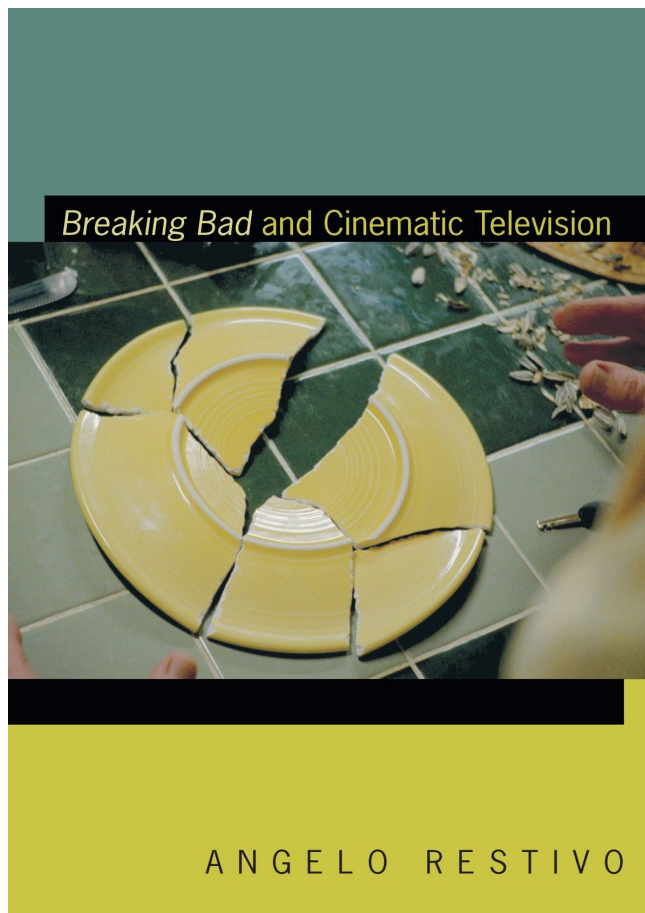


Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television

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Over the past decade, it has become a critical commonplace to observe that we are experiencing a new Golden Age of television. Once known as the “boob tube” and blamed for the dumbing down of modern culture, television is now seen by many as being on par with cinema. In fact, some critics have gone so far as to claim that so-called “prestige television” is superior to much that is being produced by the major film studios. While this may seem like an exaggeration, one need only compare the growing number of innovative and sophisticated television series produced by HBO, Netflix, Amazon, and Apple TV with the endless reboots, remakes, and formulaic franchise films produced by the major Hollywood studios to see that there is some truth to the claim. What is perhaps most remarkable about this development is the speed with which it has occurred. In the space of roughly twenty years, television has gone from being viewed as a form of mass entertainment of scholarly interest primarily for its sociological influence to being a complex and multi-layered form of visual storytelling that is the focus of a growing body of theoretically sophisticated critical commentary. This literature includes important collections of essays like Jason Jacobs and Stephen Peacock’s *Television Aesthetics and Style* (Bloomsbury, 2013), book-length studies like Amanda Lotz’ *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (NYU Press, 2014), and Jason Mittell’s *Complex Television: The Poetics of Contemporary Television* (2015), and monographs devoted to individual television series such as Dana Polan’s *The Sopranos* (2009) and Sheryl Vint’s *The Wire* (2013). To this list, one might add Angelo Restivo’s *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television* (2019), a brief but insightful book that will be of interest not only to fans of the AMC drama about the rise and fall of Walter White (Bryan Cranston), the high school chemistry teacher turned DIY meth manufacturer, but to anyone interested in understanding the unique formal characteristics of so-called cinematic television.



Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television (2019)
 Angelo Restivo
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For Restivo, cinematic television is defined not simply by its reliance on A-level Hollywood directors, actors, and screenwriters, or even its every-increasing budgets and production values, but rather by the way that television series like *Breaking Bad* draw upon the “image archive” of Hollywood cinema “to affectively reconfigure the elements of our lives via [their] cinematic manipulation of the elements of image and sound” (11-12). Among the “borrowings” that Restivo discusses is *Breaking Bad*’s indebtedness to Nicholas Ray’s *Bigger Than Life* (1956), a melodrama about mild-mannered schoolteacher Ed Avery (James Mason) whose life is turned upside down when he is diagnosed with a rare inflammation of the arteries that is treated with cortisone injections, a new miracle drug in the 1950s, but one with crippling side effects, including extreme mood swings and brief but intense psychotic episodes. For anyone familiar with *Breaking Bad*, it is not difficult to see the parallels between the Ray film and the AMC television series: both Ed Avery and Walter White are schoolteachers and family men suddenly afflicted by a terrible disease, and both become increasingly desperate as they struggle to provide for their families once they are no longer able to take care of them. Finally, both Ed Avery and Walter White become “dependent” on drugs, though in very different ways, fueling their respective forms of megalomania and leading them to “break bad,” or transgress the social rules and conventions that had previously given their lives meaning. Restivo identifies several such borrowings in the series, including echoes of specific scenes from John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). Moreover, he argues convincingly that such echoes are not simply “examples of postmodern recycling or blank parody” but rather “attempts at thinking through what a television of mise-en-scène might look like . . .” (33). It is this emphasis upon the importance of mise-en-scène that makes Restivo’s reading of *Breaking Bad* and his views on cinematic television so fascinating and so useful.

Drawing upon theorists as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Miriam Hansen, Kara Keeling, and Gilles Deleuze, Restivo argues that “the magic of cinema comes from its ability to set forth new and unexpected relationships between bodies, spaces, and worlds, and in such a way as to reprogram the human sensorium” (11). In other words, cinema, and, by extension, cinematic television, possesses the power to create fictional worlds that enable us to perceive and engage with the world around us from novel and unexpected perspectives. *Breaking Bad* does this by employing elements of the mise-en-scène that draw our attention, among other things, to the precarious nature of everyday life in a neoliberal, capitalist country like the United States. Restivo illustrates this aspect of the series through a close reading of specific scenes that draw upon the image archive of modern cinema. For instance, he singles out a scene in episode 7 of season 1 (“A No-Rough Stuff-Type Deal”) in which Walter White and his protégé Jesse Pinkman (Aaron

Paul) meet with Latino drug dealers in an auto graveyard to arrange for the sale of the crystal meth that Walt and Jesse have produced. The setting, according to Restivo, is far from a simple backdrop for the scene. Instead, it resonates with associations that are central to understanding the episode and the series as a whole. The mangled vehicles in the wrecking yard call to mind “a DIY car culture that was once associated. . . with working-class American males” but is now the domain of marginalized Latino immigrants “whose often precarious status places them in the informal back-alley automotive repair economy.” The setting also evokes images from countless films from the 1950s and 60s celebrating this car culture, a period when the American automotive industry was at its peak and served as an emblem of American mobility, prosperity, and exceptionalism. In *Breaking Bad*, however, the auto graveyard serves as an “iconic representation of ‘the repressed’: at once a testimony to waste and unsustainability and an evocation of the terrible beauty of the outmoded . . .” (40). What’s more, the image of the teetering tower of crushed automobiles looming over Walt, Jesse, and the Mexican drug dealers they meet in the auto graveyard serves as a visual reminder of the precarious position that they are all in as they attempt to do business together.

What makes *Breaking Bad* a model of cinematic television, according to Restivo, is not simply its frequent allusions to the canon of Hollywood cinema, but its foregrounding of specific elements of its mise-en-scène over story and character. By drawing our attention to the affective quality of specific images associated with the mise-en-scène, such as the tower of mangled automobiles mentioned above, the series frequently “interrupts” or problematizes our immersive experience of the narrative, encouraging us to reflect on the thematic significance of these “interruptions.” To explain this aspect of the series, and of cinematic television in general, Restivo turns to the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who argues that when we look at a film or television image solely in terms of its narrative function, we “ignore all those elements of the image that are irrelevant (or are only incidental or excessive) to the unfolding narrative” (43). In doing so, we overlook the inherent complexity of the image and of the world it represents. We also oversimplify the complexity of many narratives, looking for causal connections between events in the plot while overlooking the breaches, gaps and internal contradictions that undermine or problematize those connections. Among the many disruptive techniques used in the series, the most obvious are found in the opening scenes that appear at the beginning of each episode of the series. As Restivo notes, these “teasers” serve many purposes, ranging from anticipating the climax of a particular episode or linking one episode to another to providing flashbacks that refer to plot developments from a previous season or to events predating the series. Often these scenes bear only a tangential connection to the episode that follows. However, the writers of the series “choose not to clarify the meanings of actions by writing in facile clues to provide logical explanations” (49). Instead,

as viewers, we must attempt to determine the meaning of the teaser and its relation to the episode and to the series' complex, recursive narrative.

Restivo does a brilliant job of identifying the ways in which *Breaking Bad* is “haunted” by the image archive of classic Hollywood cinema, and his views on the role of mise-en-scène in defining the cinematic elements in so-called “prestige television” make this a book that will be of interest to both film and television scholars. However, there are two additional themes in the book that deserve attention before concluding this review. The first concerns the politics of the series. Restivo acknowledges that “with its relentless focus on the beleaguered, angry, middle-aged white male, deceiving his wife, mowing down a host of ethnic others, and making alliances with neo-Nazi thugs . . . ,” *Breaking Bad* would appear to be a politically conservative television series. Yet he argues that when we look past the character of Walter White and the seemingly reactionary narrative to the mise-en-scène of the series, it is clear that, like *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver*—two films that serve as important intertexts for the AMC drama—, *Breaking Bad* “performs critical work on contemporary American mythology similar to that being done in the two [classic] films” (9).

In developing and supporting this claim, Restivo draws upon one of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's last essays, “Immanence: A Life,” which is also the title of the last chapter

of *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television*. In this chapter, Restivo analyzes the final episode in the series, explaining how it is “haunted” by the final scenes in *Taxi Driver* and how it illustrates Deleuze's views on a purely immanent conception of life” (142). For Deleuze and for Restivo, this term refers to the idea of a life “that is logically prior to the particular descriptions that any given life takes on” (143). In other words, it describes a life as it exists prior to or independent of the influences of history or environment, personal or political: Life as pure potential. In *Taxi Driver*, paradoxically, this view of “a life” is evident in the scene in which we witness Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro) raise his bloody hand to his head after the blood bath he has caused and pretend to kill himself; in *Breaking Bad*, it is reflected in Walter White's death. As Restivo notes, the staging of Walt's final moments seems to deliberately recall the final moments of Scorsese's film, including the use of strategically placed aerial and tracking shots. Whereas Scorsese's film exposes the racism, sexism, and hypocrisy of New York City in the 1970s, *Breaking Bad* draws our attention to the brutality, corruption, and claustrophobia created by contemporary neoliberal capitalism. As Restivo puts it, in Walter White's rise and fall, we see how “everyday life under neoliberalism manifests itself as general warfare” (141). And in his death, we are witness to the vanishing of the potentialities that existed prior to his cancer diagnosis or his turn toward criminality and madness. ■

WORKS CITED

Restivo, Angelo. *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television*. Duke UP, 2019.