tackles a different case-of-the-week in each episode, the Kings let Alicia reveal a little bit more of herself to the viewer (even as she still resists her in-world media's mediated demands on her privacy). The Kings let their protagonist remain elusive. Her interiority, her sense of herself as a person apart from the narrative crafted around her by her Chicago media, only bubbles up to the surface occasionally. Be it the rare moments that Alicia responds to other characters in dramatic fashion or those where The Watcher translates bits of her emotional state into *The Good Wife's* visual rhetoric, the series constructs a character that can only be understood on her own terms. She chooses when she will allow herself to be read authentically by both other characters and, with The Watcher's help, viewers. The procedural nature of the show allows its protagonist to hide behind plot pyrotechnics, revealing layers of characterization incrementally. We only think we know Alicia Florrick when the basic premise of her tale is laid forth in the pilot episode; the Kings' *coup de grace* is that we still only really know what Alicia has *let* us know, even at the series finale.

The series premier, however, immediately starts preparing us to recognize and understand Alicia's moments of "discovery," to pun on the legal parlance. As with the other shows I discuss in other chapters, *The Good Wife's* pilot features many of the visual tropes and flourishes that will make the show look distinctive throughout its seven-season run. However, the importance of these tropes to the show's feminist project only reveals itself after a slow and steady

accumulation of repetitions in the patterns laid out by pilot director Charles McDougall and DP David Mullen. Their patterns emerge not instantaneously but with painstaking patience, though the show's work toward a politics of inscrutability begins with McDougall and Mullen's first frame.

Cold Shoulder Cold Open

This opening sequence I referenced earlier embodies the show's slow burn approach. We open with a tight shot on a white couple's hands, unclasped yet close enough to almost touch, as the couple walks down a long hallway. The camera then pulls back to reveal a man and a woman from behind in medium shot, following them down the hallway until the man turns his head toward the woman. His face slowly resolves into focus. A hard cut to a new shot fills the frame with bright lights. Lens flares abound, representing camera flashes that stun and temporarily blind the couple who now stand on a small stage in a hotel ballroom. The man speaks to a gathered crowd, but this shot is frequently interrupted by cuts to blurry, soft-focus images of the same man having sex with a woman who is not the person standing next to him back in "real time." Interspersed throughout are also shots of the "real time" conference stage as it is being simultaneously broadcast on television via the journalists' cameras filming what is clearly a press conference. This sequence, between the couple on stage, the presumed memory/mental image of the man having sex, and the in-show broadcast image of the man apologizing for having been caught having sex, sets up three levels of diegetic reality in one scene: live, remembered, and mediated. The complex interplay between these three levels is impressive, but what makes the sequence fascinating (and not just McDougall and Mullen showing off) is where the true focus of the scene lies.

The man who would seem to be the narrative heart of all cinematic levels in the sequence is a distraction. The focus of the scene, in fact the focalizer of the scene, is the silent woman on the hotel stage next to him. Because of her silence, this woman captivates *The Good Wife's* camera, in contrast to the countless journalists' cameras in the scene. Throughout the "live" shots, The Watcher's camera stands at face level with this silent woman. Amidst the chaos of the sequence, The Watcher chooses to focus on her and stay on her level despite the more obviously dramatic or active visual option in the man and his journalists (all on different depth planes than the woman, which emphasizes The Watcher's choice to focus on and through her). The scene bustles around her, but she stands stock still, a shocked expression frozen on her face but no other clue as to what's going on inside her evident in her astounding composure. The Watcher always returns to that face despite the swirl of activity competing for its attention. She says nothing and does nothing for her whole time on stage in this sequence, but The Watcher wants to make sure we as viewers pay attention to this woman. We are meant to notice and ponder her, her silence, and her inaction.

Much like the unexpected slap to the man's face that ends this cold open sequence, the real significance of what we have been watching only becomes clear in hindsight. The slap makes clear what The Watcher intuited (and tried to get us to see): Alicia's silence was not forgiveness, was not acquiescence, was not fear. It was a choice made to keep part of herself safe and private from the prying eyes her husband's very public affair had forced on her. Looking back, it is clear to see how McDougall and Mullen were building toward this revelation. Even though we see Peter's face first, Alicia's is the one we spend time with in the sequence. Even though his character is the focus of all the attention within the plot of the scene, hers is the focus of our attention and sympathy, especially once her hand makes contact with his face. The slap

ends the scene and underscores just how filled with withheld emotion Alicia really is behind her inscrutable public reserve.

This is our introduction to Alicia and Peter Florrick, and *The Good Wife* uses that unexpected explosive violence to unsettle our expectations about the focus and purpose of this show in that moment. Though the aesthetics had been building toward the slap all throughout, our understanding of more typical narratives in the legal procedural genre would lead us to assume that the more dramatically dynamic figure would be the center of this series' world. Alicia and *The Good Wife* will be different, though, constantly forcing us as viewers trained on traditional TV to relearn how to read her story. Alicia will refuse to react when we expect her to, and, in doing so, will deny those that would write a trite and pat end to her story the satisfaction of thinking they knew her through their preconceptions. She won't show the press her fury, but The Watcher will catch it. I believe that The Watcher notices her and how she refuses to conform to prescribed responses. Like Alicia, The Watcher will wait, observe, and learn to read the signals that the titular "wife" will choose to send. As The Watcher gains this gnostic understanding, it likewise retrains us viewers how to read Alicia's refusals. Only in taking the character on her own, often unspoken, terms and through investing our time across lengthy seasons will we get the chance to "know" Alicia Florrick. Only once we start to see her reservation as power will we understand just how radically she and *The Good Wife* rewrite the rules of empowerment in their television genre.

A Post-Slap Aesthetic

This cold open sequence in the pilot not only sets up the underlying logic of Alicia's empowerment through inscrutability, it also lays a foundation for the visual techniques that will

define the series for the rest of its seven-season run. Fred Murphy takes over as DP in S01E02, “Stripped,” and he builds on Mullen’s work to oversee the camera for the rest of the series.⁸⁵ He fills his frame with figures in motion and activity, warm lighting designed to flatter all actors’ skin tones⁸⁶ and cast a soft glow over everyone, and his camera will shift constantly from set-up to set-up in a wide variety of framing sizes and styles. Wide establishing shots appear alongside mediums and medium-close-ups as master shots setting each new scene. Murphy makes *The Good Wife*’s frame buzz with energy even in the storylines’ quiet and contemplative moments. Alicia’s emotional control stands in stark contrast to this hum of excitement. Even as the world flutters busily around her, Alicia’s countenance betrays none of that energy. She holds herself apart from the bustle, and Murphy’s cinematography emphasizes that distance.

Many early TV critics note this distance, the restraint in actor Juliana Margulies’ performance of Alicia. They warm to her cold performance, seeing in the character “all steel and interesting stupor” (Schwarzbaum), “sleek and confidently understated” (Gliatto), “exquisite restraint” (Rabinowitz). They don’t yet see the larger project of *The Good Wife*’s inscrutability-as-feminist-resistance, but they begin to sense some of the ways Margulies’ performance choices fit into a larger pattern of political importance for the show. These early critics hadn’t yet spent enough time with the show to see how *The Watcher* repositions Alicia as a feminist protagonist,

⁸⁵ Though Murphy will remain the director of photography for the overwhelming majority of the show’s episodes, Tim Guinness will shoot a couple of seasons’ worth across the overall run as well. Mullen only works on the pilot, Murphy shoots 103 episodes, and Guinness handles another 52.

⁸⁶ Notably, *The Good Wife*’s lighting design flatters a wide range of skin tones. Many shows are lit with Caucasian skin as the default reference point, leaving actors with different and darker skin tones often in literal shadows. These golden hues have become a trademark of the Kings’ Chicago franchise (with the spin-off *The Good Fight*, set in a law firm staffed primarily by Black men and women, following suit). Though I have yet to find interviews with the various DP’s involved to confirm this, I believe that this lighting design is an attempt to acknowledge and in part rectify one of the micro-aggressions actors of color deal with in the industry. Such a choice would certainly be in keeping with the ideals espoused on the show and the motifs I chart in this chapter.

but they intuit significance in her difference even without the full education to be earned in following the series as it ages.

Even if they do not yet have a full understanding of how different *The Good Wife* is compared to most shows in its genre, these critics recognize that this series begins by unsettling our expectations. Both those presumptions about who would be the focus and how that character would behave are rocked by the way Margulies and Murphy's work interact. As the show progresses, *The Watcher* echoes for viewers Alicia's internal perspective, making us privy to the POV she denies to the world around her. As we realize we can "read" her, *The Watcher* teaches us new ways to interpret Alicia's reserve in response to the way Murphy's camera works. The result is a view into the new power dynamic *The Good Wife* fosters, its politics of inscrutability and empowerment through reserve.

The more we learn to read Alicia's subtlety, the more we can see the ways the camera becomes a manifestation of Alicia's POV. Just as hindsight reveals that the pilot cold open was focalized through her, *The Watcher* wants to show us how Alicia's interiority is filtered out to us through the way the camera represents her emotional perspective. The lens becomes a mediator between what the character sees, what she feels, and what she shows us of both. This camera's lens, then, functions like the unobserved eyes of an unnoticed person also in the room with Alicia. It is not observing her from "on high" or from some abstracted or objective distance. This is not a journalist's stance. It is a camera more akin to Jane Austen's unnamed narrators. *The Watcher's* camera pointedly looks on as if from the perspective of a human being embodying space alongside Alicia and the other characters. The significance of this embodied lens, though, will only reveal itself later, after we viewers have spent a great deal of time learning to parse the meanings of Alicia's silences.

Initially, though, this unseen human observer echoes Alicia's own stance within the physical space of her reality. The plotlines of the show make immediately clear that Alicia keeps her emotions bottled up as a reaction to all of the trauma and stress she goes through thanks to her husband's scandals, so she tends to spend most of her narrative time standing back and observing as other characters emote around her. The Watcher uses Murphy's camera to act as a continuation of Alicia's observational coping device. As such, it becomes like a projection of her performance of quietude and passivity, allowing her to subvert both in-world and external viewing audience expectations as she deals privately with the very public indignities of her situation.

The Watcher Puts Us Inside Alicia's Mind

This connection between The Watcher and Alicia develops over the first season. Eventually, we begin to see The Watcher's camera identify with Alicia and echo out for us, through cinematographic techniques, Alicia's emotional responses as she feels but does not express them. This identification is most evident⁸⁷ in sequences like S01E06's mad dash to file a legal brief before a ticking clock deadline passes. "Conjugal," shot by Murphy and directed by Rod Holcomb, finds the show's central law firm scrambling to prepare and submit a brief challenging the scheduled execution of one of their clients. The firm must submit the legal document to the authorities as quickly as possible in order to save their client's life. During the brief-writing sequence, when Murphy's frame is arguably at its most frenetic, Alicia sits at the

⁸⁷ The show takes the trope of putting viewers inside Alicia's perspective to its logical end in S06E14 "Mind's Eye." This episode is shot by Tim Guinness and directed by series co-creator Robert King, and it takes place primarily inside Alicia's own imagination as Alicia braces for an interview leading up to election day in her own run for public office. Though she struggles to remain as reserved and private as in the pilot, it is quite telling that Alicia grows comfortable enough with the public spotlight to risk exposing herself completely as an elected official. Pointedly, this literal view inside Alicia's mind is only possible in such a late stage of the show's run.

dead center of the screen, a calm eye in the middle of a dramatic storm. She is surrounded by frantic and frantically moving figures as she types quickly but steadily on a laptop computer. The camera bolts around her stable form, panning and tilting to capture all of the hectic action swirling around her. Frequent fast editing cuts amplify the sense of anxious speed in the camera's movements. Alicia's seeming calm looks wrong, out of place in this setting, as if she is untouched and unmoved by the serious stakes of the action in which she is involved, like in the cold open of the pilot. *The Watcher*, though, continues to focus our attention on her in a visual pattern that connects Alicia's interiority to the show's aesthetics. We know from other scenes in S01E06 and from previous episodes that Alicia is passionately invested in this case, fully in support of the firm's quest for justice for their potentially innocent client. In fact, the episode is actually structured around the plot point of Alicia agreeing to put her personal wishes aside and accepting a "conjugal visit" with her now incarcerated estranged husband. She agrees only because Peter might have insight on the case that could help her client.⁸⁸

That Alicia's beliefs are expressed elsewhere as narrative canon causes us to reconsider her supposed detached calm amidst frenzy. We know she cares, but we see her acting differently than expected. I argue that *The Watcher* is showing us a glimpse of Alicia's inner feelings as she attempts to seem calm and professional to her colleagues. The camerawork here is designed to make us viewers feel tense and anxious. If we assume that Alicia's reserve reflects her emotions, that she is not affected by the urgency of the case even as all of her colleagues are, then her characterization has suddenly broken faith with both what we've come to understand about her from previous episodes and what the narrative of this particular storyline states explicitly. However, if we instead read, as I believe *The Watcher* and *The Good Wife* intend us to, the

⁸⁸ Before his scandal, Peter Florrick had been a State's Attorney, and, as such, he led the original prosecution of Alicia's current client.

cinematography as an extension of the emotions Alicia tries to hide in order to appear professional and competent to the senior partners who are expressly judging her work to determine if she is worthy of keeping her job,⁸⁹ then the sequence suddenly makes sense. For many reasons, Alicia needs to put up a front and hide her inner being from the other characters around her, but the show needs the opposite to happen for viewers to invest in the protagonist. The episode needs us to care about the case because Alicia does so we can then understand how it motivates her later interactions with Peter. The Watcher translates Alicia's hidden emotions into a visual rhetoric that then informs the rest of E01S06 and beyond.

In S01E11, "Infamy," Murphy and director Nelson McCormick will return to this technique again and twist it to make the implied identification between Alicia's mental state and The Watcher's camera more pronounced. This episode finds Alicia taken off of a flashy and exciting case against a Glen Beck-style figure and instead retasked on a seemingly boring and mundane divorce case with which she is unfamiliar and completely uninterested. In the show's main law office set, which is all glass walls and reflective wood surfaces, Alicia sits in an out of the way corner office with her boss and the prospective divorcee. Alicia's attentions, however, are squarely still on the histrionics of the other case playing out in the background and visible through a series of those glass walls. The camera flits back and forth from one room to the other with Alicia's general visual perspective governing each camera movement. The cinematography is a little frantic, distracted even, and it reflects the growing frustration Alicia is trying not to show to her boss in his office. However, once the divorcee reveals that her soon-to-be ex is Peter Florrick's current nemesis, Alicia's full attention settles entirely on this woman. The camera's

⁸⁹ The first season is structured around the premise that Alicia is a junior staff member who must compete with another first-year hire to have a job at the firm the following year. Her direct competition here is Cary Argos, a character I will discuss further shortly.

movements calm down, and the editing slows and smooths. Alicia and The Watcher are both now fully focused on this storyline. As the protagonist redirects her emotional energies, so too does the camera. It follows her mental state even as other characters remain oblivious to the shifts happening inside Alicia's mind. By paying attention to the ways the cinematography echoes and amplifies, observes and responds to Alicia's actions and reactions, we can begin to understand how the character feels on the inside even as she refuses to reveal this to those in her narrative world. This is that which I call The Watcher, the way our relationship to a show can be transformed by shifting our focus from surface-level narrative towards the more complex visual rhetorics at play in these Prestige series.

Adding New Points of View

As *The Good Wife* progresses, I find that our focus is directed out beyond just Alicia. We learn to read the series first by learning to read her and are then expected to apply our knowledge to other characters as well when the show focalizes scenes through them. As the show focalizes through more and more characters, expanding its own POV, we start to realize that everyone on the show has the potential to tap into the sort of agency that Alicia finds in her radical resistance. Just as focalizing through other characters extends our opportunities to learn through new perspectives, it also allows Alicia a respite from even The Watcher's private spotlight. This begins late in season one, once Alicia and her private interiority are established for regular viewers and she no longer has to bear the weight of the series' narrative alone. She remains its central focus but not its only focal point.

Likewise, as more figures participate in point of view on the show, we viewers have more varied and better chances to share in these new perspectives. *The Good Wife* extends toward

many of these characters the same potential radical resistance as Alicia. They, too, want to protect their privacy even if not for the same dramatic or narrative reasons. As The Watcher notices and reflects their interiority, even as they hide themselves from their narrative reality, they are participating in the show's politics of inscrutability. As The Watcher directs our attentions toward these characters in these moments, we are trained further in how to read this politics. I would suggest that this directed observation might serve a sort of pedagogical function. Rather than merely accruing a deeper understanding of these characters, The Watcher is also training us viewers in this inscrutability ourselves. We learn how to resist, too, right alongside the characters.

Before I return to this "pedagogical imperative," however, I want to demonstrate how The Watcher manages to focalize beyond Alicia. It is a slow and subtle process that paves a way for a profound reinterpretation of the viewer's role in the meaning making process on *The Good Wife*. We can see it start in S01E21, "Unplugged," directed by Christopher Misiano with Murphy behind the camera. The episode opens with Alicia's assistant, Courtney (played by Sonequa Martine-Green), and her fellow paralegals having lunch in a vacant corner office from which they can sneakily watch unnoticed the happenings in the firm's central glass-walled conference room. The sequence focalizes through Courtney. The camera follows activity on a depth plane with her, positioned at her face level, implying the gaze of a person of Courtney's height. It tracks alongside her as she moves around and pauses with her as she overhears gossip outside the conference room. It then follows her as she makes her way toward the offices of the first-year attorneys she works for, Alicia and her friendly rival Cary Argos. Courtney is anxious but doesn't want to show it and risk letting on that she is now privy to a secret she shouldn't know. The camera movements echo this anxiety and Courtney's indecision over which of her

competing bosses she should share the secret with (that she would hold onto the secret and tell no one isn't even considered an option by the scene's mechanics). While the sequence's narrative impact is ultimately about how this overheard information will affect Alicia, the aesthetics of the sequence privilege Courtney's POV. Here *The Watcher* makes room for this ancillary character's interior life, shining the same private spotlight on Courtney as on the series protagonist. We now understand Courtney a bit better (and her relationship with Alicia better) because we use our "Alicia lens" to read Courtney, too.

Our "Alicia lens" also realigns our relationship to other ancillary characters through visual perspective. In S02E05, "VIP Treatment," shot by Murphy with Michael Zinberg directing, our ability to read Alicia's motivations despite her refusal to participate in the more open emotionality of her counterparts in more traditional legal dramas also allows us to translate the motivations of this episode's client-of-the-week. S02E05 revolves around whether or not the firm will take this client's case and represent her in court as she accuses a very powerful man of sexual assault. Though many characters within the show will question this woman, and her motives, the show ultimately resists such "victim blaming" and shaming through reinforcing a connection between the potential client and Alicia, her potential lawyer. The woman decides in the end not to pursue the case, and most of the show's characters are perplexed by her decision to, what appears to them, let a man get away with an all-too-common crime. Alicia, though, appreciates the woman's choice, and we can see why through the final scene of the episode. It closes on an image of the would-be client walking out of the firm's elevator into the building's ground floor lobby, her retreating figure perfectly centered in frame. The elevator doors close on her vanishing point in the dead center of the screen. Alicia had occupied this same visual space

and framing moments before as the woman revealed that she could not bear to go through the public drubbing Alicia experienced after Peter's scandal.

I believe that this overlap is meant to suggest that the women are sharing a similar psychic space as they share a physical space within the frame. The rape survivor chooses to reject official justice in order to maintain her own safe anonymity. Though Alicia's mentor, the staunchly feminist Diane Lockhart, cannot see the client's choice as anything but a failure on their firm's part, Alicia (and, in turn, we viewers) understands that this woman is choosing to protect herself by refusing to submit to the cruelty of the same media circus that nearly destroyed Alicia's life. Because she walks away of her own accord, maintaining her privacy and thus inscrutability, seeing her do so through the same visual space as Alicia allows us to see how *The Watcher* and *The Good Wife* position her choice as a form of self-empowerment. Diane Lockhart cannot see this woman the way we see her, cannot read her like we can, because she doesn't know how to read and read through Alicia. To Diane, the client's actions look like just another opportunity to let a powerful man get away with being privately cruel and publicly kind. She fundamentally misunderstands Alicia's own refusal in response to Peter's affair as well. Here, the client compares herself to Alicia, and *The Watcher*'s camera amplifies their bond, which lends this woman some of the same strength and power Alicia, too, has earned through refusing to be laid publicly bare.

Making Space for Viewers within The TV Frame

The Good Wife trains viewers to read the subtle paratextual signals picked up by *The Watcher* to understand the internal motivations of its characters and foster a sense that refusing to be known by or according to traditional patriarchal rule can be empowering. I believe that the

show also does something more profound than changing our relationship to television characters via dynamic visual rhetoric. I believe that *The Good Wife* disrupts the traditional, typical relationships between content and consumer so profoundly that it extends its politics of inscrutability to us viewers via this empowering identification. With the way the show deploys its visual rhetoric intervening in our understanding of the show through its protagonist, the show goes beyond empowering viewers who might see themselves in and identify with Alicia and her inscrutability. I argue that the visual rhetoric I identify as The Watcher shifts the traditional hierarchical dynamic between all viewers and that which they view. Through The Watcher's implied presence in the way the camera so frequently mimics human figures in its frame, The Watcher functions like an embodied presence integral to *The Good Wife*'s meaning making process. In what I argue is a truly revolutionary move, the show translates this metaphorically embodied camera into a mechanism for bringing us viewers directly into the politics of refusal and inscrutability fostered for its characters by implying a physical space for us viewers within the narrative reality of the show.

One of the first moves the show makes to connect viewers' reality with the series' is the use of digitally animated insert shots representing characters using computers on screen. These jarringly surreal interludes make their first appearance in S02E08, "On Tap," directed by Roxann Dawson and shot by Murphy. In this episode, Alicia's son, Zach, and his girlfriend construct a fake social media profile for the son of Peter and Alicia's State's Attorney nemesis (the same man being divorced in S01E11). It is a misguided attempt to disrupt a smear campaign against Peter. Zach's computer screen suddenly fills our home TV frame as his mouse pointer icon flits back and forth across our screen and his. The scene returns repeatedly to these insert shots, shots which appear rendered at a higher frame rate than principle photography and thus look markedly

different. They seem too smooth and noticeably lack the pixilation and flicker that marks how actual computer displays appear when captured on camera. The “screen image simulated” quality of these insert shots becomes obvious when considered next to the many images throughout the episode of characters using computers and watching online streaming videos. These more traditional scenes always place the computer’s frame inside the bounds of our real-world TV screen frame,⁹⁰ whereas the insert shots collapse both screens into each other. The insert shots erase the presumed distance between our viewing reality and the viewing reality of these fictional characters.

The show returns to, and reinforces, this relationship between computers on screen and computers as screen in S02E15, “Silver Bullet,” directed by Jim McKay and shot by Tim Guinness. This episode features scenes of both characters using computers within frame and the strange insert shots that transform our TVs into computer screens with no mediated distance. Crucially, in addition to otherwise unmotivated sequences of Alicia’s daughter, Grace, streaming videos online, the heart of the S02E15 plot beats around scenes of Alicia and her colleague and best friend, Kalinda Sharma, obtaining and reviewing closed-circuit security camera footage as they pursue a case. Kalinda brings a laptop to Alicia specifically to show the lawyer what her lead investigator (Sharma) had uncovered. The presence and placement of the laptop is conspicuous and ostentatious. As viewers we can’t help but follow the characters’ gazes to that screen. Though regular viewing of other legal dramas has trained viewers to expect otherwise,⁹¹ Kalinda cannot magically zoom in on this security footage to produce a new, high-definition

⁹⁰ Or, if one watches the episode online, within the frames one’s own device

⁹¹ For a fun riff on this particular TV trope, see *Enhance. Computer*, a web-based game developed by Nicole He for Artworld Videogames. It allows players to use voice commands to play with grainy images as characters in classic science fiction and police procedurals do. It “also plays with themes of surveillance and techno-dystopianism,” according to the creators.

image on her laptop screen that could simultaneously produce a clear, high-definition image for us viewers back home. Instead, and in a dramatic departure for this genre, the security footage gets blurrier and more pixelated the closer the women try to look into it. This scene in particular hangs a lampshade on the ways *The Good Wife* bucks the norms in legal procedurals with regards to technology. The Watcher's framing and editing seems designed to make sure we notice and spend time observing these mediated moments. As viewers, we are left to ask ourselves why. What is the point of such oddity?

I believe that, in such sequences where these visual paradigms for computer use appear in succession, we are meant to see *The Good Wife*'s narrative reality as if it were our own. Kalinda's inability to zoom in forever⁹² is the bridge linking the traditional and expected images of characters with computers and the utterly surreal and unexpected insert shots of a computer in use on *The Good Wife*. As if a continuum from mundane to uncanny exists within the show's visual rhetoric, the simultaneity of the zoom's genre atypicality yet real-world believability marks this scene that transforms the disparate ends of the continuum from unrelated to part of a larger pattern. All three paradigms (characters interacting with computers, the TV frame morphing into the computer frame, and computer software following real-world rather than traditional-TV-World physics) work together to merge our viewing world with *The Good Wife*'s viewed world. The faked bits, the animated insert shots, are a sort of simulacra of what we viewers actually see when we work at our own computers in the real world unmediated by the manufactured visual reality of another screen in between. The pointedly unreal in one context is

⁹² I am thinking here specifically of other CBS crime procedurals like the *C.S.I.* franchise. On these shows, when forensic investigators zoom in on digital images, the end result is yet another high-resolution image instead of a pixelated blur. Within the logic of typical crime dramas, fictional computer software perpetually fills in the digital information compressed in the image file, maintaining a perpetually clear and hi-definition picture. Producer Dick Wolf's New York and Chicago crime drama franchises are equally guilty of this implausible trope.

factual truth in another. Likewise, S02E15 takes great pains to highlight how viewer expectations about technology through TV are impossible, demonstrating characters interacting with digital images reflecting our real-world limitations rather than the impossibly dramatic physics seen in other shows in the genre.

I would argue that the goal of this continuum, the juxtaposition of these visual paradigms into a pattern, is to suggest that we viewers are “there” within the narrative reality of *The Good Wife*. S02E15’s “zoom scene” whets the palate, as it were, for the copia of animated insert shots found throughout S02E16, “Great Firewall.” In this episode, where the week’s case revolves around the ethics of social media companies doing business in China, over and over again we viewers virtually become the characters as they look at their computer screens, positioned within the eyeline of these characters with our own perspective overlaid upon theirs. The insert shots extend The Watcher’s previous work aligning us with and helping us identify through characters to put us in their direct POV. As The Watcher’s camera embodies characters for these shots, we more quite literally identify with their perspectives through the sorts of camera positioning and framing that reinforces our bond with Alicia at the start of the series.

I mention S02E16 not only because it features so many of the animated insert shots. Since the case concerns the legalities of American tech companies doing business in another country where reporting political dissidents is both legal and required, characters are repeatedly turning to computers throughout the episode to pull up a piece of evidence or demonstrate one defense move or another. The episode is arguably designed to highlight as many of the show’s animated inserts as possible. This is an obvious tactic for The Watcher, especially once we’ve viewed the episode multiple times. What is less obvious but arguably more important, however, is the way S02E16 seems to lay groundwork for *The Good Wife*’s most unusual visual trope. It

primes the pump, as it were, by so frequently situating us viewers inside the visual perspective of characters in their narrative reality.

The Revolutionary Potential of Direct Address

The very next episode cold opens with a shot of a character making direct eye contact with us viewers via the camera. S02E17, “Ham Sandwich,”⁹³ by Griffin Dunne and Fred Murphy, begins as Cary Argos (formerly Alicia’s season-one competition-colleague at the firm but now opposing counsel in the State’s Attorney’s office) addresses the camera lens as “you.” Though it is soon revealed that this “you” is a grand jury witness Cary questions, for a few disorienting moments Cary is speaking directly to us viewers as that astounding “you.” S02E16 prepared us for this bizarre violation of the fourth wall. In this previous episode, the show’s producers bombard viewers with as many computer-based sequences as possible to suggest a sense of our presence, as viewers, within the reality of the series. Cary’s S02E17 direct address is the first thing we encounter after all the complex world-bending and world-building in S02E16. The direct address essentially cements the viewer’s “presence” within *The Good Wife*’s narrative reality, if only for the moment of that ambiguous “you.” Cary’s S02E17 direct address is not an isolated instance. In fact, the show returns to this well again many more times as the series progresses. With each iteration, I argue that *The Watcher* brings us viewers further into the reality of the show by drawing us deeper into the mental spaces of the various series characters we will make eye contact with through direct address.

⁹³ It is interesting that direct address is first used in this episode partially for what the title itself will suggest about us as viewers through our connection to the show in these moments of “eye contact.” The episode is named for the legend in Chicago law that says a Chicago city grand jury would indict even a ham sandwich for murder. This implies that the city’s grand juries not only frequently let innocent people be indicted for crimes they did not commit, but that, as members of a jury here, we also share in the prosecutorial bias implied by the legend.

Initially, direct address reinforces the idea that we viewers are somehow directly participating in the series' world. When Cary speaks to the grand jury witness in S02E17, the reveal puts us in the place of the Chicago citizens on that panel. S02E22, "Getting Off," places us on another jury, this time an empaneled trial jury. The episode opens with actors Mamie Gummer's recurring opposing counsel character and series regular Josh Charles' firm named-partner character alternately directly addressing us in the guise of their jury. In both of these episodes, we "embody" nameless extras, mere ancillary figures with no deeper connection to the show's world. We move close to *The Good Wife's* narrative center in S03E03, "Get a Room." Once again, an episode opens with direct address, here guest actor Isiah Whitlock looking and speaking squarely into the camera lens as if it were a character, too. Significantly, here that camera stands in for both Alicia and Charles' Will Gardner as the firm's lawyers participate in a formal mediation process conducted by Whitlock's character. Over the course of 26 episodes, we have moved from general citizens to members of the recurring cast. We are brought close to these central characters' interiority even though our direct association with either is limited thanks to the presence of other non-regular or recurring cast members within the reveal frames.

The next moment of direct address, however, positions us explicitly "as" two central characters in the midst of a personal and private conversation. In S03E18, "Blue Ribbon Panel," the episode begins with Alicia looking straight into the camera before the shot cuts to Kalinda also directly addressing the camera. The pair converse as lawyer and client, trading off direct address extreme close-ups. Here plot mechanics function like the buffer of other characters do in S03E03, keeping the full interiority of the show's most reserved figures, Alicia and Kalinda, at a sort of arm's distance. Because this direct address conversation concerns their professional roles

and not their specific personal connection, we are still at a remove from the women even as we are positioned within their exact points of view.

We get closer to a central character's authentic emotional space in S03E21, "The Dream Team," Once again the show turns to Cary to make a crucial psycho-aesthetic rhetorical move. As Cary locks eyes with the camera (in a position which will never be directly linked to a specific character and thus, I argue, suggesting that he is looking to us viewers specifically for emotional support in the scene), Kalinda, Will, and Diane Lockhart descend upon him at his desk in his cramped State's Attorney's office. Cary's gaze brings us closer to his interiority even as we are still just "participating" in a work-related encounter. The position of the camera with relation to Cary versus the other lawyers is crucial to understanding how this instance of direct address positions us viewers. Because there is no reveal that resolves who embodies that gaze in frame, we must consider other cinematographic elements to read its significance. As I have established already, *The Watcher* uses relative camera heights to underline with which character our sympathy is meant to align in a given scene. Though Kalinda, Will, and Diane loom over the seated Cary, the camera remains aligned with his height in his seated position, implying that viewers should sympathize with him instead of his interlocutors. Such sympathy was almost always Alicia in the show's earliest run, but here we are clearly meant to side with Cary and to share in his masked anxiety as his former colleagues corner him. When Cary stares into the camera, the lens is centered on his face at his seated height; the rest of the scene will continue to privilege this camera position even as shots move and shift throughout the sequence. I believe this is a visual signal that we viewers are bonded with the outnumbered lawyer. Moreover, that initial moment of direct address seems to suggest that Cary is looking at us and to us for help as he deals with his former colleagues. The conversation is all about professional plot issues, but

that direct address “plea” draws us into Cary’s emotional space in a way that the previous instances of direct had not.

Each time *The Good Wife* and *The Watcher* have used this particular cinematographic technique, one that is striking no matter the in-world context for the way it violates the central tenet of all American fictive visual storytelling by acknowledging the viewer’s existence through the camera lens, direct address eye-contact has brought us as viewers deeper and deeper into the emotional reality of characters on the show. These moments all culminate in a season four scene that finds us alone with and essentially “looked at” by the series’ most guarded and secretive figure. S04E01, “I Fought the Law,” closes with Kalinda staring into camera in her darkened apartment as she silently waits for an attacker to break-in. Like with Cary in S03E21, this scene never resolves an in-world “who” for Kalinda’s gaze. The apartment door does not open (in this episode). The implication is that “we” are inside the room with her, beside her as she has made safe her home, and before her as she awaits a confrontation she seems sure is coming. We are not positioned as that threat, not meant to embody the returned gaze of the person Kalinda fears. By looking at “us” through direct address, I think Kalinda views us as something more like a silent confidant. We get to see clearly the fear and anxiety on her face, emotions she is loath to reveal to any character in her narrative world. Kalinda’s personal storyline up until this moment has revolved around the fact that she refuses to share her past or her inner feelings with any of her friends or colleagues; our getting to be with her in this moment, to be seen by her in her authentic emotional state, is an honor. I believe that this is the show’s way of demonstrating that, through perseverance and *The Watcher*’s tutelage, we have earned Kalinda’s trust. This is why she, via the show’s aesthetic tropes, shares with us a glimpse into her most private life. Not even Alicia is allowed that.

Over the course of several seasons, I argue that The Watcher aesthetics slowly manipulate *The Good Wife*'s camera in order to bring us viewers closer and closer to the inner worlds of *The Good Wife*'s characters. The Watcher has positioned us in direct conversation with the narrative reality of the series by putting us within the visual POV of these characters. We start off observing the way Alicia guards herself from the prying demands of the action surrounding her; we progress into seeing things on our screens that suggest we are looking at the world as the characters look at their screens, the idea of identification and "presence" reinforced through the digital animation inserts; ultimately, our place in *The Good Wife*'s reality evolves into direct address eye-contact with The Watcher's camera. By the time we are sitting with Kalinda as she waits for a violent past to catch up with her, our vision has come to represent the "eyes" of a silent and off-screen being alongside the other characters. Even as they appeal to us directly, as Cary does in S03E21, we will remain unknown to these people, inscrutable in our silent witness much like Alicia in the series' opening sequence.

Reversing Hierarchies

I believe the ultimate end of this pedagogical aesthetic, slowly training viewers to understand silence as an active power stance before seeing ourselves as implicit figures within the narrative paradigm that proclaims such silence as feminist empowerment, trains us viewers to think of ourselves as empowered in our silence as TV audiences. With *The Good Wife*, I believe The Watcher radically reshapes our relationship to TV by repositioning us as active-if-silent rather than passive-and-disinterested participants in the televisual meaning making process. We viewers now hold power because, though we reveal nothing of ourselves, we are privy to all of the show's and characters' secrets thanks to this aesthetic education. *The Good Wife* reverses the

traditional televisual power hierarchy: show over viewer, audience as passive consumer of a show's creative action. This is empowerment through reservation. We become active, silent participants in the narrative meaning making process and not merely idle bodies being washed over by an extant story.

The Good Wife's Place in Legal Procedural History

This radical shift didn't happen in a vacuum, though. The ethical implications of both a feminist politics of refusal and a shift in power dynamics have roots in how previous American programming built meaning and how said meaning was received by viewers. *The Good Wife* exists in response to this history. Alicia's story is the stuff of melodrama, to be sure, fitting comfortably into the world of soap opera. The crucial distinction here seems to be that *The Good Wife's* brand of soap is influenced by the genre-reclaiming work foundational to our field of feminist revisioning of how soaps mean.⁹⁴ Similarly, the show's soapier elements also underline the melodrama at the heart of classic legal procedurals, almost as if the Kings sought to lampshade the ways the clear cut, black and white moralities of fare like *Perry Mason* or *Matlock* worked hard to mask the sex and strife inherent in the scandal-mills that fuel real life legal and political intrigue. The world the Kings built revels in the open-ended and morally ambiguous demands of a 24-hour news cycle desperate to make meals out of figures like Alicia Florrick. Though *The Good Wife* may have perfected the balance between the soapier and the more "realistic" elements of the legal drama thanks to genre interventions like Mumford and Modleski's, the Kings' series learned from the choices made by other sudsy legal dramas that came before it as well. Stephen Bochco and Terry Louise Fisher's *LA Law* might be *The Good*

⁹⁴For more, see Mumford 57-74

Wife's most important direct ancestor. This Quality era series was unafraid of soap elements, secure in exploring melodrama alongside its attempt to portray the American legal system more accurately than its more pedantic predecessors like *Mason* and *Matlock*.

Perhaps inspired by those predecessors where moralizing tended to take precedent over naturalism, many critics (and the audiences following both the shows and the critiques) have seemed to gauge the quality and success of legal dramas by how series like *LA Law* represent the law as a real practice. In particular, the impact these series have on how Americans view the legal system via exposure to its depiction on TV forms the basis for many of the critical conversations about the genre. Though they will not frame it as such, the ways legal procedurals impact social relationships through identification with the reality of a fictive world remains an underlying obsession for critics of the genre even today.⁹⁵ In other words, these types of shows matter to critics because they impact ways we viewers interact with our real-world judicial system. The way a legal drama repositions a viewer toward her own political life, for many critics, means more than what an individual show does artistically. I would argue that *The Good Wife* responds to these critical assumptions, builds on the way its predecessors like *LA Law* dealt with this implied social contract, and grounds the issue firmly within its own artistic goals to draw a connection between what critics focused on and what they elided in the past.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ For an example of this, see Machura and Davies. 279-294

⁹⁶ In a short piece for the *Illinois Bar Journal*, Bailey E. Cunningham, herself a practicing attorney, examines some of the ethical issues tackled within *The Good Wife*'s version of the law. She finds that the show ultimately, and unsurprisingly, favors high drama over realism, a balance that seems to trouble her. While Cunningham clearly enjoys watching the show as a fan of drama and as a lawyer, she worries that the series' approach to the law may make for better television, "but it also gives viewers a false sense of how legal ethics work" (Cunningham). This real attorney's concerns suggest that viewers might struggle to reconcile the conflict between the false sense of the law as a practice and the emotional reality of Alicia's interiority that the show's refusal of absolute verisimilitude creates. From its opening scenes, the series announced its intentions to present a biased view of public figures, heavily favoring the scorned wife more typically ignored after the first blush of scandal dies down. *Cinema verité* or true verisimilitude (whatever that might look like) were never goals for the Kings' and their staff; using the almost-real-world as a springboard for deconstructing fame and infamy is their end goal. The Watcher works diligently, if slowly, to retrain *The Good Wife*'s audiences to understand that emotional accuracy is more important to the show than strict realism via the way the show's aesthetic participates in a conversation with the more standard conventions

To understand, though, how *The Good Wife* bridged this gap, we need to look how an earlier series made similar if tentative steps in the same direction. Bochco and Fisher's *LA Law* is arguably the Kings' closest cousin in this regard. Michael Epstein seems to presage this linking relationship in his work with *LA Law* in the mid-1990s. He establishes the continuum between early stalwarts like *Mason* and the shows that would evolve from it, his focus remaining firmly on how these series depict the reality of the legal profession to viewers, however. Of these two *The Good Wife* forebears, Epstein writes, "each shares the distinction of having been a mega-hit that helped thrust the legal profession into the forefront of public consciousness. Yet these programs say a lot of different things about the perceived role of lawyers in American life" (Epstein). If *Mason* represents "the people's self-appointed healer," Epstein argues that the lawyers of *LA Law*'s McKenzie, Brackman firm refuse to "function as mediators of conflicts inherent in the complexity of modern society. Instead, they leave questions unanswered and social tensions unresolved" (Epstein). As opposed to *Mason* or even *The Good Wife*'s Lockhart/Gardner on many occasions, *LA*'s lawyers are "less interested in discovering an objective 'truth' than concerned with getting their client off, going so far as to suppress or ignore evidence incriminating to their clients" (Epstein). If Perry Mason followed the letter of the law to attain some sort of ideal justice, the lawyers at McKenzie, Brackman were willing to ignore that letter to find the best possible justice they could for their clients. Epstein finds this moral relativism more realistic and thus more important for viewers.

Epstein highlights a feature that *The Good Wife* shares with *LA Law*, though: the sense that the images presented are actually somehow more realistic to viewers than those offered by classical counterparts like *Mason*. Rather, they "essentially step into the shoes of clients, argue

of its predecessors in the genre. The Kings have also crafted their show in seeming response to the critical conversation surrounding legal dramas. *The Good Wife* manages to comment on both conversations simultaneously.

vociferously on their behalf, and then walk away from the matter, win or lose. Moreover, the cases they argue are not straightforward investigations into facts that take less than [sic] a week from indictment to verdict” (Epstein) Perhaps because both *LA Law* and *The Good Wife* are willing to explore non-professional sides of their characters and revel in their sudsier, sexier dramatic elements, they are able to touch the sort of realist representation of a lawyer-as-a-person that critics like Epstein praise.⁹⁷

This sense that the characters in legal procedural should have richer interior lives that extend beyond their investment in the case of the week in order to be more realistic pervades most *LA Law* criticism, as if the notion were radical that characters experience more than mere plot and are motivated by things beyond a black-and-white morality. I believe the sense of surprise that lurks within these critiques underlines why the show is such an important example in American TV history and why it is vital to understanding how truly radical *The Good Wife*’s choices are in the Prestige age. For someone like William H. Simon, writing about *LA Law* in response to the way Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial spotlighted legal ethics on American TV sets, *Law*’s willingness to show lawyers grappling with their roles as representatives of justice provided more realistic characterization while simultaneously projecting an image of an “ideal” legal ethics to viewers. The characters display what he terms Moral Pluck, “a combination of transgression and resourcefulness in the vindication of justice” (Simon 422). These characters “understand ethics less in terms of compliance with rule and custom [like *Mason*’s morality] and more in terms of *fidelity* to the values that underlie rule and custom” (Simon 431, emphasis

⁹⁷ Though it doesn’t seem to play into his argument that while images of lawyers on American TV have gotten more realistic but also less admirable, I feel it would be remiss not to mention the epigraph that accompanies Epstein’s piece. His biographical note reads, “Michael Epstein left the Wall Street equivalent of McKenzie, Brackman to practice law in the *Perry Mason* tradition” (Epstein). It would seem he has used mediated images as inspiration for becoming and then revising an outdated, mediated image itself.

added). Simon means that the characters on *LA Law* may follow not the letter of the law but rather its spirit. These fictional lawyers behave like people who live in a world of strict rules *and* moral ambiguity and who choose to follow their principles instead of unquestioningly supporting laws simply because they exist as laws. The lawyers on *L.A. Law* don't abide by classical *Perry Mason* black-and-white letter of the law justice, because their more complex interiority allows them to exist inside of and contemplate moral ambiguity within the bounds of the justice system's rules. Perry Mason, as a character, served the mechanics of the procedural plot, whereas *L.A. Law* and *The Good Wife* feature plots that serve characterization. It is a reversal from established television tradition.

This reversal has led critics to read both the Quality series and its Prestige progeny as more realistic than the classical procedural format was. Simon claims this makes the characters feel more realistic than the more strident legal literalists from previous TV eras do. That the principles the McKenzie, Brackman firm lives by are progressive ideals makes them, for Simon, realistic idealists. This oxymoron depends, in large part, on how Simon understands the relationship between these characters and their viewing audience. He argues that viewers can see these characters as at once realistic and idealized because their willingness to bend the rules to help their clients makes them simultaneously relatable and aspirational figures for viewers who arguably get most of their knowledge about the American legal system from the American television industry.

Simon acknowledges the tenuous nature of this character/viewer relationship, writing that “enjoying these works is not tantamount to embracing their moral premises, [but] the works seem to depend strongly on the imaginative identification of the audience with their heroes” (Simon 440). While I would hold that such a caveat is true whether we're meant to identify with

heroes or villains, Simon hits on something crucial that also applies to *The Good Wife*. The act of identification matters most. Be it identifying with an *LA Law* character as she risks violating attorney-client privilege to exact justice from a corrupt CEO, or seeing ourselves in Alicia Florrick's desire to remain private in the face of a very public existence, by fostering that bond between character and viewer do these shows sell us on the more complex ideals undergirding their storylines. This is a radical sort of empathy that has the potential to change society through entertainment.

Critics have been debating this power almost since the birth of television. For the debate around *LA Law* in particular, even the *Yale Law Review* weighed in with a pair of articles in 1989. Two attorneys took sides on the assumptions and expectation of the legal process as depicted on the show. Stephen Gillers, an NYU law professor, critiques the series for too heavily dramatizing their profession and giving viewers the unrealistic sense that legal procedure is much more exciting and sexy than it really is. He claims that, "absent an extreme situation, the holder in due course doctrine is just not going to be great entertainment" (Gillers 1608). Charles B. Rosenberg, a named partner at an LA firm similar to that on *LA Law*, rebuts Gillers critique on the grounds that legal dramas can use entertainment to inspire as well as inform audiences about a more complex sense of legal morality and ethics if that procedure is dramatized. Rosenberg and Gillers, however, both agree that legal soaps like *LA Law* are valuable because they can depict the moral ambiguity at the heart of the *corpus juris*. Though they disagree about how accurate or realistic the depiction is, both praise the show's potential to change the way viewers understand their own reality.

This ontological potential carries over from the Quality-era show to its Prestige descendent, even if the critics' obsession with realism misses the point of what both shows are

trying to accomplish. *LA Law* was in many ways a show about ideas that just happened to use the dramatic framework of a legal procedural to explore those ideas. Similarly, *The Good Wife* also uses the affordances of the genre to ask complex sociopolitical questions about things like racial and economic justice by sneaking progressive feminist discourse into the sexy and dramatic soap opera of the American legal drama. For the Kings' series, realism is a byproduct of a commitment to exploring stories not normally told by traditional media; it is not a response to any duty toward the viewer's knowledge of how law is practiced beyond the screen. The show and *The Watcher* are training viewers not to better understand the minutia of the American legal system. That is a happenstance offshoot of reconsidering the world so as to change the roots of the injustices marring that legal system.

Fortunately, this critical obsession with realism has not clouded the eyes of all scholars working with these series. Judith Mayne recognizes *LA Law*'s greater project and dismisses the realism debate out of hand. Her work locates within the rhetorical structure of the series a feminist perspective rare in American television during even the Quality era. She traces out how *LA Law* explicitly and implicitly uses the metaphor⁹⁸ of a door that swings both ways as a model for a feminist narratology. Mayne looks at moments both when characters use the phrase as well as when the show echoes it through epanalepsis and anadiplosis.⁹⁹ The copia of repetition devices builds to a sense of feminism itself playing a role in the show

as an explicit or implicit protagonist [where] the narrative of *LA Law* shifts constantly

between the two different swinging doors – the one suggestive of the radical difference

⁹⁸ Mayne acknowledges that this metaphor is also a cliché but that even such low hanging fruit can be put to good use.

⁹⁹ I am applying the names of these tropes to Mayne's work rather than citing her use of them. Epanalepsis is the repetition at the end of a phrase of the word that opens it, a sort of "X-Y-X" construction. Anadiplosis is the repetition of the word from the end of a phrase at the beginning of the next: "A-B-C. C-D-E" Though Mayne does not mention these rhetorical tropes by name, or refer to her reading of the series as a rhetorical analysis, she describes these actions in detail that make their more codified rhetorical analogs quite clear.

between men and women vis-à-vis the law, and the other of the applicability of the law to men and women alike. (Mayne 34)

In paying close attention to how the series' aesthetic choices function in relationship to plot and dialog, we can finally see that *LA Law*'s narrative framework oscillates between the extremes of the destabilizing forces often associated with feminist politics.

Mayne's take on *LA Law*'s refusal to abide by a single center in favor of constantly shifting around the margins of power to unsettle that center is very similar to what I find in *The Good Wife* with a crucial difference.¹⁰⁰ If, as Mayne claims, "the overarching narrative perspective of *LA Law* comes from juxtaposition and combination, rather than from the identification of a single narrator or a single perspective as the voice of narrative authority and cohesion," then a narrative pattern used throughout the series actually undermines the feminist potential Mayne finds in its metaphorical "swinging door" (Mayne 37). Each episode ends with a scene of couples, often heterosexual romantic couples, coming together in "a utopian heterosexuality, a complementarity of men and women in the face of massive disorder instigated, in the previous fifty-five minutes, by the intersection of the law and gender" (Mayne 44). These scenes and their reification of a heteronormative paradigm suggest that the creative forces behind *LA Law* were still beholden to the sorts of patriarchal assumptions that will go on to place Alicia in the media's crosshairs on *The Good Wife*. There is a disconnect, then, between intention and execution for the earlier show. I believe that what marks a Prestige series is that, through the

¹⁰⁰ While I find the connections between Mayne's reading of feminism in *L.A. Law* and the feminism in *The Good Wife* striking, she also raises a more literal connection between the two shows. When discussing the ways a woman's body is used by *L.A. Law* as an opportunity to elaborate on contradictions between expectation and reality, Mayne cites an episode where a TV news anchor is fired for baring her breasts during a segment on breast cancer prevention. The similarities between this episode and *The Good Wife*'s S04E07, "Anatomy of a Joke," are striking. In "Anatomy," guest star Christina Ricci plays a comedian sued by a TV network for baring her breasts on a late-night talk show during a routine about breast cancer screening. I prefer to read these similarities as homage, a tip of the hat from a 21st century drama to one of its forbears. It is a subtle acknowledgement of their shared history and roles on the American television landscape.

metaphor I term The Watcher, the new show makes and lands the conceptual leap that the previous series fails to stick. *The Good Wife*'s visual rhetoric builds off the fruitful but flawed foundation laid by *LA Law*. Though the latter made great strides in changing the dynamics of the American legal drama, it takes the more focused cultural shifts behind Prestige to allow for *The Good Wife*'s radical politics of inscrutability to take root in the American legal procedural.

Significant cultural shifts also had to happen between Quality and Prestige to allow other revolutionary aspects of *The Good Wife*'s narrative paradigm to challenge the traditional expectations and assumptions of broadcast TV. I am thinking in particular of the ways the show treats Kalinda Sharma's sexuality. Though this notoriously private woman seems to pleasure in refusing to define herself for or be defined by other people's assumptions about her sexuality, it is commonly understood that Kalinda's sexual orientation is at least fluid if not officially bisexual.¹⁰¹ Though the show is ultimately supportive of the character, some critics have located in her extreme need for privacy an emotionally manipulative streak that feels far too close to pernicious stereotypes about bisexual women for their comfort. One such critic is Leonie Taylor; whose work examines how bisexual women are portrayed in the media and theorized within feminist criticism. She believes that pushing against the limits of how bisexuality has been theorized can allow us to better understand and thus challenge gendered and sexed norms that constrain us all (Taylor 278).

Taylor notes that Kalinda's flexible sexuality is tied to the ways she manipulates people in her job as Lockhart/Gardner's in-house investigator as well as her ethnicity as an Asian-

¹⁰¹ This question is official cannon on the show, from SO3E21, "The Dream Team," directed by series co-creator Robert King and shot by Fred Murphy. While they drink at a bar, the white and heterosexual Alicia asks Kalinda if she is gay. The Asian-American woman responds that she thinks of herself as flexible.

American. She plays with other characters' sexual desire for her in order to get what she needs out of them for the various cases she works. According to Taylor,

Other people's feelings for Kalinda are depicted as straightforward, pure, intelligible, and kind, whereas her feelings for them are presented as confused, machinating, and dichotomous. [She] exemplifies one of the most dangerous qualities of the bisexual 'double agent' – you might fall for them but you can never truly get close to them. (Taylor 288)

For Taylor, Kalinda's refusal of labels combines with her manipulative professional methods to suggest a link between her sexuality and ethnicity as well, tying her ambiguous sexual status with what Taylor terms the neocolonial implications of the show's racial politics (Taylor 289). Taylor argues that given "all of Kalinda's sexual partner are white, perhaps a white audience doesn't see itself in Kalinda, but it sees something 'Other' that it desires – an alluring mixture of danger and sexual energy" that has long been a stereotypical attribute of both bisexual and non-white women (Taylor 299). Though Kalinda's portrayal reinforces dangerous images of bisexuality, images often used to deny bisexual people space within feminist and progressive ideologies, Taylor sees in the series an opportunity to shift perspective and change how we theorize both bisexual and non-white people through Kalinda's portrayal. For Taylor, scholars might be able to examine, deconstruct, and thus redeem the ways sex and race have been conflated in critical theory. She uses Kalinda's body as a jumping off point for a new politics of sexuality unbound by stereotypes and assumptions.

I believe, however, that Taylor's stance is too limited in scope. She makes no room for the average viewer to join in on this new politics (nor does she acknowledge her own complicity in using a brown, queer body as means to an end). If we read beyond the storylines and look at

the visual rhetorics in the show, I argue that Kalinda's aesthetic presentation (in addition to the show's established politics of inscrutability) functions to rehabilitate a reading of the character for all viewers, even according to Taylor's own terms. She appears now private rather than dangerous. Kalinda

remains private, emotionally impenetrable, and distant [... with] even [her] clothing – her tight skirts, leather jackets, and leather boots – [mirroring] her poker face, emotional coolness, and unreadability. It is close fitting and sexy but never reveals much flesh, maintaining an impression of dominatrix-like invulnerability. (Taylor 288)

This invulnerability is a product of Kalinda's same refusal to be laid bare publicly as Alicia's but taken to its logical extreme. The way the series shoots Kalinda's scenes suggests that *The Good Wife* sees her as powerful and empowered rather than duplicitous and dangerous. In fact, she is one of the first non-Alicia characters to have scenes focalized through their perspective. She also earns her own personal soundtrack while other characters' storylines are accompanied by music that is more generic.¹⁰² Kalinda Sharma does in fact provide a foundation for reimagining a politics of bisexuality, but not just because of the ways scholars might position her as representing uglier past politics. When we take into account how the show's aesthetics work in correlation with its storylines, we can see that her participation in stereotypes can also be an attempt to undermine them. Yes, Kalinda manipulates other characters with her sexuality, but it is because they hold pernicious and limiting views of what and who she is.¹⁰³ She takes advantage of people who insist on viewing her only through a prejudiced lens.

¹⁰² Whenever Kalinda sets out to do something "bad ass," like take on a man twice her size as he threatens her physically, as in S04E10 "Battle of the Proxies," directed by Grffin Dunne and shot by Tim Guinness, the show switches to musical cues with driving bass lines and aggressive rhythms. These songs also often feature female vocalists singing lyrics about women being powerful or aggressive themselves.

¹⁰³ It should be noted that though Kalinda's characterization has not always been read as having so much potential. David Sims, in a recap for *The A.V. Club*, expresses his frustration with these exact issues, writing that,

I believe this is what *The Good Wife* asks of viewers across the board. The show wants us to pay attention to the signals it sends that might otherwise get lost underneath a surface-level simplicity. Viewers can treat the series like a diverting romp and just another quality addition to the long American history of legal dramas. If however, we are willing to look a little more closely and pay a little more attention to the rhetorical gestures the show makes, we can find our very understanding of our relationship to television itself revolutionized.

Resist Someone Else's Version of Your Story

Slowly, over the course of nearly three times as many episodes as the other series I discuss, *The Watcher* has taught viewers how to interpret *The Good Wife*'s rhetorical gestures. We have learned to read characters' emotions through camera work. We have made connections between a fictive world and our own reality through heavily mediated images of technology use. We have even discovered sites of our own participation in *The Good Wife*'s Chicago through judicious use of direct address to the camera. Our reeducation has been truly revolutionary. With *The Good Wife*, *The Watcher* has taught us viewers how to understand silence as power. Refusing to reveal one's self, insisting instead on remaining inscrutable becomes an empowering political act. Such inscrutability destabilizes traditional authority hierarchies and makes room for other stories in the center of TV narrative.

"Kalinda seems coolly dispassionate and Panjabi's line-readings can be almost robotic, but she's a skilled enough actress to invest some warmth behind them. I am, however, getting a little tired of how close Kalinda plays her cards to her chest (one example: if she is gay, as the show is hinting, why would she care if people knew about it?)."

5. *The Wire*

The Watcher and The Theater of The Real

Though its original run on HBO predates those of all the other series I've discussed so far, I've intentionally saved *The Wire* for last. Though it was the show that inspired my reading of Prestige cinematography and gave me the shape of the metaphor behind *The Watcher*, I believe we needed to learn to read these other shows before really appreciating how remarkable *The Wire* is in the history of American televisuality. I believe it is the lessons learned through this show that *Breaking Bad* found its hyperstylization, *OITNB* its genre reflexivity, and *The Good Wife* its silent politics. Because, just like the old story about *The Velvet Underground*,¹⁰⁴ though very few people watched *The Wire*'s original run, everyone who did was inspired by it.

Created by journalist and author David Simon, the show examines the lives of people involved in and affected by the drug trade in Baltimore, Maryland at the beginning of the 21st century. It ran for five seasons on the subscription cable powerhouse, HBO. The first season riffs on cops shows, following detectives and criminals during a season-long investigation revolving around wire tapped phones (which gives the series its title). Additional seasons expand scope to address Baltimore's dockyards (season 2), halls of government (season 3), school system (season 4), and newspapers (season 5). Across all of these disparate domains, *The Watcher* traces out a vision of how corruption seeps into all manner of American institutions of power.

¹⁰⁴ As the joke goes, very few people ever saw *The Velvet Underground* play, but everyone who did started a band afterwards.

Manufacturing Verisimilitude

As such, the first season of HBO's *The Wire* is, unsurprisingly, obsessed with images of surveillance. The foundation of the plot is built on acts of surveillance, and the visual rhetoric developed echoes and amplifies this narrative. In every moment of the storyline featuring a character watching another unnoticed, the series' turns to The Watcher to underline that significance. I believe that *The Wire* uses these moments of surveillance to challenge us viewers to see our own role in both the construction of meaning making for the series as well as our own role within the larger set of social institutions challenged by the series. Though the show will move away from these explicit images of literal surveillance as seasons progress, The Watcher's observational stance remains a dominant visual motif within the manufactured verisimilitude of *The Wire*. It's there in S01E01, and it's there in S05E10.

According to showrunner David Simon, on the audio commentary accompanying S01E01, "The Target," directed by Clark Johnson and shot by Briesewitz, the "innocuous shots of surveillance" were added to convey the sense of being watched, functioning like a shorthand for a world of too much information from which the valuable must be sifted out from the dross. According to Simon, co-creator and executive producer, Robert Colesberry¹⁰⁵ was responsible for the decision to stay "in the wide," keeping framing as wide as possible for as long as possible to "show the world as much as possible" and allow the camera, and thus the viewer, to see as much raw data about the show's world as possible when sifting through for the "valuable" (Simon). Briesewitz's camera captures everything, but she uses it clinically. She¹⁰⁶ does not interject herself into the setting, instead shooting most of her footage (exterior scenes in

¹⁰⁵ Colesbury would occasionally direct episodes as well as appear on screen as character Detective Cole.

¹⁰⁶ Uta Briesewitz operates her own camera, unlike many directors of photography, according to Clark Johnson on the S01E02 DVD commentary.

particular) through a telephoto lens from a great distance. The goal is to create a sense of objective distance that also suggest that the world being show on screen is coeval with the “real” world, the world the viewer inhabits being somehow the same one the characters inhabit. It is a zero-degree style journalistic aesthetic,¹⁰⁷ but, we must note, it is as fabricated and manipulated as mediated images we find in *Breaking Bad*, *Orange Is The New Black*, or *The Good Wife*. Even though realism and naturalism govern the show’s style, season one’s repeated refrain of surveillance imagery, both moving and still, reminds us that someone is watching, gathering, and manipulating all of these supposedly “real” images. When a screen is involved, *The Watcher* and *The Wire* remind us that someone is constructing a notion of “the real” for us.

We can see this manufactured verisimilitude play out across S01E03, “The Buys,” directed by Peter Medak with Briesewitz again on camera.¹⁰⁸ A scene set in Lt. Daniels’ basement office is lit so that it would appear as if all the available light that comes in streams in from the street above despite being very much shot on a specially-fabricated set. As a result, the scene is very dimly lit, with dark shadows enveloping much of the set, limited to only what light might be allowed to spill in from the small, high egress windows or the large, reinforced glass window opening out onto the adjoining bullpen office. There is virtually no light, in other words. This cave-like recess is part of the main shooting set for season one. The design of this main set suggests that we have stepped into a real basement in the real world, a forgotten and dank corner

¹⁰⁷ If you’ll recall from the introduction, Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard posit two types of aesthetic presentation, a zero-degree style that presents the world as it is and a second-degree that directly comments on the world. Though Barrette and Picard locate “theatricality” in both forms, they seem to ignore how permeable the supposed barrier between the two really is. *The Wire*’s aesthetic demonstrates just how form might impose commentary while also seeking to restage reality as it appears beyond the frame.

¹⁰⁸ Uta Briesewitz will be the director of photography for all of seasons one and two. She shoots 4 episodes of seasons three before leaving the show. Eagle Egilson will shoot the final seven episodes of season three before Russell Lee Fine finishes out the show. You can see a distinct shift in the quality of camera work, specifically the lighting design, when Fine takes over. His light is muddy and needlessly dark, whereas Briesewitz’s design (and Egilson’s work) more specifically references chiaroscuro and expressionist lighting designs via ambient (or “ambient”) sources, as if Fine did not quite understand what the shoot bible meant by “dark lighting.”

of some sort of corporate catacombs. It is ostentation that tries not to draw attention to itself as artifice. Medak and Briesewitz want to give us the sense that this office is just like one we could see, unmediated, outside of the frame of our television screens.

All The World's A Stage

The visual sense that we are seeing what is “really” happening, that seeing how the world “really” looks as opposed to how a soundstage might appear, however, is countered by much more explicitly theatrical moments in these same locations. An early scene in S01E03 finds detectives McNulty and Greggs, after having tricked two recalcitrant colleagues into doing their own share of the work for once, stepping into a corner of the bullpen to hold what amounts to a very theatrical “aside.” The camera pushes in dramatically into a close-up as Greggs jokes, “that was inspiring.” McNulty smirks back, “I’m a leader of men.” The staging and blocking of this exchange underscores the manipulated nature of the scene, as two actors literally move aside to carry on a conversation just so the audience (rather than other characters) can follow along. It is the theater of the “real.”

This blend of the deeply theatrical and the committedly realistic is also seen in what might be the most famous scene of the entire series, the “fuck” scene from S01E04, “Old Cases,” directed by Clement Virgo. Jimmy McNulty and Bunk Moreland investigate a cold case with possible ties to the Barksdale drug organization, the murder of a young woman they now suspect was tied directly to Avon Barksdale, the head of that organization. As the two seasoned detectives comb over the victim’s now sanitized and barren kitchen, they communicate solely through variations on the word “fuck.” A property manager greets McNulty and Bunk and shows them through the door to the victim’s apartment. As the camera steps inside with the detectives,

the kitchen crime scene space is framed like a theater stage, with the walls of the living rooms drawing our eye towards the kitchen. Their backs to our gaze, Bunk and McNulty approach the *foot of the stage*. As Bunk flips through evidence photos to get a sense of placement for the scene of the crime, the shot cuts to face the cops in a medium wide shot. Bunk utters the first “fuck,” and the camera zooms in to a close-up on the pair. The detectives *take the stage* themselves, stepping into the kitchen. A series of quick, close shots sees Bunk lay out the photos to block out the crime. While he recreates the position of the woman’s corpse, McNulty checks the *script* of the case file notes to make sure they’re following stage directions appropriately. All the while, Bunk mutters “fuck” over and over.

Exploring the full lexicographical range of the word, the scene is in turns disturbing, funny, profane, and profound. The single-word play is clever, but I would argue that the scene has captivated viewers and critics alike because it deftly combines social realism with expertly staged dramaturgy. The scene itself highlights the stage craft that makes it possible as a scene through the ways McNulty and Moreland themselves re-stage the crime they investigate. They position each other, establishing blocking for victim and murderer as they play out possible versions of events, all while speaking in the very writerly conceit of “just fuck.” However, the dramatics at play are balanced by the constant reminder that we are watching people work, on two levels. The detective characters McNulty and Moreland work through an otherwise blankly sterile environment to piece together the brutal details of a quiet tragedy. Simultaneously, we see two gifted actors perform a scene designed to highlight how they go about building drama as stagecraft. The scene shows us the fun that the writers and actors all can have with their work while reminding us of the serious stakes they’ve devised for their creations. The actors play, but their creations are trying to solve a terrible crime. Just as “fuck” lets the episode’s writers have

some fun in their craft, the vulgarity also underscores how important and unsettling this bit of fun is for the cop characters. Surrounded by violence, they use “fuck” as a sort of release valve, a coping mechanism that lets them distance themselves from their reality just enough to (try to) deal with it every day. What we know from other scenes with both characters also reminds us that such coping devices don’t really work.

The show will return to this sort of ostentatiously *theatrical* staging a few more times, mostly in season five as McNulty again literally restages crimes scenes to help fabricate a serial killer story, more typically however, the show relies on subtler forms of viewing to construct its message about surveillance and watching in its great Rube Goldberg device of *The Institutional*. Much of this comes through camera-as-complicitous-critique, *The Watcher* implicating the viewer in these institutions as it reveals them. Sometimes this means putting viewers in the explicit perspective of a character. In S01E08, “Lessons,” directed by Gloria Muzio with Briesewitz shooting and Geraldine Peroni editing, we are put into Omar Little’s point of view as he plans his revenge for his lover’s brutal murder. On the street, at night, outside of Avon Barksdale’s strip club, the camera tracks up and down Orlando’s storefront, pans to the left to notice the Love Zone porn shop and then pans to the right to the vacant storefront on the other side of Orlando’s, before it then pans back to center and focuses on the strip club again. The sequence then cuts to a reveal that the POV belongs to Omar, who is casing the building. The camera has been mimicking his head movements, paying attention to the details he notices.

Our Role in This Scene

In S01E12, “Cleaning Up,”¹⁰⁹ The Watcher takes a similar, if less literal, stance in a scene where its presence carries significantly greater emotional weight. As Bodie and Poot, two of Barksdale’s foot soldiers, have been tasked with killing their friend, Wallace, for potentially being a snitch, the camera watches Bodie climb a staircase in Wallace’s row-house squat and then cuts back to the ground floor landing where Poot lingers. It zooms in on Poot’s face at the foot of the stairs before panning and tilting back up to Bodie at the top. It’s a heartbreaking exchange as these two boys face what they are being made to do to their friend. The camera links them, capturing Bodie’s false bravado and Poot’s reticence, and it focalizes through each of them across the sequence. Because, though, the camera is between them, it also acts as a sort of intermediary. Not only is the camera witnessing the moment, it is also, in a fashion, forcing it to happen. Both characters are performing for the other, Bodie acting out what he thinks manhood must be in this version of Baltimore and Poot offering, however subtle, an alternative. Importantly, though, because the camera is between them on the staircase, they have to look through it to each other, addressing the gaze of the viewer via the camera as well. If the camera, then, forces the boys to their task by acting like a sort of “Big Brother” making sure they follow through on the order, it likewise suggests that we viewers are also forcing them to do this horrible thing. We are driving them to murder their best friend. Much like the show seeks to implicate all members of American society for our roles in the kinds of corruption tracked across its seasons, this camera set-up implicates us viewers in a more intimate corruption. In no small part, this sequence shows us that we are just as responsible for Wallace’s death as the institutions that more explicitly led to it.

¹⁰⁹ Directed by Clement Virgo with Thom Zimny editing Briesewitz’s footage.

Though *The Wire*'s camera infrequently puts us into a specific characters' POV like this, the show more regularly surveils its world through no particular character perspective grounding or focalizing the set-ups. Occasionally this third-person, not-quite omniscient, objective narrative perspective results in ostentatious and flashy shots, like the roving fish-eye lens close-ups in S01E13, "Sentencing," circling round and round gangster Stringer Bell, Avon Barksdale, and their lawyer Maurice Levy during their parking garage parlay. Typically, however, this narrator perspective takes a subtler track. Introducing a new institution for examination, season two opens with The Watcher surveying docklands and shipyards alongside a reassigned McNulty on his patrol boat in S02E01, "Ebb Tide." The camera never mimics McNulty's particular POV. Later on, at the end of the same episode, the story returns to a scene in the shipyards. Following the reveal of the bodies of the women murdered inside a shipping container, the camera pans across the port in an extreme wide shot, pointedly making note of the hundreds if not thousands of other containers stacked up and ignored by the characters. I believe The Watcher is here not so subtly implying that we, and the characters, should care more about what might be hidden within these seemingly innocuous symbols of modern industrial capitalism as well.

This lingering sense that we have a responsibility to the people harmed by our gaze (and our refusal to gaze) permeates throughout the show. In a moment that carries the weight of the women's plight and also harkens back to Wallace's heartbreaking death, S02E06, "All Prologue,"¹¹⁰ forces us to bear witness to another character who had hoped for a better Baltimore fall prey to violence. D'Angelo "D" Barksdale is murdered in the prison library. After his killer restages D's death to look like a suicide and shuts the door on his slumped body (once again reminding us of the dramaturgy and theatricality at the heart of the show), the camera pushes in

¹¹⁰ Directed by Steve Shill and edited by Allison C Johnson

on D's shadow through a crack under the door. The slow push-in is the same as the slow push and pan across the docks, another shot of a crime hidden in plain sight. The impact of this echo is amplified by the way *The Watcher's* camera had been following in D's killer's footsteps. As this murderer for hire spies on D'Angelo in the library stacks, the camera mimics his steps and tracks in on D through the killer's vantage point, just as the camera did beside McNulty's at the start of the season. We watch him and yet don't intervene, so we are implicated in D's murder, just as we are in Wallace's in season one. Now, though, this murder carries with it more than the death of just one man thanks to of the simultaneous echo of callous and clinical mass murder of the trafficked women in the shipping container. Our role as complicit witnesses to these crimes is extended and compounded by these visual echoes.

The Watcher and The Wire, Complicit Partners

Though the show strives to make the viewer feel complicit in its critique of the mechanisms of late industrial capitalism and the neoliberal policies that make its storylines possible, *The Wire* is itself complicit as well. Take the absence of a "T-Visa" thread in season two as an example. T-Visas are temporary visas available to trafficked women who assist in the prosecution of their traffickers. Though they could have been introduced as McNulty tries to track down the identity of the woman whose body he pulls from the water in S02E01, the show actually fails to examine how these valid and legal documents could have aided both the detectives in pursuing their case and the trafficked women who should have been at the heart of said case. The closest the series comes is when McNulty tries to interview women detained by Customs before being deported back out of the country. The eastern European women held by Immigration and Naturalization Services that McNulty approaches about the identity of his

murder victim could, in the real world, seek access to these visas, since they were smuggled into the country under false pretenses. They are victims of the 21st century slave trade, but this is only just hinted at on the show. The absence of any real discussion of T-Visas underlines the misogyny of the storyline while also spotlighting the misogyny inherent in the political structures that make human trafficking a non-priority for policing organizations. In this scene specifically, we can see the show trying, and yet still failing, to call out such misogyny.

I believe the show's decision in this sequence not to subtitle-translate the dialogue between the jailed women when questioned by McNulty both supports and subverts the chauvinism at work in the situation. Focalizing the scene through McNulty, the show ultimately doesn't care about what the women have to say once it is clear that they won't be saying what McNulty wants to hear. However, in having *The Watcher* still manage to capture and pay attention to that speech and the expressions of the women generating it reminds us of the world elided by McNulty and by the show's intense focus on him. The woman described as "good with English" here in S02E05, "Undertow," could have translated for us, could have made the conversation legible to outsiders, but she kept us out of their world. Silence and refusal, like we see in *The Good Wife*, are the only protections they have from the institutions turning them into mere commodities, so she refuses to let agents of those institutions into the women's private, communal interiority. *The Watcher* notes her act of quiet defiance even as the show's story and its institutional agents ignore it.

The Watcher's Dramatic Irony

The Watcher regularly notices things characters miss like this. Be it in S02E11, "Bad Dreams," where camera spies the powerful drug cartel leader and human trafficker The Greek

walking past Detective Kima Greggs' car as her attentions are elsewhere, or in S03E08, "Moral Midgetry," when the camera speeds down the precinct hallway alongside an officer called Truck but then does a literal double take when *The Watcher*, but not the running detective, spots Lt. Bunny Colvin talking in his office with The Deacon, an important social leader and recurring character on the show.¹¹¹ Later, in season five, *The Watcher* will capture moments like these for ironic effect, such as when a Marlo Stanfield drug lieutenant, Chris Partlow, stops assistant district attorney Ronda Pearlman in the hallway for directions inside City Hall in S05E01, "More with Less." These ironic glimpses build to the grand absurdity of the main "fake serial killer" plotline in this season. It also underscores the inanity going on in that storyline, like in a scene at *The Baltimore Sun* in S05E05, "React Quotes," featuring McNulty, unethical journalist Scott Templeton, and ethical journalist Alma Gutierrez. Here only Alma's face is fully lit, while the two liars causing all the fuss are cast in shadows that *The Watcher* rather pointedly observes.

Irony also comes into play in some of the ways scenes are focalized, though rarely so explicitly or as intentionally humorous as with McNulty and Templeton in shadows. Returning to the exchange between Bodie and Poot at Wallace's murder in S01E12, the show relies on dramatic irony to complicate our identification with the camera as McNulty and Daniels arrest Avon Barksdale at the end of this episode. Rather than indict us viewers in the detectives' actions as it has the corner boys', instead the connections between the pairs of characters challenge us to imagine the detectives in response to the ways we were previously positioned within Poot and Bodie's perspectives. McNulty and Poot are aligned, as are Daniels and Bodie, but from reversed positions.

¹¹¹ In an example of the show's cheeky sense of humor and commitment to naturalism even in casting, the Deacon is played by Melvin Williams. Williams is the man who provided the actual model and inspiration for the drug kingpin character Avon Barksdale.

Avon's arrest is a warped mirror of Wallace's murder. Avon and his right-hand man, Stringer Bell, know what's coming for them, watching a heavily armed police assault team prepare to storm their offices above the strip club. McNulty and Daniels (reluctantly, because they don't want to arrest Avon at this point in their investigation but have had their hand forced by their superior officers) demand the assault team stand down and then willingly go up to those offices in order to affect the arrest. The arrest itself happens wordlessly and without drama; Stringer's surprise that he isn't also handcuffed the only "incident." The stairway shot mirroring the corner boy sequence now starts at the end of the arrest "action" at the head of a darkened staircase. Avon goes down the stairs first, with Daniel holding the drug lord's shoulders to guide him. The shot cuts back to view McNulty at the top of the landing, his face in sharp spotlight as he glances back to the office where Stringer remains. The stairwell behind McNulty is a black cavern from whence we hear Avon and Daniels' footsteps descend. The camera pushes in from a medium shot on McNulty into a close-up as he turns to look down the stairs. The camera crosses left frame over McNulty's chest, following his gaze and the sound of those footsteps. Tilting down as it pans slightly left, *The Watcher* now captures Daniels and Avon at the foot of the stairs, washed in bright light from the strip club proper. Daniels looks back up the stairs to return McNulty's gaze, just like Poot did to Bodie. This time, the camera then cuts to a close-up on Daniels' face as he subtly gestures for McNulty to hurry up and follow him. The camera cuts back now, looking up the stairs from Daniels' POV to a medium close-up of McNulty staring back at his boss. A quick cut to McNulty's POV sees Daniels and Avon exit the landing and frame, then a final cut to look back up into the dark stairwell catches McNulty reluctantly head downstairs.

McNulty here is the man doesn't want to follow his partner's lead, though it's because he feels his job isn't yet over (arresting Avon being little more than a display for the higher-ups), while Poot is more than reluctant to see his job begin. These scenes are both predominantly focalized through this pair of characters to the extent that Daniels and Bodie's views aren't really explored beyond quick glances from their POV's.¹¹² Daniels and Bodie come off as more duty-bound, functionaries even, compared to the more overtly conflicted McNulty and Poot; though, for the former pair, the actions in the rooms at the other end of their stairs suggest that any sense that Daniels or Bodie are less conflicted is short-sighted and a result mainly of their respective scenes' focalization through their partners. This in turn ironically reinforces McNulty and Poot's focalized stances. The irony of this focalization acts to undercut the power of McNulty and Poot's perspectives, though; that their view makes so little space for Daniels and Bodie's moral worldviews highlights a narcissism inherent in the act of focalization. This irony reminds us viewers that we cannot fully trust or put all of our faith in the perspective of the focalizer, that every act of seeing is also an act of not seeing in this show obsessed with the dramaturgical staging of reality. The process of ironic focalizing indicts us, then, for that which we all choose not to see going on in the world around us.

How Quality Handled the Stage

The Wire is far from the only TV show indicting its viewers for the "real world" baggage we carry with us as we watch. As I've demonstrated in previous chapters, these Prestige series owe great debts to those that came before. Prestige's most important forerunner is Quality. Of all

¹¹² The scenes overall are focalized through McNulty and Poot, but, as I've noted, the individual camera set-ups allow for shifts in perspectives that complicate the narrative. That said, we do not find ourselves fully in Daniel's POV the way we do with Bodie's. Perhaps his connection to the higher-ups, as it were, separates him from the moment. He cannot claim to be merely carrying out orders, as he is part of the command chain that hands them out.

Quality-era antecedents, Stephen Bochco and Michael Kozoll's *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) is arguably *The Wire*'s most important predecessor. *Hill Street* was spoken of in its own time (as well as even today) in the same near-reverent tones as *The Wire* has been. It is seen "as a milestone in American series programming, a marker of a place where (program) quality won out over (viewer) quantity" (Deming 2). Caren J Deming even seems to lay the critical groundwork for what I term The Watcher by applying a narratological lens to her contemporaneous reading of *Hill Street*, observing how

in *Hill Street Blues*, the implied author is apparent in the many devices used to call attention to the medium. Abrupt editing and temporal discontinuity, for example, give the viewer a sense of being led through the narrative by an omnipresent (though not omniscient) camera eye. Frequent use of handheld camera shots and occasional use of rolled focus call attention to the medium, reminding viewers that they are experiencing art and, thereby, establishing aesthetic distance. (Deming 3)

Though it will take the cultural developments that lead to Prestige to suggest connections between "real world" and "fictive world," Deming's Implied Author oscillates our attentions back and forth between *Hill Street* as entertainment and *Hill Street* as rhetorical comment on televisuality. I extend Deming's Implied Author into The Watcher because of the ways Prestige aesthetics, on full display in *The Wire*, seem to transform the real audience into the implied audience and back again as they oscillate and meld. This is the key difference between Quality and Prestige that *Hill Street* demonstrates: Quality TV was created in response to television tradition that did not present itself as reflexively commenting on its place in that tradition and the viewer's relationship with both tradition and program like Prestige does. Like Quality TV more

generally, *Hill Street*'s aesthetic complexity focuses squarely on its own present instead of keeping an eye toward the past and the future.

The moves *Hill Street* makes towards aesthetic complexity, though, have made profound ripples in the fabric of Prestige programming that cannot be underestimated. In a move that presages the generic work done on both *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* to reposition melodrama, *Hill Street* staged:

the classically melodramatic battle between order and chaos takes place on three interactive levels: on the societal level (where evil is violent crime or political corruptions), on the interpersonal level (where evil is behavior that undermines the goals of the group), and on the personal level (where evil is insanity or less total personal disintegration, failure to cope) ... Melodrama is essentially a modernist form, an artistic response to the shattering of myth and the loss of tragic vision ... Having abandoned the likelihood of the absolute triumph of virtue, melodrama rehearses the confrontation with its enemies (labeled as villains), expunging them over and over again. (Deming 6)

The Quality show embraced the excess usually located within melodrama narrative and invested it in the show's visual rhetoric instead. It is an aesthetic of excess where, "the density of action is matched by dense visual and aural texture and overall naturalism of style" that builds to an "intensity of affect [that] is consistent with the melodramatic form and with the density of its treatment, [thus] the narrative achieves verisimilitude. In other words, the excesses of style and content are acceptable under artistic terms set up by the narrative" (Deming 8). The series, much like *The Wire*'s manufactured verisimilitude, appears so *realistic* because of all the excess of effort that goes into constructing such a specific and complex aesthetic.

This balance between a reflexively constructed commentary on televisuality and a genre-based desire to ape a sort of journalistic objectivity drives both *Hill Street* and *The Wire*. David Barker's distinction between verisimilitude and realism with regards to *Hill Street* is helpful here. He prefers verisimilitude to realism because the term seems not only "less value laden but [also] because, by definition ('real-seeming'), it implies the notion of 'work' as well" (Barker 42). Calling these artistic texts realistic elides the effort put into making them seem like reality, when "all forms of television representation, verisimilitude included, are constructed and involve the active participation of both encoder and decoder" in the meaning making process (Barker 43). American televisuality seems predisposed to this verisimilitude thanks to the ways our "culture (or, at least, culture expressed as a reflection of dominant ideology) implies that visual narratives as news or documentary are accurate representations of reality" (Barker 47). This leads to a preference for, and valuing of, supposed realism in even fictive broadcasts, because our culture and this particular medium have developed together in such a way that the semblance of reality in art appears natural, appears to be a sort of default style. Works that seem most like this Zero-Degree style default this seem supposedly more credible to audiences.

However, this zero-degree realism also elides the artists who work hard to construct it. In embracing an expanded idea of melodrama, *Hill Street* and *The Wire* give their realisms weight backed up by stylistic flourishes that keep the work of the show's crew at the forefront. Of *Hill Street* in particular, David Barker notes that, "while still remaining grounded in the structure of melodrama common to many of television's narrative forms ... *Hill Street Blues*' interweaving of numerous plot lines and their often elliptic closure demands not a piecemeal but holistic knowledge of the series' text" (Barker 49). In other words, the show's visual rhetoric is informed by the rhetorical demands of its narrative structure, and an understanding of both together is what

leads to meaning making for viewers (or decoders, in Barker's terminology). What melodrama affords realism is a multiplicity of narrative perspectives, the open-ended nature of the genre refusing the firmly situated power dynamics of more journalistic genres. The power of the two generic paradigms combined as they are in *Hill Street* (and *The Wire*) marks Quality (and thus also Prestige) aesthetics as so transformative. As Barker writes of *Hill Street*, it is

the multiplicity of spectator positionings embedded within television's cumulative text in large part [that] is what makes it so remarkably rich and complex. Not only do the position within any given segment of the text allow numerous decodings, but over the course of, say 30 minutes, the range of positionings will themselves change. (Barker 52)

In other words, the manufactured verisimilitude on display in these series takes advantage of melodrama's polyvocal structure and realism's relatability to create numerous and varied opportunities for viewers to identify and empathize with a wide range of personalities.

With *Hill Street*, this manufactured verisimilitude helped audiences reimagine what America could look like on screen. The sense that the supposed realism viewers see could open our eyes to the range of perspectives not usually found in traditional televisuality means, for scholar Thomas H Zynda, that *Hill Street*'s manufactured verisimilitude

serves an unacknowledged vision, of police and the inner city, as a metaphor of America since the traumatic realities of the 1970s. It is a figuration of the America that has called for a 'masculine' reassertion of control and order, in politics and its representation in television drama, as against 'feminine' liberalism. (Zynda 102)

Zynda is not actually suggesting that *Hill Street* advocates for a regressive image of America, but rather he claims that the show uses manufactured verisimilitude to present a harrowing image of

what our national fears about the end of our industrial age are doing to our society. For Zynda, what *Hill Street* presents is not America as it really is but America as the 1980s feared it was:

In *Hill Street*, this broken down northern city defines the industrial age as America's past. Several decades ago this was the 'modern city' where movie gangsters machine gunned each other for the territory from which they extracted their fabulous wealth. *Hill Street* shows us this America as it looks to the imagination of the 1980s: decrepit and abandoned, devoid of wealth and of any economic activity, heaped with trash as if the whole 'modern' world had been worn out and thrown away. No longer the milieu where dreams of wealth, however misguided, can be pursued, it is now only the liability of the postmodern society, the 'outside' where are cast those, mainly black and Spanish poor, who do not belong in the newly constructed energy-information economy that has moved America and its wealth to Houston, Phoenix, and Silicon Valley. (Zynda 103)

According to Zynda, in this new American imaginary,

crime on the Hill comprises a routine terror of random hold-ups, mugging, rapes, and murders. On the Hill, organized crime is hardly a possibility, for organized crime, like middle-class life, requires a stable, prosperous society and on the Hill, there are only individuals, some of whom are criminals and others victims. (Zynda 105)

Hill Street becomes, then, an extreme image of what might be the logical end of neoliberalism.

Though Zynda points to *Hill Street*'s relatively low rating as a sign that audiences did not respond as enthusiastically to such a cynical self-portrait as critics did, I would ask if his contemporaneous reading of the proto-Quality program doesn't also smack of his own fear of or discomfort with those outsiders populating the streets of *Hill*'s narrative reality. Much of Zynda's reading of the show relies on the idea that "middle-class ... stable, prosperous society"

is an ideal that ever really existed as such and that a “postmodern society” of mainly poor people of color is a dystopia not intimately bound up with and necessary for the lie of middle-class stability. If *Hill Street* doesn’t sell the connection between the poor urban reality and the prosperous exurban fantasy, then *The Wire* certainly does. The proto-Prestige series’ critical reception would suggest it’s been effective as such.

The Wire’s Critical Impact

Though the ways both *Hill Street* and *The Wire* try to speak truth to power would matter regardless of that critical reception, the lasting impact both shows have had broadly on American culture and specifically on American televisuality have been guided by the ways critics have responded to them. Zynda’s work has helped shaped *Hill Street*’s legacy. Likewise, work like Brian G Rose’s fascinating blend of scholarship and marketing in *The Essential HBO Reader* is determining how audiences coming to *The Wire* after its initial airing understand the show’s place in television history. Rose recognizes both the show’s revolutionary style and the fact that, like Zynda before him notes of *Hill Street*, scholars have responded more to David Simon’s Baltimore opus than contemporaneous audiences ever did. Rose believes that *The Wire* alienated viewers by being “a direct assault against that most venerable of TV genres, the cop show” (Rose 82). Though he misreads as “filmic” the show’s radical engagement with specifically televisual innovation,¹¹³ Rose is correct that the show refuses to make “it easy for casual viewers to simply tune in and start watching the show” (Rose 87). His claim that the series “moves in distinctly un-television ways” is a byproduct of a failure in television scholarship at large; Rose acknowledges the unique nature of what, as I would say, *The Wire* accomplishes with the series, but he

¹¹³ *The Wire* is not simply a 60-hour movie, and insisting on reading it as filmic rather than televisual limits the scope of what it can really mean for American media.

doesn't yet have the vocabulary to describe it. Much like Richard Dienst sensed the changes happening on American television at the end of the Quality era but didn't yet have a way of properly naming those changes, those like Rose who insist on describing TV through film are simply trying to describe the *avant garde* of Prestige before critical consensus has settled on specifically televisual ways of describing these new affordances.

The Wire could never have existed as a movie, though, or as a novel, another legitimated medium so often cited to explain how this text works. Only the combination of verbal and visual presented over a long period of time allows for the sort of environment necessary to the many stories that make up *The Wire*. Like Alan Moore and David Gibbons *Watchmen* comics or Richard Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* *Ring Cycle* have come to embody texts that resist translation across media, so too is *The Wire* a specifically televisual story. When critics like Rose, willfully or not, insist on translating the show's visual rhetoric into film's motifs and paradigms, they miss the point. They sever what is arguably one of the most important cultural artifacts of the early 21st century from its mass-media roots, ignoring what the show tries to say about the supposedly populist implications of television, and what consuming a text obsessed with the failures of American exceptionalism and neo-imperialist policy through the most ubiquitous of American commercial entertainment media implies, says, and does to, for, and about contemporary American culture.

This is not to imply *The Wire* exists in a vacuum distinct from any other media. Far from it. As Erlend Lavik notes, the show uses references and allusions to other popular culture artifacts in order to structure the sense that its manufactured verisimilitude is cotemporaneous or co-extant with our reality as viewers and consumers of a wide range of media. Unlike the sorts of postmodern referential pastiche found in works by artists like Quentin Tarantino, Lavik points

out that *The Wire* puts a twist on this postmodern tradition and the academic scholarship such art inspires:

The type of intertextuality that very much predominates on *The Wire* is grounded in the private or local sphere. Since they do not refer to preexisting media texts they do not act as pats on the back of pop-culture aficionados. Nevertheless, they have been frequently mentioned in secondary texts about the series, or internet forums, in feature articles and interviews. Thus the function of the numerous behind-the-scenes cameos and amateur performers playing version of themselves is in one sense actually somewhat similar to that of typically postmodern references: the information serves as trivia that separates those in the know from the rest, and lends the series a ludic spot-the-reference quality. (Lavik 60-61)¹¹⁴

Though I disagree with Lavik's assertions that *The Wire* "exhibits none of the narrative and stylistic playfulness of other contemporary TV series" (Lavik 53), he hits the mark when he notes that "meticulous construction is required to create such a convincing appearance of non-constructedness" (Lavik 55). The show's positioning of its manufactured verisimilitude within a world populated with references to other media lends the show a certain gravity that anchors the series in something outside its own text (Lavik 61). *The Wire*'s references to work beyond its frame reinforce the connection between the show's reality and our own viewing reality.

I would argue that one of the things that makes Prestige TV special, and something *The Wire* excels at, is the way these shows remind viewers of our relationship to TV thanks to the sense of a world outside their own texts. On *The Wire*, this sense is often transmitted through the

¹¹⁴ Here I would like to remind you of the show's clever casting choices: having men like Melvin Williams play characters so different to their real-world reputations, as well as having Baltimore figures like Felicia "Snoop" Pearson play a dramatized version of herself on the show.

way characters pause their participation in the show's central storylines to consume media on their own time. As Hua Hsu puts it, these pauses allow characters the free time to watch television [themselves] and then, on our behalf, discern between the harsh realities of their lives and a 'bullshit,' technology-wonderland fantasy of policing" we see in more typical police procedurals (Hsu 512). These leisure moments foster "an awareness of the proximity between imagined worlds and ours, a visualization of one plane colliding with another" (Hsu 513).¹¹⁵ I call this the oscillation between the frame and what surrounds it. That *The Wire* introduces a sense of leisure time for its characters (though it very rarely ever depicts this time) creates an echo for the viewer who is perhaps consuming the show in her own leisure time. This bond reinforces the idea that the series is "realistic," and in turn reinforces the idea that we viewers are complicit in the critiques it is making since we share so much in common with the fiction inside the frame. Hsu brings up a variation on this when noting that,

by simultaneously reinforcing the uniqueness of Baltimore and allowing us some affective response, be it pride, despair, or maybe a weary pang of nostalgia, *The Wire* situates us as more than just tourists or voyeurs. It is a map we begin to visualize – but it is also a map that begins to implicate us. (Hsu 514)

For Hsu, we are implicated in the pernicious cycle of capitalism's abuse and misuse of labor time. In the tacit acknowledgement of a character's leisure time off-screen and an intense focus on the tedium of the minutiae of work time, the show reveals that, "just as there is no exit from the spatial reality of Baltimore, there are no moments when the characters are not somehow implicated in some form of labor hierarchy. Nobody is actually in charge. It is a perpetual state of unfreedom" (Hsu 519). The show itself seems to underscore this point when Lester Freamon

¹¹⁵ *The Good Wife* accomplishes something similar through its digitally animated insert shots.

admonishes Jimmy McNulty that he won't find salvation in the job in S03E09. The implication is that McNulty has poured too much of himself into work time at the expense of any sort of leisure time, though Hsu convincingly argues that the show inextricably links the two to suggest that not even leisure time could save someone trapped in the neoliberal and neoimperialist hegemony of late industrial American capitalism.

This sense, that *The Wire*'s version of Baltimore is somehow caught perpetually within this tension between participating in versus representing such hegemonic power structure is built into the show's aesthetic. Galen Wilson's work with the series strikes at the heart of this tension:

While the series attempts to honestly represent the lives of marginalized segments of Baltimore society, one cannot ignore the class dynamics of such representation. *The Wire* is, after all, a show created and written predominantly by writers from a white middle-class background, and, distributed via HBO and DVD, is ultimately consumed by a similarly privileged audience. (Wilson 60)

The series attempts to mitigate and mediate this privilege, however, through its own relationship to the act of re/presentation, or "to put it another way, an anxiety of representations [is] evident within the series, and this anxiety is responded to by the show's creators via a strategy of self-reflexivity" (Wilson 70). Since "with modes of cinematic realism comes the threat that the Subjects of representation become Objects for the consumption of the observers[, thus then realism], if uncritical, can become poverty porn at best, another means of controlling the underclass at worst" (Wilson 71). This is a risk every artist runs when attempting to create within the affordances of "naturalism" or "realism." Particular if the artist seeks to depict a world beyond their own specific lived experience. If not careful, the artist risks reifying the oppression of the already marginalized by fetishizing stereotypes of oppression.

I believe that *The Watcher* pushes back on this risk and instead uses *The Wire* to depict “a classed power dynamic implied by such forms of representation that suggest it is ultimately impossible for the privileged members of the institutions to truly grasp the experience of underclass life” (Wilson 72). Those that would consume the underclass cannot ever really understand the peoples they objectify, because they can never see themselves in that objectified Other. A gulf exists between consumer and consumed that can only be crossed through recognition and understanding of the Other as Another with a complex interiority beyond the Consumer-Subject’s own “I.” Seeing another without objectification necessitates recognizing simultaneously that she is separate from one’s self but also similar. As the show’s casting choices underscore, *The Wire* asks viewers to see its characters as individual with complex interiority independent of any enjoyment we might take in following their stories. This is the point of *The Wire*’s manufactured verisimilitude, which finds viewers seeing characters as more than mere diverting fictions and instead as analogously “real” beings who can help us see more in our own worlds. There is, in the clinically distanced surveillance motif of manufactured verisimilitude, a sort of protective buffer where the Object resists, residing instead in its status as different yet relatable. The Baltimore underclass, then, cannot be co-opted and subsumed into the privileged status quo of a disinterested privileged audience. They refuse to be codified and fitted into that larger hegemonic pattern, and *The Wire*’s visual rhetoric allows for such resistance.

Such resistance might be dubbed, in fact has been by some critics, Utopian thinking. Fredric Jameson is one such critic. He situates realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode at the edges of Utopianism, writing of *The Wire* in particular that it

not only offers a representation of collective dynamics (on both sides) but also one of work and productivity, of praxis. In both instances, then, there is at work a virtual

Utopianism, a Utopian impulse, even though that somewhat different thing, the Utopian project or program, has yet to declare itself. (Jameson 364)

Within the show's manufactured verisimilitude, according to Jameson, lurks a sort of subterfuge, a current hidden within the show's aesthetic that believes that the re/presentation of the realistic can itself invoke Utopia. He claims that realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode is failing our society, because we are running out of fuel for the engines of melodrama that incites the realistic: to describe the ills of a particular society is an act of hope that the description itself might provide a way to redeem that society, and this hope is at the heart of melodrama's obsession with good and evil. For Jameson:

We therefore have here two converging problems: one the one hand, the repetition of the older melodramatic plot form becomes more and more tiresome, and more difficult to sustain. On the other, the raw material or content for such a practice of form is becoming unidimensionalized: evil is vanishing socially, villains are few and far between, everybody is alike. The Utopian writers already had a problem with the possibility of literature in their perfect world; now we have a problem with it in our imperfect one. (Jameson 368)

Which is to say, for realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode, there are no new things under the sun. We are reaching the limits of what is possible to re/present. Jameson suggests that the specificity of realism, that sense of particularity of place, is being eroded through overuse.

This is intimately tied to globalization and the de-exoticization of the world that results from the spread of industrial capitalism. If there are no more stories to tell, because there are no more villains to conquer, then there cannot be a Utopia, a no-where, anymore. For Jameson, then, it is the moments of fantasy, the non-realistic, that provide the reformer hope in *The Wire*.

Here he refers to the more outlandish schemes of characters or plot points on the show: Frank Sobatka's season two dream of a revitalized Port of Baltimore; former detective now teacher Roland Pryzbylewski's season four hopes for his class of downtown eighth-graders balancing between the innocence of childhood and the dangers of adulthood in the city; or (most obviously) Detective McNulty's season five "serial killer" fraud meant to garner funding for the "real police" work of catching drug lord Marlo Stanfield. We are left, then, with the sense that

the future and future history have broken open both high- and mass-cultural narratives in the form of dystopian Science Fiction and future catastrophe narratives. But in *The Wire*, exceptionally, it is the Utopian future that here and there breaks through, before reality and the present again close it down. (Jameson 372)

Even as realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode erodes specificity of place, *The Wire* is able to tap into the optimistic potential within its manufactured verisimilitude to suggest that we, that our world, can become better. Its hyper-focus on Baltimore's "present" is all in the service of a brighter future.

Some of this hyper-focus also stems from the sentimental attachment David Simon clearly feels for the city. His love for the town and its inhabitants provides another lens through which to read *The Wire*'s realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode. As Jessica R. Valdez notes, the show's use of realism retains the individualism of person and place [that so worries Jameson], even as these figures represent something more than themselves in the fictional space of the show ... The show holds onto a sentimental mode deeply tied to the local as a means to resist the hegemonic influence of global capitalism. (Valdez 195)

Simon and his team's sentimental attachment to Baltimore as a specific place allows the "reality" created on screen to function as both signifier of social ills writ large and as signs of a particular place and time. I would argue that this is the power and possibility found in melodrama, as a

generic form too readily dismissed by critics as somehow not serious enough to handle the most important social truths of “realism.” It is not just because they are aesthetically realistic that characters and places can be both sign and signifier. If, as Valdez claims, “*The Wire*’s realism responds to capitalist exchangeability through realist typicality [, and] characters are ‘typical’ in the sense that they suggest something more than themselves[,] but are also not simply subject to substitution,” I argue that it is melodrama’s open-ended narratives of the *Heimlich* that allows for the sentimentality that Valdez believes unites sign and signifier (Valdez 198).¹¹⁶ It is a *pathos* relationship that creates an *ethos* relationship between viewer and viewed.

Emotional reactions inspiring moral responses seem to be an integral feature of melodrama. At the heart of the genre’s 21st century, serialized-drama incarnation rests a focus on moral behaviors:

Melodrama is the way a mega-melodramatic popular culture reassures itself that we – good folks, the blue avatar – are good and those who threaten us are evil. It is not necessarily a drama of the defeat of evil by good but the all-important recognition of a good or evil that was previously obscure. (Williams 524)

Within this paradigm, for this image of American society filtered through the genre affordances of melodrama, nostalgia is crucial, yes, but so too is that sense of hope Jameson identifies. The perpetual present of melodrama craves the rosy glow of a fondly remembered past (nostalgia)

¹¹⁶ Valdez also highlights an excellent example of *The Wire* noticing an important detail that is otherwise left without comment by the narrative of the show. In the third season, we often visit Stringer Bell’s copy shop, though we only see it as a single storefront via surveillance footage. Valdez notes that in S03E12,

Stringer walks away from Copy Cat Copies and the camera pans out. We see a building labelled Broadway Market in the background. Suddenly, anyone with even a superficial knowledge of the city realizes that this drug front is located in one of the wealthiest and trendiest neighborhoods in Baltimore: Fells Point. This visual cue changes the meaning of Stringer Bell’s business: He is no longer in West Baltimore but in south-eastern Baltimore. The juxtaposition highlights the interconnections within the city, the extent to which *The Wire* is not just about West Baltimore but also about the city as a whole. The sign challenges viewer’s notions of a city fully divided by race and income levels and demonstrates the implications of the West Baltimore drug trade for the larger city. (Valdez 197)

and the bright halo of a potentially positive future (hope) to survive the negative imbalance of the present (realism). In television (as opposed to filmic melodrama), this temporal state used to be associated only with daytime soap operas, hence much of the classist and misogynistic dismissals of melodrama by academics. Linda Williams notes, though, that

in roughly, the same twenty-year period that the action blockbuster has gone increasingly vertical in its utilization of space, television has gone increasingly horizontal in its utilization of time, expanding narrative flows, borrowing important qualities from the greater liveness of news and reality shows and, of course, the soap opera, which used to move at a pace almost as slow as, and in parallel to, the duration of 'life itself.' Those unending day-time melodramas, once aimed primarily at women, are now gradually dying off, but their DNA seems to have been passed on to melodramatic serial dramas, with the difference that the appeal is no longer primarily to women and that these stories can eventually come to an end. (Williams 531).

Which is to say, 21st century television melodrama borrows affordances from other, more-legitimated genres to synthesize a new way of envisioning duration that pushes back against the ways the genre has been previously classed and gendered so as to be dismissible to critics wrapped up in such legitimization games.

This synthesized melodrama changes how we see our relationship to these temporal questions. It repositions us viewers in relationship to the past, present, and future which so obsesses realism. Williams continues:

Serial television [this new 21st century melodrama], by virtue of its sheer ongoingness, encourages us to recognize this quality of time as that which does not coincide with space [thus distinct from realism's hyper-focus on place]. Its motion toward an often uncharted,

as yet unscripted future, along with its ability to evoke and for viewer to remember ...

long swathes of an accumulated past, invites us to live more vividly in the materiality of duration. (Williams 533).

The long, slow, 60-hour story of *The Wire* embodies this melodramatic materiality of duration.

Though David Simon actually resists the term, like many of the TV critics Williams takes to task for only seeing in soaps histrionics and finding no “real” value there, *The Wire* is the example *par excellence* of contemporary serial melodrama. As Williams notes, “it is the recognition of virtue and villainy, not the foiling of evil and triumph of good that is [melodrama’s] essence.

Indeed, *The Wire* does not denigrate melodrama, only its more obvious archaic forms. The series is, in fact, a reinvention of a newer, better melodrama capable of incorporating larger swathes of realism” (Williams 535). In the end, “the undeniable innovation of *The Wire* is its effort to tell a melodramatic story at the level of social and political institutions that have failed justice.

Seriality enables a new energy for establishing the ‘good’ of justice” (Williams 540). Whether Simon owns “melodrama” as a term or not, *The Wire* carefully crafts a world designed to interrogate the ways those institutions have failed justice in Baltimore and beyond.

The brilliance, though, of *The Wire* as *gesamtkunstwerk* is the way every aspect of the show’s construction works towards the hopeful progressivism of its manufactured verisimilitude. We follow it in the show’s storylines, see it in its cinematography, and even hear it in the sound design. As Robert Walker notes, *The Wire* spends as much energy constructing a sonic version of Baltimore as manipulated and manufactured to echo reality as the show’s *verité* images are. Most critics are content just to note the series’ (general) lack of non-diegetic musical accompaniments as an example of Simon *et al*’s commitment to realism. Walker, though, extends the underlying

argument and points out how crew members like Jan Ralston and Andy Kris¹¹⁷ build up sound effects to replace the more obvious musical cues used to guide viewers' emotional engagement on more traditional television:

It is clear that directly communicating emotion is more straightforward with music than sound effects. However, there is an important distinction when sound effects occupy the space left by music. These sounds have multiple independent causal relationships and sources (the drivers in the cars of distant traffic are not aware of the police radio which has no bearing on the barking dog), which makes them seem as though they are unstructured. Although these sounds may have been purposefully designed to create a sense of the moment, a mood or an emotion, their authorial intent is disguised because they are plausibly sited in the onscreen world. By contrast, the musical montage sequences, at the end of each season, stand out in sharp relief, removed as they are from the diegesis. This serves to remind the audience that this is a fiction, controlled from outside of the story world by its authors. (Walker 47)

The montages remind viewers/listeners of the manufactured nature of the story, even while its creators take great pains to disguise most of their work through an “un-scored score.”

If, as with Linda Williams' assertions about genre, David Simon insists *The Wire* uses no score, Walker instead argues that “the instruments are sound effect, snatches of dialogue, and ambient background; the composers of this score are the post-production sound team” (Walker 49). There is great labor involved with obscuring an authorial voice from such composed sound; Walker writes, “it requires a great deal of post-production manipulation to achieve an audio

¹¹⁷ Members of the show sound design team. Ralston was supervising sound editor, and Kris was the re-recording mixer.

aesthetic which makes it technical apparatus appear largely transparent” (Walker 50). Such labor actually manufactures an aesthetic of ugliness, as Ralston points out to Walker. She describes her technical process as going

through a scene, [finding] the worst-sounding lines of dialogue in it and then [going] through and [making] the rest of the scene sound as bad as that. Because a consistently bad-sounding scene is less distracting to the ear than a scene that goes from crystal clear to suddenly noisy and back. (Walker 51)

Perhaps much of what is hailed as gritty realism in the series can be traced back to this sort of consistently bad-sounding aesthetic and the subtle ways it influences the pathos of the series. The show’s sound design certainly plays a significant role in the pathetic relationship between the audience and *The Wire* and the aesthetic modes this metaphor represents.

With *The Wire*, *The Watcher* builds a simulacrum of Baltimore from the subtle accretion of aesthetic choices. *The Watcher* manipulates our emotional responses to this painstakingly crafted version of reality through these subtleties. The subtlety of this manufactured verisimilitude, then, allows these moments where the series explores the obviously unrealistic to stand out productively. Ralston discusses the motivations behind arguably the most stylistically jarring moments of the series, the uncomfortable intersections of diegetic and non-diegetic sound elements within the motif of surveillance technology established in the pilot. She recalls:

The biggest discussion I can recall about the way to approach sound stylistically was with the surveillance photography: Normal state of things – the show is in color, the sound is 5.1.¹¹⁸ We go into the POV of the telephoto surveillance SLR camera and the perspective of the sound pulls back in distance to match it and folds in a little to mimic the tunnel

¹¹⁸ This refers to the Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound format used for broadcast after season one and for all DVD releases.

vision effect. The camera CLICKS off a photo and the action freezes in black and white for half a second, all the specific sounds drop off and only a mono air tone remains. That was the road map we made in Season 1 for the photos. (Walker 54)

Walker then interjects to note that “here the use of a mono ‘moment’ has allowed the suspension of time - the atmosphere present in all of the speakers is removed because time has stopped for the moment of the snapshot,” a most un-realistic and ostentatious manipulation of realism-as-an-aesthetic-mode (Walker 55). This balance between seeming real while representing the impossible allows *The Wire*, as a total work of art filtered through The Watcher’s metaphorical manipulations, to draw audiences into its manufactured verisimilitude.

It Took A Lot of Work to Make This Look So Real

Of all the series I’ve discussed, the makers of *The Wire* have been the most explicit about the goal of changing society through their art. Simon, Colesbury, Briesewitz and the rest have sought to restage a version of an American city struggling to overcome corruption. To break down not only how the institutions of power in Baltimore are corrupt by how they came to be corrupted, these artists rely on an aesthetic I’ve termed manufactured verisimilitude. They have used artistry and craft to restage reality for viewers, allowing the productive tension between finely honed artifice and cultural authenticity to teach viewers how to see their city in a new light. Through *The Wire*’s manufactured verisimilitude, The Watcher has also taught us viewers how to see televisuality itself in a new light.

6. Conclusion

That Wasn't What We Expected

It might seem foolish to believe that something as seemingly trivial as watching TV could, as I claim in my introduction, have the potential to change “the tangible lives” of real people, but the ubiquity of the television machine imparts real social power. Fear of that power has long shaped both the TV industry and the work of its critics. From racist industry lore to “lowest common denominator” programming strategies, American TV history is filled with example of how the medium’s power has been used to pacify, placate, and propagandize audiences. That is merely one facet of American TV history, though, and a facet that denies the ways many people throughout this history have sought something more from the medium. As long as we have had TV, we have also had people trying to use its power to improve the world instead of just control it. For the early part of the 21st century, Prestige TV has been arguably the most significant site of this improving project.

I have argued that this project is revealed to us through cinematography using an embodied metaphor I call The Watcher. Through it, we viewers are reminded that actual material bodies lay beneath all of the theory and language, verbal and visual, used to discuss power. The prestigious is built upon real human experience, and our conceptions about Prestige TV correspond to our conceptions about real people. There are consequences to our cultural categories, and The Watcher seeks to teach us this. As a metaphor for how the camera functions within Prestige as a genre, The Watcher is also a stand-in for the real, and imagined, audiences

implied by all of the creative rhetorical choices made by Prestige TV artisans. It bridges the gap between audience and artisan and challenges us all to think more carefully about what television can mean for our shared American experiment.

I have argued that *The Watcher* redirects our attention as viewers, pointing our gaze toward the sort of figures more typically marginalized by our media culture. This cinematography re-centers attention in order to challenge viewers to see Otherness differently, to see the Other at all. This focus on the people pushed to the edges of power in American is why I have emphasized *The Watcher* as a presence itself. It has been a person-ified act of vision describing how Prestige TV cameras capture images. Positioning the genre's cinematographic techniques as an anthropomorphic metaphor for seeing allows me to reinforce the significance of real, live human experience behind and beyond the camera. It likewise embodies the complex social relationships created through that camera. In the "hands" of this metaphor, Prestige cinematography embraces the persuasive rhetorical potential of television as a ubiquitous mass medium in America.

The End of an Era

Artists and critics alike have a tendency to recognize this rhetorical potential in waves. A sort of eternal return seems ingrained in television as an industry. As Timothy Havens and Amanda D. Lotz remind us, media "experience similar cycles in which a new trend becomes successful, the trend is replicated many times, the audience tired of the trend, and a new trend replaces the old one, following the same pattern of replication and burnout" (Havens and Lotz 157). When such trends coalesce around a philosophical goal, the trend tends to be recognized as a "hallowed" era. TV executive John Landgraf puts it eloquently, writing:

Once in a while, conditions arise in which artists find themselves with the institutional support to be truly brave, to resolutely follow their muses in the pursuit of truth and beauty. These tend to be eras in which new ideas and insurgent institutions are rising – times when we are emboldened to follow the bravest explorers as our tastes change. As economic competitors rush to meet a new demand, artists may find themselves, for a while, with the financial support to hold fast to their highest aspirations. We call these hallowed periods “Golden Ages.” (Lotz *Disrupt* ix)

The Prestige era has been one such Golden Age. But, just as for its predecessors like Quality, so, too, has the era of Prestige now come to an end. Running roughly contemporaneously with the aughts and teens of the 21st century, the industrial factors that arouse to make it possible have now changed significantly enough to once again transform the American television landscape. Figures like Landgraf and Amanda Lotz locate the source of this change in the rise of digital streaming and the internet as a television delivery method. Of their impact on our most recent TV Golden Age, Landgraf remarks:

Despite some excellent programming contributions made by these new streaming services, what we are witnessing is the transition from our precious Golden Age into an overheated economic bubble. TV series, once again led by HBO with their excellent, epic *Game of Thrones*, have now become the primary weapon in a war for global domination for subscribers and internet users. And, unfortunately, though weapons can sometimes be quite beautiful, they tend to be something other than art. Those whose first goal is scale or profit do not rate the artist’s search for truth and beauty as their highest priority (even though they might admire it). (Lotz *Disrupt* xi)

The very industrial forces that birthed *Prestige* are no co-opting its affordances to once again centralize control amongst a few powerful corporate bodies.

Hence the urgency to understand the rhetorical gestures made during the *Prestige* era before the industry moves on to the next big, new trend. In this work, I have traced out how some of *Prestige*'s affordances manifest visually. Though the rhetorical gestures made by individual series vary, taken as a collective body we see a camera interrogating who in America has access to power, to authority, and, most importantly, to justice. As other series airing outside of a *Prestige* paradigm¹¹⁹ reaffirm tropes, techniques, and people traditionally centered on American TV, the more niche programming of *Prestige* literally refocus our viewing attention to look at our cultural world differently.

Previously on “The Watcher”

I began by demonstrating a critical genealogy informing who the ideal/idealized *Prestige* TV viewer is. From Guy Debord's emancipated worker-viewer, on through to Richard Dienst's Quality-era sense that the viewer must find a way to be no longer alienated from her political life as a media consumer, to Marshall McLuhan's visions of a “student of media” educated in how technologies reshape humanity, our *Prestige* viewer has been asked to consider the relationship

¹¹⁹ As noted in previous chapters, *Prestige* programming may have dominated talk about TV, but more traditional programming still dominated the airwaves in terms of how many viewers tuned in to watch those shows. Be it the “copaganda” of Dick Wolf's crime empire on NBC or the decades of ratings dominance by CBS's *NCIS* dynasty, traditional versions of genres like the police procedural ran concurrently with the revisionist *Prestige* takes like I discuss in this book. It does a great disservice to the hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals who worked hard on these traditional shows to dismiss them out of hand for not following the same philosophical trajectory as their *Prestige* cousins. Though some admittedly reified extant power structures because their makers themselves enjoyed working from the privileged positions of power represented within their shows, many (if not most) more typical programming simply aimed for different targets than *The Watcher*. I am very much of the mind that all cultural production is worthy of attention, if for no other reason than its existence says something about the culture that produced it. Similarly, just because a series falls outside of the purview of the specific generic era discussed in this piece doesn't mean said show isn't accomplishing good work, artistically or politically. It is simply waiting for another opportunity to reveal itself to us emancipated, no-longer-politically-alienated, worker-viewers.

between her literal gazing and our wider metaphorical seeing. In examining that relationship, she learns the skills necessary to being to surveil anew our American televisual landscapes.

When *The Watcher*, my pedagogical metaphor of Prestige cinematography, turns our viewer's attention toward specific works of art, it highlights different techniques across different shows. The various highlighted techniques then accrete into a fuller picture of a Prestige curriculum. Hopefully by now, the organizing structure of my project has become apparent. I have sought to guide you, my reader, through this curriculum by showcasing how learning to read one set of motifs build on and increases your understanding of another, starting with more overt moves and progressing into the more subtle.

With *Breaking Bad*, *The Watcher* trains our visions using the hyperstylized camerawork on this series as an entry point. The ostentation of *Breaking Bad*'s Style Bible draws attention to how cinematography makes meaning. It is easy for even the untrained eye to notice such visual fireworks. *The Watcher*'s trick, however, is using such bombast to ask us viewers to also see subtleties. The drama of the cinematography draws our eyes to the figures elided by the drama of the plot. *The Watcher* teaches us how to see the people *Breaking Bad*'s protagonists ignore.

With *Orange Is The New Black*, *The Watcher* subverts our expectation by subverting genre norms. After showing us how to follow the camera, here *The Watcher* shows us how to reinterpret the kinds of visual tropes that have become so associated with specific genre types as to become clichés. It then uses those clichés ironically to re-center stories about women of circumstance who so rarely find themselves in the spotlight of traditional television storylines. We viewers have learned to look at classic televisuality from a new angle.

Having asked us to make room for Others on our TVs with *Breaking Bad* and OITNB, *The Watcher* dares to move into some truly revolutionary territory with *The Good Wife*.

Deploying some of the strangest¹²⁰ and most disarming tactics in its educational stockpile, *The Watcher* manages to find a way to situate us home viewers within the filmic reality of this series. These moments of direct address and the impossible insert shots still feel surreal, even to the now-trained Prestige viewer. However, once we combine these flagrant violations of traditional televisuality with *The Good Wife*'s empowering politics of inscrutability, we begin to see how Prestige cinematography might just change us and not simply change our perspective.

And it is changing us viewers at home that governs the moves *The Watcher* makes on *The Wire*. No longer content to let us see our own world from a different point-of-view, *The Watcher* challenges us to read in *The Wire*'s manufactured verisimilitude a method for us to affect change in our communities themselves. Here *The Watcher* seeks not just to teach but to inspire. In the culmination of its televisual lessons, *The Watcher* positions us viewers to look back out on our reality with the critical lens of the Prestige camera.

On Next Week's Episode...

Of course, the four series I've discussed here are not the only shows comprising Prestige's canon. Over the roughly 15 years of the era, numerous artists made contributions to the genre. I selected just the four shows discussed so far because of how clearly they demonstrate the rhetorical techniques I locate within Prestige's camerawork. *The Watcher*, as a metaphor and as a methodology, can be applied to other series as well. An obvious starting point for expanding conversation about *The Watcher*'s scope is the shows mentioned by critics I have cited already.

¹²⁰ Breaking the so-called "fourth wall" through direct address, as happens so frequently on *The Good Wife*, is still a shockingly rare occurrence in American film and television. It is so rare that seeing an actor make eye contact ("eye contact") with you through the screen remains a jarring experience. Screen actors are typically trained to avoid looking at the camera lens, because that gaze so violently disrupts a viewer's suspension of disbelief. That *The Good Wife* makes it a featured component of its house style is truly remarkable.

For example, many critics see this Golden Age beginning with subscription cable behemoth HBO's *The Sopranos*, which ran from January of 1999 through the summer of 2007. A crime drama built around the joke of a mobster in therapy, *The Sopranos* transformed American TV. It is an allegory of the dark side of the American Dream. A spiritual partner to that dark dream, basic cable powerhouse AMC's *Mad Men* is another oft-mentioned example of Prestige TV at its finest. Airing from the summer of 2007 through late spring of 2015, *Mad Men* gave audiences a peak inside an American dream factory, an advertising agency in the 1960s. The show also gave audiences a peak behind the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves and about our cultural history. On the Hulu digital streaming service, *The Handmaid's Tale* adaptation presented a dystopian fantasy nightmare of an America that allowed our traditional centers of power to fester and corrupt beyond recognition. The show originally ran from Spring of 2017 through the autumn of 2022.¹²¹ On broadcast giant NBC, an adaptation of *Friday Night Lights* aired from autumn of 2006 until the winter of 2011. Ostensibly a high school sports drama, the series was an intimate look at small-town American life. Any of these shows would provide excellent opportunities for extending the work of *The Watcher*.

I would argue, however, that *The Watcher* metaphor reaches its apotheosis in the USA Network series, *Mr. Robot*. The show had four short seasons,¹²² but what it accomplished in that limited span is truly impressive (and deserving of an extended, dedicated analysis in a project of its own beyond the scope of my work here). Sam Esmail's paranoid techno-thriller follows the exploits of a talented but troubled computer hacker named Elliot. Not only is the series focalized through his perspective, but Elliot is the show's literal narrator. His is also wildly unreliable as

¹²¹ Though there has been chatter about a proposed sixth season, it appears that the series has concluded its run with its original 56-episodes.

¹²² 45 episodes over the course of June, 2015, through December, 2019

such. Without spoiling here the joys of experiencing *Mr. Robot*'s narrative reveals, I will say that the way the series' cinematography combines with its storylines brings The Watcher as an embodied rhetorical presence to its zenith. The show deploys many of techniques I've discussed: hyperstylized *mise-en-scene*, genre trope play, literalized surveillance through screens, and moments of direct address that truly astound. If *The Wire* is the culmination of The Watcher's syllabus for viewers, *Mr. Robot* is that curriculum brought to life.

A Bright Future Awaits. Maybe. Certainly A Future Awaits.

It is fitting, then, that *Mr. Robot* would end its run around the same period *Prestige* would draw to a close. It is a phenomenal bookend for The Watcher as a metaphor guiding our understanding of a particular moment in American televisual history. The end of *Prestige* might signal the end of The Watcher, but it does not also signal the end of, as John Landgraf put it, the artist's search for truth and beauty. Even for the different shows running concurrently with but not part of the *Prestige* genre, the way the TV camera captures images will both reflect and inform how meaning is made. How, for example, does a reliance on hand-held camera rigs impact the visual rhetorics of docusoaps like Bravo's *Real Housewives* franchise? What does the use of proscenium-like stage sets and high-key lighting mean now for 21st century mass-market sitcoms like CBS' *The Big Bang Theory*? What are we to make of the house style of carious police procedurals in response to the impact *Prestige* revisionism had on the genre? Questions like these, and many more, await a new metaphor, their own Watchers, to resolve them.

Though people will continue to argue over the waves of trends that wash through the industry, I think we can all agree that there will be more cycles of Golden Ages to come. Right now, there are significant changes happening within the industry that will inevitably influence

the shape of future TV content. After the consolidation of executive control following “cord cutting” and the so-called “streaming wars,” which have marked the ascendancy of international conglomerates like Disney and Comcast, the industry was hit by another series of disruptions. The landscape of American TV has been shaped as much by work stoppages from the COVID-19 pandemic and strikes by multiple labor unions as by that corporate consolidation. In fact, these were all forces that brought Prestige to its end. They will also be the forces driving the new Golden Age to begin. Though I don’t want to hazard a guess at the shape this next wave will take, I cannot wait to watch it coalesce. And I cannot wait to discuss the new ways American TV makes meaning once it arrives.

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