# HOW DO WE WRITE ABOUT PERFORMANCE IN SERIAL TELEVISION?

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## ABSTRACT

Television studies has produced few sustained analyses of performance in serial television. Yet film studies scholarship has shown how attending to the integration of performances with other aspects of film style is crucial to the interpretation and appreciation of expression and meaning in filmed narrative fictions. However, as a particle form of filmed *serial* narrative, series television raises a number of questions about performance that will not necessarily be satisfyingly addressed by the direct adoption and application of approaches to writing about performance that have been honed in regard to film. How, then, do we write about performance in television serials in ways that recognise and accommodate the form's relationship to film, while at the same time appropriately acknowledging and responding to long-form television's serial status? To examine the difficulties and opportunities of approaching performance in serial television this way, the article conducts close readings of various pieces of television studies writing on performance, by scholars such as Jason Mittell, Sue Turnbull, George Toles, and Steven Peacock. Their work brings into view film and television's points of common relation, and the distinctive challenges, achievements, and rewards of appreciating the best television serials, and the performances in them.

## KEYWORD

Two related aspects of serial television viewing and criticism warrant my question. The first is the way our involvement in the best serial television is strongly keyed to the presence of particular performers over the periods and rhythms of time available to such shows. The second is the strange fact that the peculiar nature of that involvement is rarely a central subject of writing in television studies, and so an important aspect of what matters to us about serial television is going overlooked. If the need to address this question requires further justification, there is ample to be found in a certain strand of writing on acting and performance in film studies, exemplified by the work of scholars such as, among others, Charles Affron, Lesley Stern, George Kouvaros, Andrew Klevan, V. F. Perkins, George Toles, and Alex Clayton. The value of such writing is modelled well by Klevan's *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation*, which shows how attending closely to the presence and activity of individual performers is crucial to understanding and appreciating a range of filmmaking choices. For Klevan:

> interpretations mature when one responds to the performer's multifaceted relationships – not always prominent – to the surrounding dramatic environment. We may well be rewarded for concentrating on a performer as they *merely* turn a street corner, sit in a chair, touch a wall, move around a bedroom, or carry a bunch of flowers. . . . Interpretations unfold and complicate with our moment-by-moment experience of viewing the performer's activity. (2005: preface; original emphasis)

In light of such attention to film performance, this article examines how pieces of television studies criticism approach and handle performance in serial television drama. One aspect of what appears distinctive about acting and performance in serial dramas – especially ongoing ones – is not only the length of time that actors inhabit characters and that audiences are involved with them, but also the sense of a relatively 'open horizon' towards which such inhabitation and involvement each move, and the dense accumulation of fictional and narrational history upon which performances may come to draw (and that may, in turn, draw upon those performances). However, it is not my aim to present findings about instances of acting and performance in serial television as such. Instead, I follow Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan's attention to the 'language and style' of criticism (2011). For Clayton and Klevan – themselves following Adrian Martin (1992) – 'coming "to close terms" with

matters of style and language [in writing about film] will yield a sharper recognition of the "*action* of critical writing", and in turn, a stronger sense of the achievements and potential of film criticism' (2011: 2; original emphasis). In similarly looking at the '*action* of critical writing' in the pieces examined below, I hope to illuminate various hesitancies, difficulties, and successes in television studies work related to the criticism of acting and performance in serial television drama. This matters because, as outlined above, close attention to the work of actors, and to their integration within the narrative and style of individual series, should become of crucial importance to the burgeoning field of stylistic and aesthetic analysis in television studies. At the same time as we might call for more writing that pays such attention, it is just as important that we attend with close, critical scrutiny to the writing that we currently do have, and might wish to modify or emulate in future work.

As noted, there is a large body of film studies writing on performance and acting in movies, but the same cannot be said of television studies and serial television. This situation can be seen to follow from the younger discipline's historical tendency to direct its attention away from the style and achievements of individual shows. And, as Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock note, many studies of individual shows 'remain, for the most part, informed by approaches through which theory is mapped onto the television "text" to decipher its so-called coded meanings', and 'such work resists a dedicated and sustained scrutiny of television style, attempting to undertake "close textual analysis" without getting close to the text's integral compositional elements' (2013a: 2). This has implications for television studies' appreciation of performance in television fictions. These follow from Klevan's claim that performers should be considered a pivotal element of film style (2005). If television studies has historically been reticent about paying close attention to style in individual television programmes, then performance as an aspect of style will represent a particular corner of this wider neglect. As Jacobs notes, 'celebrity studies and accounts of style and narrative seem to bypass, somewhat hurriedly in embarrassment, what is I think for many viewers the primary aesthetic experience of television – fiction and non-fiction – which is the compelling presence of human beings in front of us' (2013: par. 2).

Such hesitancies and difficulties around this presence are on display throughout pieces of television studies writing that aim to give accounts of performance or characterisation in individual works of serial and series television. For example, Roberta Pearson explicitly advocates for inattention to the materiality of screen performance:

Television characters are to some extent autonomous beings; autonomous, that is, of the televisual codes and individual scenes/episodes that construct them, existing as a whole *only in the minds* of the producers and audience. . . . Anatomising the televisual character requires identifying the elements that constitute a character *abstracted from* the design of the text and existing in the story, that is, in the minds of producers and audiences, rather than conducting a close textual analysis of individual scenes/episodes/codes. (2007: 43; my emphasis)

It is of course the case that the significance or meaning of any particular characterisation in a television fiction – or a film fiction, for that matter – is in part a product of a viewer's involvement with it. As Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan note, 'more often than not [film] criticism emphasises those qualities that are discovered through an *imaginative engagement with the text,* and with each other (through dialogue, during teaching)' (2011: 5; my emphasis). But the imaginative component of this engagement is not of such importance that it elides the centrality of the material work, in response to which our imaginative engagement takes shape, and in regard to which our individual modes of involvement and response might find inter-subjective accord, or reasoned disagreement (Gibbs and Pye 2005: 3–5).

Pearson's position also seems at odds with the ontology of characters in film and television fictions altogether, which demands close attention to their material realisation in works of film and television. As Klevan writes:

Attending to the moment-by-moment movement of performers . . . enhances our understanding of film characterisation. It encourages us to attend to a character's physical and aural details and reminds us, because we are prone to forget in our literary moods, of their ontological particularity in the medium of film. A living human being embodies a film character. (2005: 7)

Forgetting this, as Pearson calls for television studies scholars to do, has serious implications for our capacity to appreciate individual works. This can be seen in the way Jason Mittell approaches television characters (and so therefore also the performers who embody them) as a 'specific *narrative* element' (2015: 118; my emphasis). This view of characterisation strongly shapes Mittell's account of a climactic sequence

in the eleventh, penultimate episode of the first season of *Homeland* (2010–), in which secretly bipolar CIA agent Carrie Matheson (Claire Danes) has a psychotic breakdown ("The Vest" 1.11). Mittell describes Carrie's breakdown only as 'Claire Danes's manic performance', and characterises its significance this way:

Our sustained allegiance through her breakdown marks Carrie's shift as a mid-level behavior change, rather than a high-level moral shift—Carrie is still motivated by noble ethics and consistent beliefs, even if her actions and attitudes differ radically from where she started the season, and we believe the shift to be temporary, anticipating her renewed stability following psychiatric treatment. (2015: 135)

By understanding characters as a 'narrative element', Mittell tends not to give close attention to Danes's qualities and activities as a performer, and so his writing distances us from how our sense of the scene is keyed to these crucial elements. The writing here favours ready-made conceptual categories, and as a result the particular quality, nature, and significance of what we see onscreen is too quickly and broadly determined and rigidly defined. Alex Clayton inadvertently describes the tendency exhibited by television studies writing such as Mittell's quoted above, when he contrasts two film studies essays on *His Girl Friday* (1940), one by David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, the other by Stanley Cavell. 'Problems result,' Clayton writes, 'from the way a ready taxonomy of terms . . . has been forged outside of and prior to any specific critical encounter and then *applied* as a descriptive vocabulary' (2011a: 32; original emphasis). The result is Mittell's reduction of the scene to a catalogue of categorical terms – 'mid-level behavior change', 'high-level moral shift'– all of which remain abstract, bereft of the particular weave of specific feelings and ideas that good performers unfold, and hold in tension, not only across a moment or a scene but throughout a work.

A brief account of the scene can illuminate what goes missing through approaches that forgo attention to the activity of its performers. Following her narrow survival of a terrorist bombing, Carrie's bipolar symptoms have begun to re-emerge. However, the tightening grip of Carrie's mania allows her to weave a narrative that points toward a (still obscure) terrorist motivation that suggests the attack she survived was merely the prelude to a more public and massively devastating event. This is a narrative Carrie literally pieces together out of colour-coded scraps of newspaper articles,

intelligence briefings, and other secret documents, separately insignificant shards that nearly cohere into something of clarifying meaning when her CIA mentor Saul (Mandy Patinkin) arranges them as a chronological mural on her private living room wall, a fragmentary history (at once global and personal) that promises some key to the mind of Carrie's terrorist nemesis. The sequence to which Mittell refers begins with Carrie inspecting her appearance in her bathroom mirror, applying makeup, putting in and removing earrings, and draping a scarf. This is in preparation to meet Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), the returned prisoner of war whom at the beginning of the season Carrie suspected of being a terrorist sleeper agent but with whom she has begun a love affair, and in whom she has confided the secret conspiracy that is (illicitly) pieced together on the living room wall. Expecting Brody at the door, Carrie opens it to find CIA assistant-director David Estes (David Harewood), who has been alerted to Carrie's manic behaviour by Brody. Estes enters the house with two security agents, and upon discovering the mural, orders it torn down to have its pieces secured at Langley while a distraught Carrie is forcibly restrained as her father and sister look on. As Carrie struggles, a mournful jazz piece replaces the diegetic sound, and the episode ends.

The summary 'manic performance', and the characterisation of our involvement in that performance in terms such as 'allegiance', does not satisfy the depths to be found in Danes's performance as Carrie, how it enriches not only our sense of the sequence itself but also of the series as a whole. As Estes and his men take down the mural, Danes's performance is extraordinary. Central to its force are the actress's extreme facial contortions, which pull, stretch, and compress her features in conflicting directions across her face. Claire Danes as Carrie typically presents a face of open beauty and sharp intelligence, usually just marked by a faintly furrowed brow in times of intent interior scrutiny of a puzzle, as when she conducts her own analysis of performance when placing Brody under surveillance in the season's early episodes. Here, though, everything is pushed out of shape, especially the mouth, the lower lip of which curls out and over the normally fine chin that, at the front of a jaw stretched taught, has now become a bulbous protrusion, the warped jutting of lip and chin creating deep troughs of shadow that elsewhere line the face below each cheek, breaking-up what is usually a pleasant unity. But our sense of Carrie's wrenching trauma is felt most forcefully through the sight of her eyes, which bulge violently, their accusatory stare sharpened by the jutting of Carrie's mascara-heavy eyelashes that stab-out against her pale skin.

In this way, Carrie's application of makeup in preparation for presenting herself to Brody amplifies the disfiguring effect of Danes's facial expressions, as if her desire to be seen a certain way provides here the basis for her awful collapse of self. Alongside these aspects of the performance, Carrie's screaming pleas for comprehension fade out and are replaced with jazz, removing the character's voice and so rendering her gestures especially strange, puppet-like. The choice is apt. It deepens the scene's presentation of Carrie's madness as a condition of disfigurement, and effects more than just a split between inner and outer: it confronts us with the absolute and complete inaccessibility of one within the other.

What Danes's performance allows the scene to capture is something of the unhinged and fully overwhelming horror that one must surely feel if one's sole anchor to a world of meaning and sense was impossible to share with the people in whose judgment and insight one should most be able to trust or at least speak to, that the mural being stripped from the wall is to Carrie the piece-by-piece dismantling of the most convincing evidence of the world's intelligibility to her, the evidence she needs to trust in her own fragile sanity. In a scene earlier in the episode, we see Carrie view the mural for the first time. It is the morning after her mania first became apparent to Saul, who has spent the night discovering pattern and order among the jumble of colour-coded fragments in which Carrie sensed significance but was unable to reveal meaning. As the one able to assemble the incomprehensible fragments into meaningful order upon the corkboard wall, Saul emerges as possessing the capacity to discover, recognise, and come to see from Carrie's viewpoint. Yet Patinkin exercises admirable restraint in his responses to Danes/Carrie, in doing so rescuing the sequence from the risk of simplistically valorising what is troubling and dangerous about Carrie's way of seeing. Clear gestures and tones of agreement and understanding are guarded by a refusal to too closely endorse or join any proposal. When Carrie tells the story of first losing her sanity while at college, Saul reserves the politely distanced sympathy of a stranger, while his eyes carry a care for her only deepened by this revelation of how poorly he has known her. Prior to Estes discovering the mural, Saul's capacity to look at Carrie this way generously preserves and makes publicly shareable Carrie's world of sense, rescuing her from isolation in the inaccessible privacy of madness.

By contrast, Carrie and Brody's failure to meet each other the same way in the episode's closing sequence effects the collapse of that world, and Carrie's fall into a condition in which she is unable to make sense of herself or of the world she was

trained to interrogate. That the world Carrie inhabits is now hostile and unreadable to her is represented by the passive unresponsiveness of the men Estes unleashes. So perhaps we are inclined to be unsympathetic to Estes, who in his grim refusals to entertain Carrie's ideas provides a performative counterpoint to Saul. Yet in a small but moving final touch, the episode's closing moments suggest a possible saving grace for Estes, in the way David Harewood has his character gently take Carrie by the shoulders, keeping hold on his patient tenderness despite her thrashings, to steer her away from the mural as it is taken apart. He averts his eyes from Carrie, and keeps hers from the mural's destruction. Given the circumstances of the fully serious breach of the nation's trust and security, and of *his* trust, the gesture might strike us as generous, taking time and care to allow Carrie some privacy while also shielding her from a painful sight. But Estes is of course also shielding himself from Carrie's breakdown; his seemingly instinctive consideration of Carrie's privacy and feeling shades into a (perhaps unconscious) need to veil his involvement in her disintegration. Similar is the passivity and distance on the part of Carrie's father and sister, whose objections to the intrusion of these men come late. The sudden, unexplained, and clearly hostile entry of these strangers into the home is greeted with no more than a neighbourly hello. And soon after, as Carrie is accosted and restrained, her family's gestures apparently in defence of her are somewhat less than impassioned, as if seeking the poor consolation of a restored state of calm and peace rather than the preservation of a loved one's sovereignty of mind and self. So not only does the sequence invite and reward close attention to the detail and significance of its actors' performances, it finds in such attention and detail its major subject and thematic interest. What is at stake in how we look to each other, or how we fail to look?

Some television studies writing on performance does promise to look closely at details of performance in the way exemplified by the film studies work cited above. Indeed, Sue Turnbull's work in this area directly draws upon the approach that Klevan models. One aim of Turnbull's essay on *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) is to explore how the aspects of screen performance that Klevan's work illuminates might be seen to interact with serial television's specific conditions, structures, and attributes as an ongoing form composed of episodes and seasons. Turnbull takes Klevan to identify and analyse three dimensions of film performance: the narrative (relations of performer to plot), the melodramatic (relations of performer to place), and the comedic (relations of performer to the camera) (Turnbull 2011: 39). These categories provide the basis

from which Turnbull considers how performance and long-form television's serial attributes interact. Immediately after outlining the categories she derives from Klevan, Turnbull writes:

> What also has to be considered is how these various elements play out within the medium of television as opposed to that of film. For example, a long-form drama series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Veronica Mars* may also involve an evolution in the performance of the actors across an extended period of production as well as an evolution of the character as necessitated by narrative choices on the part of the writers. A performer might be required to shift from being a jerk to being a romantic hero, from being a hard-nosed teen private eye to a vulnerable victim.
>
> There are other factors to be accounted for too, such as the ways in which the narrative trajectory of the show might change depending on the nature of the performances themselves, and the direction the writers choose to take as a result. (2011: 39)

In addition to these issues, Turnbull also notes other contextual contingencies that might inform performances and characterisations in a television serial, and our response to them, such as changes in network (as was the case with *Veronica Mars*), and various instances in which actors leave a show, whether they are replaced or not (2011: 39–40). Turnbull is right to note these issues as possibly being important to appreciating specific shows. The aspects of performance in serial television she identifies remind us that performance provides a particular framework for considering the provisional aspects of achievement, interpretation, and judgment in television serials, which Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock have argued is a central issue with which the criticism of such shows must contend (2013a: 6–9). However, the way in which Turnbull takes up and applies Klevan's approach to film performance tends to inhibit the capacity of her descriptions to illuminate just how such issues should be seen to matter to our appreciation of the chosen moments of *Veronica Mars*. The passage in which Turnbull moves from Klevan's work to serial television is crucial:

> Taking the lead from Klevan, it is then possible to consider these performances in relation to the elements of plot, place, and position in the frame

while recognizing that as a long-form television series, *Veronica Mars* frequently changes mode from thriller to melodrama to comedy not only across a season, but also within an episode, sometimes even within a scene, requiring considerable dexterity on the part of the performers. (2011: 40)

I have to state at this point that my issue with Turnbull's argument isn't that I think it is *wrong* as such; it is indeed the case that within the majority of American television fictions we will find such shifts of mode, and mood, at varying levels of the work, and that, in the more fine-grained instances, such fluctuations of tone and feeling will require 'considerable dexterity on the part of the performers' in order for success to be achieved and the always-present risk of failure seen off. What I think requires further illumination, though, is how the peculiar attributes or conditions of serial television should be seen to inform our appreciation of such modulations of mode, insofar as they are achieved through the handling and situation of performances within the broader context of the series' style across its length. Part of the problem here is the general nature of the terms and their largely unmodified adoption from film studies scholarship. This works in concert with the tendency to home-in on scenes and moments in such a way that the reader is given little sense of the longer-range qualities and achievements of the show's performers, a range across which the relations between seriality and performance Turnbull aims to explore take shape, even if their effects might culminate within moments.

These two aspects of the essay come into relief through comparison with Deborah Thomas's attention to interactions between the melodramatic and comedic in *Schindler's List* (1993). Thomas opens her account of the film by making the surprising claim that, 'although it is unthinkable that anyone would presume to describe *Schindler's List* as a comedy, Spielberg is nonetheless audacious in his use of humour, especially in the film's first hour' (2001: 42). Thomas discusses a scene in which Schindler (Liam Neeson) chides his Jewish business partner Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley) for allowing a one-armed factory worker, in front of Schindler's SS compatriots, to thank Schindler for his (life-saving) employment. The interaction between Schindler and Stern culminates in this exchange:

> Schindler: Did you happen to notice that that man had one arm?
> Stern: Did he?

Thomas writes of this moment:

> What is noteworthy is not just the fact that the implicit humour is shared by the two men at this point, but the way in which, when shortly afterwards the one-armed man is shot by a German soldier while at work shovelling snow, Schindler protests to a high-ranking Nazi acquaintance, in a scene intercut with the killing so that we see the blood spreading in the snow as they speak, that the man was a skilled machinist ('He was a metal-press operator – quite skilled'), echoing Stern's disavowal of the fact that the machinist was so obviously ill-suited to his job. What I wish to argue is that Stern in some sense stands in for Schindler as rescuer (by hiring a one-armed man, for example) until Schindler himself is ready to take on this role, using humour to educate him and set an example, and that Schindler increasingly comes to share Stern's position as the film progressively darkens and its humour is drained away....
>
> The strategy of draining humour from the film's narrative world as the war progresses and the horrors proliferate (while nonetheless echoing its earlier jokes in some way to remind us of the loss) applies not just to Stern and his interactions with Schindler, but to the ironic commentary of the film itself . . .
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> . . . Indeed, the film as a whole may be deploying such a strategy in its early stages to help the viewer deal with what is to come. This in no way lessens the horror, but permits us a degree of ironic distance. (2001: 43–45)

Thomas balances descriptions and interpretations of discrete scenes, moments, and qualities with an eye to their integration within the wider patterning of the film, and the way this shapes its developments of story, tone, character, and theme. In this way, Thomas is able to at once home in on a moment while also moving 'outwards', small details allowing her to outline how Spielberg's film so deftly folds the melodramatic aspects of its world together with darkly shadowed comedic perspectives or aspirations. This deftness of tone and touch in both the film and the criticism (handled so adroitly, in fact, it is likely to be missed in either) is not appreciated for its own sake – as an empty display of remarkable skill – but for the particular way it serves to capture without tactlessly declaring an aspect of the film's tragedy, which lies in no small part in its many images of awfully and undeniably corrupted hope.

By contrast, Turnbull's final reading of a scene of *Veronica Mars* works to narrow our attention to and understanding of the television serial. This funnelling seems in conflict with the expansiveness – in relation to past and future – that is fundamental to the serial attributes Turnbull is interested in exploring. Of a domestic scene in which Veronica (Kristen Bell) and her father Keith (Enrico Colantoni) enjoy an impromptu barbecue, Turnbull writes:

> While [the prior] scene is clearly played for laughs, its comic effect is enhanced by the positioning of the camera which frames Keith as if on a stage performing for Veronica; the scene which follows, however, switches from comedy to melodrama half way through. As Keith cheerfully bops to the diegetic music while barbecuing the steaks on the verandah of their apartment block, Veronica shows him a photograph of a car parked at the Camelot motel, the one which belonged to whomever Jake Kane was meeting for his extra-marital tryst. Keith's face darkens as he looks at it. His jaw sets, the mood immediately changes. The camera moves in for an intense close-up of his face as he warns Veronica off the case. Her back is to us, but as he walks away, she turns toward the camera, stunned and puzzled. The comedy is over, and Veronica is again faced with the problem of discovering what is going on: the problem which is driving the thriller narrative. The close-up on her face confirms the seriousness of the moment. (2011: 46–47)

That final sentence is the endpoint of Turnbull's reading, leaving the analysis of the series on a brief account of the capacity of its creators and actors to achieve, within a single scene, a sharp turning of tone around a moment of dramatic revelation and withholding. Yet our thoughts are precisely left at that moment and with it alone; the reading of the scene seems to shed little light on the rest of the show surrounding it, or on how the peculiar part–whole relationship of the series should inform our sense of these gestures and their significance.

This is a problem because Turnbull's stated aim is to explore the utility of a particular film studies approach towards interactions between screen performance and the *serial* dimensions of *Veronica Mars*. If the passage above gives a sufficient account of the scene and the performances it describes, then the scene provides a poor example of the phenomenon being studied. This is because the performances within the scene appear to make no demands on the viewer that are distinctive of serial television. It's of course true that our understanding of what is going on here relies on our familiarity with the preceding story. But from Turnbull's account it is not clear how this should be understood any differently from the familiarity with past (and future) narrative events that was necessary to Thomas's reading of Schindler's brief interaction with Stern in Spielberg's stand-alone feature film.

A pertinent counter-example is Jacobs and Peacock's account of a moment of revelation that turns the mood of *In Treatment* (2008–2010). A psychoanalyst, Dr Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne), confronts his patient Sunil (Irrfan Khan) with his suspicion that Sunil harbours 'hostile lusty intentions' towards his (Sunil's) daughter in-law, suspicions that have been building across the past nine sessions, the past nine episodes. However, anticipations of a dramatic confrontation – shared by Dr Weston and viewer alike – are drastically upset: Sunil 'finds the idea hysterically funny, tittering and hiccoughing words in fits of giggles' (Jacobs and Peacock 2013a: 8). The effect is that:

> In the world of the drama, the carefully negotiated roles of these two men's performances in front of one another, developed over weeks, have now become troublingly undefined. Sunil has not acted "as expected" by therapist and viewer alike, and our gradually advanced understanding of the man is called into question. A few seconds of silence and mumbled words bring the session to a close without satisfactory reconciliation. The effects of Sunil's brief burst of laughter hang in the air across subsequent episodes. (Jacobs and Peacock 2013a: 8)

For Jacobs and Peacock, the force and resonance of the moment depends fully on the series' handling of serial television's particular opportunities for involving the audience in the slow accretion of a mutual history between viewer, performers, and characters, achieved through the repeated patterning and minute adjustment of behaviour, attitude, style, and tone. Importantly, this is not a matter of duration or length alone. It is rather achieved through the peculiar rhythms and fragmentations of television's seriality, which allows viewers, performers, and characters to settle into familiar relations. Central also is serial television's provisionality, which allows for such relations – and the understandings arrived through them – to be radically revised by previously

unforeseen or unplanned turns of event, performance, style, or tone, and for the discoveries found therein to further ramify into the future.

In George Toles's essay on *Mad Men* (2007–), the acclaimed series is seen to achieve rapport between provisional completeness, an ongoing condition of being unfinished, and our involvement with Jon Hamm as Don Draper. A close relationship between the serial qualities of the show and those of its subject matter informs the critic's appreciation of the performance. 'Don Draper and the Promises of Life' makes no explicit claims about serial television's particular structures and demands, indeed finding most of its reference points in film convention; there is little if anything made forthright about the fact of episodic or seasonal production, no considerations of the peculiar issues of re-casting, or of other unexpected contingencies that crop up in productions of such length. Toles instead approaches the material in a way that is of a piece with his many brilliant essays on film. In both this essay and those others, his elegant prose dramatises the process through which the film or television work guides the way the viewer occupies and inhabits the fluctuating modulations of perspective, feeling, and thought involved in our attachments to performances, characters, and scenes as they unfold, while being constantly keyed to the ways those experiences of individual parts press upon and inform our sense of the work as a larger whole.

That Toles appears to approach the description of films and television serials in similar ways with equal success might seem to suggest that the two forms call for no substantial difference of approach. However, the conditions and attributes of serial television can nevertheless be seen to inform Toles's account of our involvement with Draper, and of the significance of that involvement. Toles writes: 'Our image of Don Draper, and our way of thinking about him, will consistently return to his "man in a grey flannel suit" fitness for inspection. The composed outward form is an endlessly renewable source of beguilement' (2013: 148). And soon after, Toles characterises the 'central paradox' that holds our fascination with Don: it consists in 'ever-expanding dimensions within what continues to impress the viewer as a tight, restrictive outline' (2013: 149). As I have noted, elsewhere in the essay Toles involves himself in attending to and describing the moment-by-moment passage of scenes, gestures, and moods in a way no different to the kind of attention and description demanded elsewhere of him by, for example, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) or *Fargo* (1996). Yet the two quotes above point to the way in which our continuing involvement in Hamm's

ongoing realisation of Draper has its basis in qualities that both lend themselves to, and are afforded by, long-form television's serial structures of unfolding, and the kind of viewing to which those give rise. Those structures, and forms of viewing, rely on the relative continuity of a 'composed outward form', but must maintain or sustain an 'endlessly renewable source of beguilement' within that form. Indeed, an elegant way to describe the challenge facing the creators of serial television is to imaginatively and compellingly realise 'ever-expanding dimensions within what continues to impress the viewer as a tight, restrictive outline'. That this aspect of serial television leaves things, including performances and their various dimensions of significance, 'unfinished' is captured in Toles's final sentences:

> And yet Don Draper's drive to find placement, belief, a sure center about his helplessness that would allow him to give himself back whole to those he might finally learn to love, is still intact. He knows there are further moves to make, moves that will count for something, in due time. (2013: 173)

'Further moves to make, moves that will count for something, in due time.' This aspect of television serials – their ongoing expansion into an unformed future – poses substantial challenges to the criticism of such works (O'Sullivan 2013), and of especially compelling qualities and moments of performance within them. In the face of a particular difficulty that this expansiveness presents, Peacock finds an opportunity for meaningful prose *expressiveness* in his essay on relationships between performance, genre, and serial form in *Deadwood* (2004–2006). The essay considers how *Deadwood* treats lines and demarcations – 'the boundaries of language, the physical border of setting and locale, and the limits of characterisation' – through the show's handling of performance, in particular the rendition of types familiar from movie Westerns. For Peacock, 'The richness of *Deadwood*'s involvement with the central syntax of the Western is inextricably linked to its status as a work of television' (2010: 96). This link consists in the way *Deadwood* comes to take advantage of long-form television's capacity for particular rhythms and forms of expansiveness. Peacock writes:

> In its distinctive melding of arcane and profane language, the series explores the borderline meeting point of civilised and wild ways. Equally, in extensive monologues and involved exchanges, its perform-

ers explore the limits of verbal communication. The characters adopt and adapt cultivated forms of language, coming from beyond and through the porous boundaries of the camp, to shape their negotiations.

The expansiveness of television's serial form allows for a gradual and intricate development of these negotiations. In a long-running serial drama (and in a settlement on the edge of the frontier) there is an abundance of time for talk. *Deadwood*'s heightened language, at once florid and foul, achieves depth and complexity over the length of the series. . . . Over time and in sustained, subtle yet striking acts of delivery, the primary shock of profanity and the disorienting flux of register give way to a sense of fluency, of rhythms shaped by arch or nuanced expression, flutters of gesture and fanciful patter, and timely terse jabs of curse words. (2010: 99–100).

This passage comes early in Peacock's essay, and is followed later by sustained engagements with the particular details and achievements of moments from the series, appreciating the work by Ian McShane as Al Swearengen, Jeffrey Jones as A. W. Merrick, and Timothy Olyphant as Seth Bullock. The above quotation was chosen for analysis instead of those later parts of the essay because it shows Peacock respecting how moments are so important to the intensity of our involvement in the long-running series, while at the same time conveying and sharing a sense of the more ambient kind of memory-impression left on us by the ways in which the show's performers realise the lives of its characters over time. The writer's challenge is to somehow compress and evoke in a short space of words those qualities of the work, and our experience of it, that develop and find their significance in matters of duration and gradual accretion handled through repetition and variation.

Crucial to Peacock's success in meeting this challenge is the expressiveness of his prose. A somewhat reductive summary of the propositional content the paragraphs put forward is that, across the episodes and seasons, our increasing familiarity with the performers bring us to a changed manner of involvement in the fiction, and that this development of our involvement in the show is pivotal to our understanding and appreciation of it. But in addition to advancing this claim, the non-semantic aspects of the writing *embody* just such a development, and so bring it home to us as a strongly felt *sense*.

The account of *Deadwood*'s 'heightened language' is at first marked by hard, sharp sounds that contribute to a sense of difficult-to-negotiate enjambment in parts of the passage's syllabic structure. (I am reminded of the traffic jam that greets our slow arrival in the Deadwood camp at the show's beginning.) Following 'sustained, subtle yet striking acts', the phrase 'primary shock of profanity' is able to convey, through its repeated alliteration of the hard 'p' sound, a sense of being struck over and over, as if weathering an assault. This sense is not just heightened but is in fact initially facilitated by the conjunction of 'striking' and 'acts', which puns on the fall of an axe blow, as if echoing the violence of our introduction to the series' characters and world in its opening episodes. (And within this, the unresolved relationship caught in 'sustained yet striking'. The first word's second syllable demands drawing out, 'yet' the choice of the third word requires in speaking a relatively hard, fast impact, the language verbally enacting the tension between the enduring and the transient, which is precisely the serial quality at issue in the matter of expansiveness within a work composed of fragmentary but connected moments.)

By the final parts of the passage, though, we have transitioned to more fluid imagery and feeling through word choices that achieve effects expressive of familiar modes of refinement and pleasing design. This follows the relatively harsh sense of trying to find ways of making things fit in 'disorienting flux of register', Peacock's potentially tongue-tripping turn, at once elegant but pressingly crowded. The five syllables of the first word are crammed-in and demand a sharp shift of gears for the two monosyllabic words that follow, only for Peacock to finish with 'register', the trick of which is tied up in the word simultaneously making available either its noun or verb sense, the proper expression requiring we get right its context. So the harmonious forms and patterns of the culminating clauses come as a relief, offering a sense of arrival at a place now pleasantly graspable and in that way seemingly familiar. 'Rhythms shaped by arch or nuanced expression' gives graceful form to its evocation of a purposive shaping now coming into view. The upward inclination of 'arch' meets the material form it names and brings to mind, harmoniously answered in a mirrored balance by 'nuanced', the downward pitch of the first syllable forming its own inverted arch with the rising tone as we move through the second part of the word. A kind of symmetry is formed through a repetition that marks a difference.

The prose further embodies the serial developments of varied repetition in its final two turns of phrase, which directly

point to examples of the series' 'rhythms shaped by arch or nuanced expression': 'flutters of gesture and fanciful patter, and timely terse jabs of curse words'. The first is a further sign we have reached a stage in which language no longer confronts or grinds against our reading (or listening), as the show's language does in its early parts, but now reaches us with a light and delicately pleasing touch. Yet in the final words, the dark shadow of looming violence remains, reminding us of the performers' capacities in this long-running series to upset too-easily settled assumptions: the alliterative rhythm of 'timely terse jabs' conveys the sense of an actor's deliberate yet delicate timing, skilfully executing convention in the manner of a well-practised athlete, here a boxer, a choice that refines the image into a fitting picture of disciplined aggression. Yet the repetition is upset by 'jabs', which at once breaks the pattern while further developing it, revealing its point to be the (violent) upset of expectation. And further, the evocation of crude violence is given one more turn of the screw with the decorous 'curse words', which – not unlike Swearengen's 'grubby long johns visible beneath the Prince Albert suit' (Jacobs 2006: 11) – enfolds vulgar sentiment within a polite façade, a surface smoothed by a choice of words.

The pieces of television studies writing examined here each demonstrate how the discipline writes about performance in serial television. And, to borrow from William Rothman, they show that television studies does not speak in one voice. Indeed, the diversity of the assembled approaches and attitudes to the study of performances in serial television, with which I have found both fault and favour, sounds an important warning against what is surely one tempting response to the question with which I began, which would be to sign a safe and absolute prescription of method. Instead, the pieces of criticism that I claim are exemplary – for the deftness and depth with which they understand and communicate richly achieved relationships between performances and serial television form – suggest a more nebulous critical aspiration, or principle. Christopher Ricks gives it eloquent voice when, in his essay 'Literary Principles as Against Theory', he suggests this idea of intelligence as against 'intellectuality': 'Intelligence, as both understood and evinced by Lawrence, aspires to be continuous with that which it works upon' (1996: 314). The aspiration to be continuous with that which one works upon – if there is need to mark a line of distinction between the writing favoured above and that which is not, I would draw it along this edge.

To conclude, I will make one more comment on Peacock's writing about *Deadwood*. In our reading of his phrases and

words – especially if we allow ourselves the pleasure of speaking them aloud – we are involved in an experiential process akin to our tracing and responding to *Deadwood*'s own ways of settling and fluctuating: through forms of language and its performance that do not achieve immediate clarity, but rather make deepened intelligibility a matter of close involvement, attention, and absorption over time. By doing so, the best television serials, and their criticism quoted above, each earn and keep our appreciative intimacy.

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