I LIKE TO WATCH

ARGUING MY WAY THROUGH THE TV REVOLUTION

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THE BIG PICTURE

How Buffy the Vampire Slayer Turned Me Into a TV Critic

What happens when your side wins the fight, the drunken cultural brawl that you've been caught up in for nearly two decades? And then the rules change, midway through? That's the crisis that I'm currently facing, when it comes to the beauty and power—and lately, even the definition—of television as an art form.

When I first began watching television, there didn't seem to be much to argue about. Like many children of the seventies, I grew up sitting cross-legged in front of a big console in the living room, singing along to The Electric Company while my mom made Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. I dug Taxi, I loved M*A*S*H. In my teens, I memorized Monty Python sketches with my friend Maria. But I also regarded TV the way that Americans had been taught to, since the 1950s. Television was junk. It wasn't worthy of deep thought, the way that books or movies might be. It was something that you enjoyed, then forgot about. It wasn't until my thirties that I had what amounted to a soul-shaking conversion, on the night that I watched Sunnydale High School principal Bob Flutie die, torn to bits by hyenas.
At the time, in the spring of 1997, I was a literature doctoral student at NYU, vaguely planning on becoming a professor, maybe a Victorianist, but anyway, somebody who read for a living. Every morning, I woke up, flopped onto the sofa, and opened up yet another 900-pager. Across the room was an old-fashioned console TV, a dinosaur even for the era, with a broken remote control, so in order to watch my first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I had to physically walk across the room, then click the circular dial over to Channel 11, The WB, a brand-new “netlet,” and then walk all the way back to the sofa.

Walking across the room to change the channel was still a normal thing to do, in 1997. It had been nearly sixty years since the first television (spookily nicknamed the Phantom Teleceiver) launched at the 1939 World’s Fair, and yet the medium was—with a few advances, like the addition of color and the still-tentative expansion of cable—not that different from what it had been in the 1950s, when families gathered to watch Milton Berle. Shows aired once a week. They were broken up by ads. When the ads were on, you peed. When they ended, someone in the other room would yell, “You’re missing it!” and you’d run back in. If you loved a particular show, you had to consult the elaborate grids in the print newspaper or in *TV Guide* to know when to watch: “ALF (CC)—Comedy. ALF is upstaged by a loveable dog that followed Brian home, so he gives the pooch away to a crotchety woman (Anne Ramsey).”

The main thing, though, was that television went away. It was a disposable product, like a Dixie Cup. Although scripted television hadn’t aired live for many decades, it still felt live. You could watch rental movies on your VCR (and for a few years, they were everywhere) but most people I was friendly with didn’t regularly pre-program their’s to record much TV, because doing so was such a pain: spinning three plastic dials, for the day, the hour, and the minute. Each videotape held only a few hours of programming; rewinding and fast-forwarding were clumsy processes (and pausing might break the tape). There were no DVDs yet, let alone DVRs. Even if you were an early Internet adopter, which I was, dialing in was a grudgingly slow, unreliable process—and when you *did* connect, with the hostile shriek of static that we optimistically called a “handshake,” no videos showed up, just a wall of blinking neon fonts. Nothing, ever, arrived “on demand.”

This glitchy, ephemeral quality, and the ads that broke up the episodes, were a major part of TV’s crappy reputation. This part may be hard to remember, even if you lived through it. But just before the turn of the century—nearly universally, by default, and with an intensity that’s tough to summon up now—television was viewed as a shameful activity, as “chewing gum for the eyes,” to quote drama critic John Mason Brown. This was true not only of snobs who boasted that they “didn’t even own a TV”; it was true of people who *liked* TV. It was true of the people who made it, too. TV was entertainment, not art. It was furniture (literally—it sat in your living room) that helped you kill time (it was how to numb lonely hours while eating a “TV dinner,” shorthand for a pathetic existence). TV might be a gold mine, economically speaking, but that only made it more corrupt. If you were an artist, writing TV was selling out; if you were an intellectual, watching it was a sordid pleasure, like chain-smoking. People still referred to television, with no irony, as “the boob tube” and “the idiot box.” (Some people still do.)

This is not to say there were no good shows. Critics praised (and, often, overpraised) the grit of *Hill Street Blues*, the nihilistic wit of *Seinfeld*, yadda yadda yadda. In the mid-’90s, there were several major breakthroughs in the medium, among them the teen drama *My So-Called Life* and the sci-fi series *The X-Files*. But among serious people, even the best television wasn’t considered worthy of real analysis. This was particularly true among my grad-school peers, the thinky guys whom I had privately nicknamed “the sweater-vests”—the men who were also, not coincidentally, the ones whose opinions tended to dominate mainstream media conversation. For them, books were sacrosanct. Movies were respected. Television was a sketchy additive that corporations had
tipped into the cultural tap water, a sort of spiritual backbone-weakening.

The scripture for this set of thinkers was an essay by the writer George W. S. Trow, “Within the Context of No-Context,” which people recommended to me so frequently that it started to feel like a prank. A masterwork of contempt, “Within the Context” was a trippy string of koans that was initially published in 1980 in The New Yorker. It came out in book form in 1981, then got re-released in paperback in 1997, the same year that Buffy the Vampire Slayer debuted. As Trow saw it, television was a purely sinister force. It was a mass medium whose mass-ness was its danger, because it conflated ratings with quality, “big” with “good.” The vaster television got, the more it ate away at the decent values of mid-century America—back when viewers were people, not demographics; adults, not children; capable of intimacy and proportion. “Television does not vary,” he wrote. “The trivial is raised up to power. The powerful is lowered toward the trivial.” Also: “What is loved is a hit. What is a hit is loved.” It was an elitist screed, nostalgic for an America that had never really existed, but it had a penetrating, pungent force.

On Charlie Rose in 1996, novelists David Foster Wallace, Mark Leyner, and Jonathan Franzen struck an only slightly less apocalyptic note, spending nearly half of what was advertised as a panel on “The Future of American Fiction” denouncing television as “a commercial art that’s a lot of fun that requires very little of the recipient.” Their worries about television’s “kinetic bursts” were a precursor to the pseudoscientific rhetoric (“dopamine squirts”) that would later greet the Internet, once that stepped in as a cultural bogeyman. But then, they were part of a long tradition. In 1958, newscaster Edward R. Murrow had warned about the propagandistic dangers of the medium in his brilliant “box of lights and wires” speech. In the 1970s, popular jeremiads like Jerry Mander’s Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television and Marie Winn’s The Plug-In Drug diagnosed TV as an addiction. In the 1980s, the slogan “Kill Your Television” was a hip bumper sticker. At the turn of the century, watching TV was still widely seen, in the much-quoted (although possibly apocryphal) words of nineties comic Bill Hicks, as a spiritually harmful act, like “taking black spray paint to your third eye.”

There were occasional exceptions to this mood, among them Chip McGrath’s 1995 cover story in The New York Times Magazine, “The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel,” in which he praised ER and Homicide: Life on the Street for their “classic American realism, the realism of Dreiser and Hopper.” But as his title indicated, McGrath’s argument was just the flip side of the one made by the Charlie Rose panel. TV might, in fact, be worth watching—but only when it stopped being TV.

This was the value system that I was soaking in, Palmolive-style, on the night that I watched my first episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Even more than most television of that era, the show sounded like a throwaway. It had that silly title. It was based on a campy movie, created by a little-known writer/director named Joss Whedon. It starred a soap opera actress, Sarah Michelle Gellar, and an actor from a Taster’s Choice ad, Tony Head. And if you tried to describe the plot, it screamed “guilty pleasure”: It was a horror comedy about a superpowered cheerleader leading a double life. By day, Buffy Summers flirted with boys and flunked her classes. By night, she was “The Chosen One,” stabbing vampires in the heart with pointy wooden stakes. The credits opened with a wolf howling, wild riffs of hard-rock guitar, and shots of Buffy herself doing kung fu. It looked like a good way to kill time before getting back to analyzing themes of the public woman in George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda.

Instead, I fell into a trance of joy. Now to be clear, the episode I was watching is not only not one of the standout episodes of Buffy, it is also not an episode that most—or really, any—Buffy viewers
consider to be much good. Instead, it’s a first-season story that fans tend to remember as “Wait, that one with the hyenas?” In “The Pack,” a clique of high-school bullies gets possessed by the wild beasts that Buffy describes with disgust as “the schmoes of the animal kingdom.” The villain is a resentful zookeeper, straight out of Scooby-Doo (long story short, he wanted to be possessed by a hyena himself, but misfired his spell). And yet “The Pack,” for all its schlocky affect, was the one that hooked me, hard. In one scene, in which the bullies struttetd in slo-mo through the high school courtyard, I got chills. In another, in which Buffy’s friend Willow wept, my eyes welled up. The show had a peculiar tonal blend, at once bleak and goofy, formulaic and anarchic. It had a fascination with sexual violence—including the threat of “nice guys,” like Buffy’s hyena-possessed friend Xander—but it folded those dark themes together with screwball banter and fun pop-culture references (“I cannot believe that you, of all people, are trying to Scully me”).

Then, just before the second ad break, the plot took a grotesque turn: The bullies gobbled up a live pig, Herbert, the Sunnydale High School mascot. A few scenes later, the hyena-possessed kids surrounded, taunted, and then literally ate the school principal, Bob Flutie, a character who had been, up until he was eaten, a significant part of the ensemble. “Crunchy!” snickered the pretty ringleader. Flutie’s death was a fabulously macabre twist—one of many such twists in a series that had no interest at all in Dreiser-like realism—but it wasn’t exactly a joke. Once Flutie got eaten, he stayed dead.

Cannibalizing a high school principal probably sounds like small potatoes in the era of Game of Thrones. But in 1997, the moment felt bracing, particularly on a fluffy teen comedy on an off-brand netlet. Still, what really got me was the show’s peculiar originality, the ways in which it felt stealthily experimental beneath its conventional surfaces, which were low-budget and, aesthetically, nothing special. As he would often explain in interviews, Whedon had taken the bimbo victim of every exploitation film—the eye candy, tottering to her death down a dark alley—and let her spin around and become the avenger. Thrillingly, Buffy treated this one girl’s story not as something trivial, but as a grand, oceanic metaphor. It made her story mythic, not cartoonish. Like plenty of teenagers, Buffy believed that what was happening to her was the end of the world. But she was right; her demons were real. The fact that the show was silly, too, that it was sexy and playful, that it riffed off TV formula and had cheesy cliff-hangers and close-ups and sitcom “buttons,” didn’t make the show dumb. It made it smart.

During the commercial break, I called a friend, the one who had recommended the series, and, because cellphones barely existed, I had to use a landline, coiling the spiral cord around my arm. I said to him in fascination, “Did you see that guy get eaten before the ad break? This show is wild.”

I’d never finish my doctorate. Instead, Buffy spiked my way of thinking entirely, sending me stumbling along a new path. My Buffy fandom was not unlike any first love. It was life-swamping, more than a bit out of proportion to the object of my affection, and something that I wanted to discuss with everyone, whether they liked it or not. I’d been an enthusiast before, but not a fan in the stalker-crazy-obsessive sense. I had other work to do, teaching and editing and, eventually, working as a magazine journalist, but for several years, the only thing I actually wanted to do was analyze Buffy the Vampire Slayer. In practice, this meant that I was online a lot. When “Earshot,” an episode about a school shooting, was pulled from the airwaves because it was too soon after the Columbine massacre, I found a stranger up in Canada who sent me a bootleg videotape. One time, someone set me up on a blind date because the guy liked Buffy the Vampire Slayer, too. It didn’t last, but the setup struck us both as entirely reasonable.

Still, there matters might have remained—as a hobby, not a life plan—were it not for the near-simultaneous emergence of another
television show, HBO's mob drama *The Sopranos*, in 1999. *The Sopranos* was my other favorite. Like many viewers, I got hooked after watching the first-season episode “College,” the one in which Tony strangled a snitch with a length of wire, midway through a tour of New England colleges with his daughter, Meadow. And yet loving *The Sopranos* was a very different experience, at the turn of the century, from loving *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *The Sopranos* was a show for adults, something to brag about, not apologize for. It was the series that defined the twenty-first-century model of “prestige television,” a category that doubled as a social-class distinction and an intellectual one. After the first season finale, Stephen Holden, in *The New York Times*, called the show “the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century.” Not the best television show, or the best cable drama; after one season, *The Sopranos* had already escaped the orbit of its lowly medium entirely. It was real art, which meant that it was worthy of real criticism.

This response made some sense, given that *The Sopranos* was produced and distributed by HBO, a velvet-robe pay cable network whose new slogan was “It's not TV. It's HBO.” HBO, with its fat budget and its breakthrough reliance on subscriptions rather than ad minutes, could take risks that the networks could not. And, in fact, *The Sopranos* did have qualities that were unlike most television that came before it. It had no ad breaks. It had no cliff-hangers. Because it didn’t have to play to nervous censors, it overflowed with cursing, violence, and the bouncy boobs at the Bada Bing. It also looked fantastic. Visually, the series was what people tended to call “gritty”—not realistic, precisely, but *authentic*, with a sense of place (specifically, a sense of New Jersey) that distinguished it from most other TV series. Filmed on location, with a budget that helped it look almost good enough to play on the big screen, *The Sopranos* emphasized imagery over action, characters over plot, letting threads dangle and themes build. It felt like a book; it looked like a movie. Its hero was someone viewers took seriously, a tow-

ering symbolic figure: Tony Soprano, the first of the great middle-aged white male antiheroes who would dominate TV for nearly a decade. These characters were, very often, created by men who were cut from a somewhat similar cloth, insofar as they were working out their own issues with authority—including the authority of television itself, that collaborative, formulaic, culturally derided medium that they worked inside.

I watched *The Sopranos* every Sunday on my newly installed cable box, and then, as an early adopter, on my first-generation TiVo, hitting “pause” to admire all those perfectly composed shots of Tony’s massive kitchen island, rewinding to get the dialogue. In this book, you’ll find an essay about what made *The Sopranos* so great—which was, in part, how thoroughly David Chase’s masterwork punished its own audience for loving it too passionately.

But the split in critical response bugged me. Even when *Buffy* won praise, as it began to take big swings—a musical episode, a silent episode, the Christ-like death of the main character at the end of the fifth season—the series was still slotted, culturally, as optional viewing. It was a girl show. It was a teen show. It was geeky, jokey, romantic, juvenile, and formulaic. It was disposable—a Dixie Cup. *The Sopranos* was the canonical stuff, the keeper: It was masculine, literary, weighty, bleakly challenging, a rule-breaker. It was more like an original vinyl copy of *Blood on the Tracks*. (And this impression seemed true to people even when it wasn’t true at all. *The Sopranos* was frequently hilarious, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* could make you sob.)

The genre that *The Sopranos* had critiqued and cannibalized—the mob drama—was considered a serious one, tied directly to the Best-Film-Ever, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*. The genres that *Buffy* mashed together (teen soaps, vampire horror, situation comedy, superhero comics) were not. *Buffy* was disco; *The Sopranos* was rock. When you were watching *The Sopranos*, you were symbolically watching side by side with a middle-aged man, even if you were a teen girl. When you watched *Buffy*, your invisible
companion was a fifteen-year-old girl, even if you were a middle-aged man. From my perspective, both of these shows were equally radical interventions into their medium: One of them was a mind-blowing mob drama about postwar capitalism and boomer masculinity, the other a blazing feminist genre experiment about mortality and sex. But only one of these shows transcended television. The other one was television.

Superficially, this split masqueraded as lowbrow versus highbrow. But the more that I argued—and I found myself fighting about these subjects again and again, eventually arguing my way into my dream job—the more the divide felt profound. Crucially, it felt tied to the problem of TV’s deep, historically grounded, seemingly intractable case of status anxiety, its sense of itself as a throwaway, a bad habit. When I proselytized for _Buffy_, or debated my fellow graduate students about _Sex and the City_, the fight felt like a way to hash out other questions—questions of values, which were embedded (and, often, hidden) in questions of aesthetics. Centrally, these were arguments about whose stories carried weight, about what kind of creativity counted as ambitious, and about who (which characters, which creators, and also, which audience members) deserved attention. What kind of person got to be a genius? Whose story counted as universal? Which type of art had staying power?

None of these arguments were new, of course. Fights about art had always doubled as fights about what the world takes seriously—which is another way to say, they were fights about politics. They were fights about power. I wasn’t a fan of heavy-handed, pedantic TV, which had its own tradition in the medium (part of television’s legacy as a public resource, the aqueduct that everyone’s kids drank from). But even shows that weren’t polemical, that didn’t feature “very special episodes,” had a different sort of politics, the type that soaked through everywhere, disguised in the look and feel and structure. As a mass medium, TV was our public square. It was where the rules got enforced. It was also where we hashed out the news as it happened, where we looked for our reflections. Critical contempt for television was like refusing to look into the mirror.

In the two decades that followed _Buffy_ and _The Sopranos_, this status anxiety has continued to shape the critical consensus around television, often invisibly so. Long after that show’s divisive black-out finale, _The Sopranos_ was considered the default for television ambition; other shows might be good, but never great. There had to be a No. 1 show, always: a grim drama, but sometimes a nihilistic comedy. That show might be nowhere as good as _The Sopranos_. It might be glum or sadistic or pretentious. But, the consensus held—even once television had begun to warp and alter—that a show like _The Sopranos_ would always be the real stuff, the adult stuff, which meant the hard stuff, in several senses. If it was punishing to watch, it was better. Viewers who craved other visions of creativity, other styles of filmmaking, or a different brand of funny or beautiful, felt that pressure, too; we felt it from without (in media messages that certain art was less important) but also from within. It was hard not to internalize these rules, even when you resisted them, even when they excluded your story.

By the time I began to write about television in earnest—for a column called “Reruns” in _The New York Times_, then at _New York_ magazine and _The New Yorker_—television was in a state of radical reinvention. A sparkling multiverse of cable networks had begun branding themselves around one show or another, just as The WB had done with _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ and HBO with _The Sopranos_. DVDs and then DVRs turned TV into a collectible, a text that could be analyzed, and also easily shared. In 2005, _YouTube_ launched, followed in 2007 by _Hulu_; in 2013, _Netflix_ began to stream original content, entire seasons at a time. As the technology changed, and along with it the economics and distribution of television, the artistry altered as well.

The old rules of what the audience could tolerate began to break down: Shows got slower (_Mad Men_), faster (_Scandal_), denser...
(The Wire), and more dreamlike (The Leftovers). The wall between comedy and drama fell so far into disrepair that Orange Is the New Black got nominated in both categories at the Emmys, on alternate years. Auteurist creators remade the sitcom in their own images; marquee-name directors arrived from Hollywood, and so did movie stars, for whom TV had previously been a career-wrecker. Reality TV emerged, becoming the television of television, as my colleague Kelefa Sanneh has written—the source of a cavalcade of brand-new moral panics. There were new genres, new structures, new production models, and eventually, at last, in a burst of oxygen, an influx of fresh, more diverse voices (female, black, brown, young, queer)—shockwaves of innovation to a medium that was notorious for repeating itself.

Some days, it seemed like my favorite medium had changed so much that it was barely recognizable. Even as I edited the introduction to this book, the arguments that I’d been making, so grudgingly, with that ancient 1997 chip on my shoulder, seemed at times to be slipping into the conventional wisdom—or maybe it was that the terms had changed, as the brash antihero fell out of favor once one was elected president. The only thing that everyone seemed to agree on, these days, was that there was simply too much television, and no way to keep up. Luckily, I liked to watch.

This book is an account of a two-decade-long argument about television, in the form of the reviews and profiles I’ve written—and because it’s a collection, it traces my thinking as I’ve changed and as the medium has changed. Criticism is a lot of different things: It’s a conversation and it’s a form of theater. It’s a way of thinking out loud, while letting everyone overhear you, which means risking getting things wrong and, on occasion, being obnoxious. But what unites these essays and profiles is my struggle—and, over time, my growing frustration—with that hidden ladder of status, the unspoken, invisible biases that hobbled TV even as it became culturally dominant. Often, these biases involve class, gender, race, and sexuality, disguised as biases about aesthetics. (Green/gray drama, serious; neon-pink musical, guilty pleasure. Single-cam sitcom, upscale; multi-cam, working class.) Sometimes those biases have been mine, too—and several essays show me wrestling with them, sometimes more successfully than others. (Like anyone constructing an anthology, I tried not to include the terrible ones, but you make the call.) There are a few pans in the mix, but not many. This collection is not in any way a list of my favorite shows: It’s mostly the pieces that reflected best on my main argument about television, the case that began to come when I watched “The Pack.” Criticism isn’t memoir, but it’s certainly personal, so you can consider these essays to be a portrait of me struggling to change my mind.

When I first started writing about television, it was an excuse, as a new journalist, to write about what interested me. Being a critic was never my goal, however—and in fact, it was a path that I’d deliberately stepped away from. Not long after graduate school, I’d taken some freelance gigs reviewing poetry for The New York Times Book Review. But as exciting as it felt to get published in the Times, I started turning those assignments down, because they made me miserable. The problem was structural. Poetry was an “elevated” art form. But while everybody respected it, no one read it. One person wrote each book—and even if that book was a hit, the writer made very little money. Under these conditions, the stakes were at once ridiculously high and very low, making even a mixed review feel cruel. If you can’t pan art, you can’t be a critic.

The minute I started writing about television, however, something clicked. Television, it seemed to me, was the opposite of poetry. While poetry was respected and rarely read, television was, as Franzen had observed on Charlie Rose, what nobody respected and everyone watched. It made money; it was created collaboratively; the people who created it made good money, too. But the default response to TV was condescension—a pat on the back when it did
anything even faintly impressive, because it seemed more like a product than an art form. Historically, a lot of TV coverage hadn’t really been arts criticism at all: It was written by industry reporters, whose beat blurred the distinction between a hit and a quality series; or by intellectuals like Trow, who used the medium as a backboard for potshots at American culture; or by academics, who analyzed it as sociology. Writing mixed or negative television reviews struck me as a brand of cruelty that I could get behind: Even the harshest pan was a way of praising TV itself, by insisting that it could and should be great, by treating it as art.

And what was television, anyway? What made television television, distinct from other art forms? It became an obsession for me to try to understand its unique qualities, to help forge a critical rhetoric unique to the medium, one less bogged down by invidious comparisons to Dickens and Scorsese. I had no scholarly background in TV or in cinema studies: At The New Yorker, especially, I tried to sneakily assign myself essays—on advertising, say, or the history of the cliffhanger—that would give me an excuse to self-educate. Knowing that history helped me shed the lazy presumption, which I held in my early years, that TV always moved forward and eternally got better. I learned more about the early days of television, during the first so-called “Golden Age,” back when TV was a live medium based in New York, a platform for sketch comedy, opera, and Paddy Chayefsky teleplays; and then about the aggressive shift to television as a mass commercialized industry, the big cheap box that families watched together (and that babysat the kids). I revisited the Norman Lear-era breakthroughs of the 1970s, when creators smashed through standards and practices to reflect the world around them, and the Reaganite retreat into escapism; the one-step-forward-two-steps-back struggle for sexual and racial inclusivity; and the glide, during the 1990s and into the early aughts, toward greater seriality and complex narratives, a move that happened parallel to the emergence of fans gathering online, eager to mob-solve any puzzle.

Somewhere along the way, I read the full context for that 1961 quote from then-FCC chairman Newton Minow, the one in which he called television “a vast wasteland.” It was more of a lament than an insult: Minow hated that TV pandered so hard, that it was such coarse, exploitative, repetitive crap, under the thumb of its sponsors. He wanted a more wholesome, patriotic slate of shows—and that’s not what he got, in the long run. But decades later, it was TV’s “vastness,” the same enormity that had so disturbed George W. S. Trow, that released its capacity for originality: Once there was less pressure on every show to please every viewer (and also sell every product), creators took risks.

And I began to think of my job, with a grandiosity that was motivational but frankly a little nuts, as a mission. Television deserved a critical stance less hobbled by shame—a language that treated television as its own viable force, not the weak sibling to superior mediums. I wasn’t especially young, but I was part of a cohort of writers—many of whom had come of age online—who shared these values. Some of my peers were part of a TV-loving generation of print critics; others wrote more “unofficial” types of criticism, which proliferated in digital spaces. Some wrote recaps—summaries of individual episodes—or fan fiction. Others participated (as I had, anonymously, back in those Buffy-fever years) in thousand-post-long debates with strangers about the minutiae of a single scene of Felicity. Others—okay, also me—watched Big Brother live on a webcam, then held debates about its sociopolitical impact and weird aesthetics on reality-TV discussion boards.

My inspiration was less Pauline Kael and Roland Barthes than the fizzy, bratty community on the discussion boards of the website Television Without Pity, which, from 1998 to 2007 (before it was bought up by Bravo and turned into a zombie version of itself), hosted threads about nearly every series. You could describe Twot as a fan site, except that it was full of haters, too. It had started out as a website called Dawson’s Wrap, which was devoted to mocking the pretentious teen soap opera Dawson’s Creek. That site’s cre-
ators, Sarah D. Bunting and Tara Ariano, had in turn been inspired by Daniel Drennan’s hilariously digressive “wrap-ups” of Beverly Hills 90210, early recaps that were posted, initially, on the online community ECHO (for East Coast Hangout.) I’d joined ECHO in the late 1990s, too. Both environments were aggressively geeky, which is to say, obsessive, rudely funny, and unconcerned with sounding normal. For newspaper critics, a one-time negative review of Dawson’s Creek might suffice. Online, commenters felt obliged to drop by every single day in order to debate why the show wasn’t getting any better. (It was a point of pride that I got kicked off TWoP for too vehemently defending another Joss Whedon show, the Fox space Western Firefly, against a particularly contemptuous recapper. Like any troll, I changed my name and got a new account.)

Over the years, a basic definition of the medium began to emerge in my thinking, a map of what made television television. On the most obvious level, it was an episodic art form. For most of its history, television had been served up in evenly sliced segments, generally one per week. A half-hour show was, conventionally speaking, a comedy; an hour-long show, most of the time, a drama. For decades, a set of genres had grown, like coral, around the gulfs that the advertisers demanded: the sitcom, the police procedural, the soap opera. (Along with the game show, the news hour, the talk show.) In TV’s earliest years, these genres were inspired by radio and theater—not so much movies or books. They were also, by design, formulaic. Because TV got repeated, then run out of order in reruns, any viewer who changed the channel needed to know what to expect. The only true “serialized” storytelling showed up in daytime soaps, which were regarded as the most lowbrow, and, not coincidentally, the most feminine genre, designed to sell soap to housewives.

But when, as the years passed, TV began to warp—as comedies got sadder and dramas funnier; as primetime stories absorbed the serialized daytime model, allowing characters to change and sto-
or ten hours long. No one creator could oversee so much material, the way you could, theoretically, singlehandedly make a movie or a book. What’s more, no one, ever, had been truly free to create their own television show, without interference—instead, “notes” (that were really demands) rained down from above, from executives and advertisers (who, in TV’s early years, were the same people). Working under these factorylike conditions, TV makers had, early on, adopted something like a blue-collar blend of pride and shame in their own labor. Like contractors, they built to someone else’s specs, often anonymously. Making television meant making something you’d never own.

This aggressive collaboration, like television’s reliance on formula, was a big part of why people had so much trouble seeing TV as ambitious art: It was harder to assign genius to a group. As the medium changed and more “auteurist” shows got green-lighted, and as “showrunner” became a term of art, turning television writers into celebrities with their own fan bases, shows that could be traced to one clear creator often got more credit from critics—a bias that tended, among other things, to favor drama over comedy. To quote BoJack Horsemam: “Diane, the whole point of television is it’s a collaborative medium where one person gets all the credit.”

TV was also, historically, a writer’s medium, where words counted more than images. Even once that was no longer true, in the post-HBO era, TV directors were still mostly hired hands, popped in weekly, bossed around by the head writer, the inverse of the Hollywood hierarchy. The writers’ room was where artists learned to compromise, to pour their voices into someone else’s vision. For TV-makers, the existential question had always been whether it was possible to wrestle something truly original—challenging and strange, idiosyncratic rather than formulaic—from a system so synonymous with groupthink. It was probably no coincidence that television had produced so many workplace shows, often about a brilliant boss struggling to harness a team of eccentrics. They were fun-house reflections of the writers’ room itself, TV’s primal scene.

Finally, more than nearly any other artistic medium, television took place over time—it took time to make, it took time to watch, it happened over time. A director films a movie, then later, people watch it; a novelist writes, then readers read. But television takes weeks, seasons, years, even decades. A fan had to keep inviting her favorite show back in. The result was a messily intense feedback loop between viewers and creators, a sadomasochistic intimacy that both sides craved and resented. Later seasons of television were altered by how audiences had responded to the show early on, an issue that was heightened by the presence of vocal fans gathering on the Internet: Showrunners could play to audience demands or angrily push back at them, but they couldn’t ignore them. Television was an art form that was somehow permanent and ephemeral at once, a record of its own improvisational creation.

And, of course, the person who writes a TV pilot isn’t the same person who writes a finale a decade later, if only because writers themselves are changed by time, too. Television ends, often unpredictably. Sometimes it gets canceled; sometimes it gets to play out those final days in a foggy, sentimental economic hospice, tolerated until it expires. Either way, the finale carries a weight no other episode does. I wanted to write about that, too.

This became my working definition of television, the model that I cherished, and, also, the tool that I wielded when arguing in favor of shows that I saw as misunderstood or condescended to, as Buffy the Vampire Slayer had been. Television was episodic, collaborative, writer-driven, and formulaic; it was gorgeous not despite but because of its own wonky elasticity, the way it altered with time, in conversation with its own history. It had to be appreciated for its variety, from moody melodramas to stylized network melodrama, without being squashed into a top ten list, reduced to a status-addled hierarchy. Yet there’s a level at which I can’t entirely
explain my adoration for television, my sense of it as not subject matter but a cause. There was something alive about the medium to me, organic in a way that other art is not. You enter into it; you get changed with it; it changes with you. I like movies, but I’m not a cinephile; you’ll never catch me ululating about camera technique, for better or worse. I love books, but I have little desire to review them. Television was what did it for me. For two decades, as the medium moved steadily from the cultural margins to its hot center, it was where I wanted to live.

In a way, compiling this book of essays has been a process of grieving a certain model of television, even as it transforms into something new. After all, in the two decades since “The Pack” first aired on The WB, every one of television’s defining qualities—the same ones I was so eager to illuminate for unbelievers—has shifted. When a streaming network releases an entire season at once, ad-free, it does feel more like a novel. (Just as many novels themselves were originally printed chapter by chapter.) When Sundance airs a nearly silent Jane Campion crime drama, like *Top of the Lake*, full of gorgeous New Zealand vistas, it is much more like a movie. When a small cable channel produces a short-run show, directed by one person, for a niche audience, with two years between seasons, solo creativity is no longer an illusion. What classic TV genre is a show like *The Leftovers* riffing off? None, maybe. Meanwhile, time itself has bent: Among other things, we’ve gained access to archives of older shows, putting the context of no context back into context. There’s probably a whole essay to be written about the seismic impact of the “Pause” button alone, the simple invention that helped turn television from a flow into a text, to be frozen and meditated upon.

Some days, the one thing that feels stable is the episode, that flexible slice, the wave inside the ocean, the part that has to double as the whole.

None of these changes has made me love television less; they’ve made me love it more. I’m drowning in it, of course. We all are. Every year, the waves roll in faster. John Landgraf, the CEO of the cable network FX, once warned about a phenomenon he labeled “Peak TV,” a fit of overproduction that, he predicted, had to end soon. I felt a sneaky flash of relief. Now, no television critic could claim to be comprehensive. I could drop the shows that bored me.

That was in 2015. Just three years later, with Netflix dropping several new series daily, Landgraf’s peak seems like a tiny hill off in the distance. My children rarely watch TV, except with me; they watch YouTubers play Minecraft instead. Some days, when the neck-snapping changes in my favorite medium feel particularly hard to grasp, I pull down an old copy of *Playboy* magazine from 1976. In it, there’s an interview with Norman Lear, back when he was overseeing half a dozen sitcoms, a kingpin of a showrunner, when that job was still called “executive producer.” Lear wasn’t universally adored back then, as he is now. 1976 was a fraught year, for all his success: He hadn’t been able to place the cutting-edge *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* with a network, so that show was running on independent stations, at odd hours. His latest sitcom, *The Dumplings*, would be a flop. Meanwhile, he was suing both the networks and the FCC, institutions that had conspired, to Lear’s frustration, on a brand-new “family hour,” a time-slot policy that the writer regarded as a gutless give-in to priggish activists. “It’s hard to talk through a muzzle,” he groused, calling the current prime-time lineup “bland opposite bland opposite bland.”

Yet Lear also models, in the midst of these complaints, something inspiring: a blend of pugnacity and optimism, along with an insistence that television is great even when it fails to achieve that greatness. Back when no one believed they were in a Golden Age, Lear shrugged off the way that his native medium had always been “a convenient whipping boy” for American malaise. It was the networks who thought small, he argued, and who were condescend-
ing to their viewers: "I've never seen anything I thought was too good for the American people or so far above them that they'd never reach for it if they had the chance." To Lear, TV was still all potential, particularly an untapped potential for variety—it just needed to "replace imitation with originality as the formula for success." He envisions cross-medium experiments: "How do they know there wouldn't be as large an audience for a John Cheever or a Ray Bradbury drama as there is for a Norman Lear or a Mary Tyler Moore show?" He defends his own sitcoms against critics, arguing that they aren't coarse or loud, but honest, showing real, loving fights in real families. With an almost startling pre-science, he agitates for industry changes that were many decades away: creators taking breaks between seasons, or switching styles; limited-run shows and fewer commercials. He's confident that television will land in the right hands, someday: led by creators, not admen.

In 2019, at ninety-six, Lear is still out there producing TV, merging an old-fashioned sitcom with a newfangled distribution model: his reboot of One Day at a Time, now set among Cuban-American immigrants, is currently streaming on Netflix. He seems immune to status anxiety. "As far back as I can remember, I have divided people into wets and drys," he told Playboy back in the 1970s. "If you're wet, you're warm, tender, passionate, Mediterranean. . . . If you're dry, you're brittle, flaky, tight-assed, and who needs you?" That's rude, but that's Lear. It also happens to be a decent definition of fanhood, the kind of passion that expresses itself in a rolling debate, as if television itself were worth fighting for. That's my model of criticism, too. It's about celebrating what never stops changing.

THE LONG CON

The Sopranos

New York magazine, June 14, 2007

The day after The Sopranos aired its divisive finale, my boss at New York magazine, Adam Moss, asked me to write something ambitious—but also, to write it fast. This was the result, my first substantive TV analysis, after years of reviews, recaps, and columns. It was also my first serious attempt at writing about what became a personal obsession, the role of the audience as a collaborator in TV. The first line is a little over-personal.

David Chase, you sadist. We trusted you, and then you turned on us—and maybe we deserved it.

Since The Sopranos' premiere in 1999, critics have preached that it was like nothing else on television: It was novelistic (Dickensian!), cinematic (Fellini-esque!), iconic (Is there any other show where most viewers still watch the opening credits?), a metaphor for Bush's America. The implication has always been that, at last, TV was playing way out of its league.

But HBO's slogan aside, The Sopranos was TV—and great because of that fact, not despite it. Chase was the first TV creator to truly take advantage, in every sense, of the odd bond a series has