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Branded Developments:
The HBO Serial and Beyond

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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This thesis argues that the serial form is crucial to the brand identity of HBO. The complexities of cross-media interaction accommodate seriality in creating, for example, multiple ways for us to enter the stories at different times and in different spaces; "stopping points" that fuel active speculation about where the story will go, and the (not necessarily linear) directions it will take; possibilities to keep the story world alive (in other platforms), as though there is no such thing as an ending. Cross-media interaction also intensifies the emotional investment a serial narrative asks that we make. I consider how the HBO serial can strengthen, or lead to, audience loyalty and love for the brand, blurring the boundaries between what it means to be a fan of a show, and a fan of HBO.

Chapter One considers notions of endings and finality as they relate to *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), a show that looks at the transformative potential of death, a potential, I argue, that also works to keep HBO fresh, ever relevant in the cultural landscape. Chapter Two looks closely at the opening credits of *Treme* (2010-) in order to highlight HBO's distinctly political, even activist dimensions. Chapter Three examines how the first season of *Bored to Death* (2009-) draws on audience familiarity with *film noir* in order to foreground HBO as a hipster brand community. Chapter Four focuses on the presence of HBO in David O. Russell's *The Fighter* (2010), a boxing film that subtly details the story of HBO's own rise to prominence, and works to strengthen consumers' "faith" in the well-established HBO brand.

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Introduction

A 1983 sequence HBO used to introduce movies (and run throughout the 80s and 90s) places us in a middle-class family room, where a father changes the channel from a game show to something that promises to be more interesting. The camera pulls back, and as the father settles in with his family around the TV, we glide from the domestic space and through the neighborhood streets, where we glimpse a movie theater below, as though to emphasize the more intimate box office of the home we have just left. We go beyond the town, and up into space, where the HBO logo slowly moves our way. The O takes on the appearance of a film reel, and we find ourselves enclosed within the reel's spinning lines, until they reveal "HBO Feature Presentation." The logo comes to us as though from outer space, a significant greeting when we consider HBO's broadcasting history. Not only was it the first network to broadcast using a satellite signal, but it also "became the first satellite network to digitally encrypt its signal, essentially putting an end to unauthorized—unpaid—viewing through its use of the Videocipher II System" (Leverette 3). The father's move at the cable box bespeaks an authorized use of the box office. And the logo that enfolds us indicates that to experience the program is not just to tune into HBO's signal, but also to enter HBO's space.

That space has grown considerably more complex over the last three decades. Its expansion into seven channels reveals strategies to widen the appeal in a niche-driven, post-network era: an HBO subscription now extends to its family of channels, from HBO Family, to HBO Latino, to HBO Comedy, and beyond. It is also a space complicated by the different practices of watching television in an age of media convergence characterized by *interaction* with what we watch, whether through websites, DVDs, or

fan communities—platforms or experiences that either did not exist in 1983, or were not part of any marketing strategy. Kristen Daly writes about interactive experiences in the cinema, and drawing on recent work in new media argues that "a movie no longer exists as a cohesive, unchanging art piece but instead participates in a world of cross-media interaction, and this has enabled new forms of narrative requiring, as part of the enjoyment, interaction in the form of user-participation and interpretation" (82). Influenced by media theorists including Henry Jenkins and John Caldwell, this thesis will explore the impact of a world of cross-media interaction on television in general, and HBO television in particular. I am especially interested in the *serial* form of narrative, and the ways this form affects our interaction not just with a given television show, but also with the HBO brand. This is a thesis, in other words, that examines the "HBO serial."

I will demonstrate that the serial form is crucial to the brand identity of HBO. The complexities of cross-media interaction accommodate seriality in creating, for example, multiple ways for us to enter the stories at different times and in different spaces; "stopping points" that fuel active speculation about where the story will go, and the (not necessarily linear) directions it will take; possibilities to keep the story world alive (in other platforms), as though there's no such thing as an ending. Cross-media interaction also intensifies the emotional investment a serial narrative asks that we make. I will consider how the HBO serial can strengthen, or lead to, audience loyalty and love for the brand, blurring the boundaries between what it means to be a fan of a show, and a fan of HBO.

It might seem that my approach minimizes the blur. My close readings of an episode or a scene may often seem like they have nothing to do with HBO; my discussion of HBO might often seem remote from the textual analysis I do. But my overall aim is to reveal the emotional overlap between the two—that is, between a serialized show and HBO as a brand. Serialization is a strategy for building relationships. It fosters an emotional investment that is meaningful for both fans and corporation. I will argue that HBO develops its brand identity most prominently *through* a strategy of developing narratives over time; and that a given serial develops brand awareness, even when the story world seems untouched by corporate interests. I hope my thesis will contribute to the discussion of how we think about HBO today, in what some critics have called the "post-HBO era".[1]

HBO aired its first program on November 8, 1972: a hockey game between The New York Rangers and the Vancouver Canucks (Leverette 2). Since that time, it has become a flagship company in the Time Warner media empire, though as many have pointed out, the company is its own empire, with numerous channel incarnations and a global outreach. HBO is now, as Al Auster writes, "a far cry from the network that started its history . . . with bicycling programming including polka contests and the film version of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*" (226). Auster argues that HBO's history is characterized by its "approach to generic transformation," an

[1] Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley use the term in their introduction to *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era* (7). They write: "HBO's influence has reached across the television landscape. Other networks have begun to imitate the HBO formula in terms of style and content, the 'HBO effect,' if you will" (1). They cite programs such as AMC's *Mad Men* and Showtime's *Dexter* and *Weeds*. The HBO effect I see in shows like these is the serialized form. I will argue that the form is both a good business model, and a reflection of the pleasures offered by convergence culture.

approach that is itself marked by HBO's corporate awareness of operating in opposition to the major networks. The recent tagline associated with the brand from 1997 to 2009—"It's not TV. It's HBO"—has an historical inflection that keys us into its earliest strategies to separate itself from TV.

Its made-for-television movies, for instance, challenged traditional, TV-typical approaches to the bio-pic. Auster cites *The Terry Fox Story* (1983), a movie about a young man who has lost his leg to cancer and runs across Canada to raise cancer awareness; what kept the movie from being a standard story of inspiration, "and was suggestive of what the future might hold, was the fact that Terry Fox (Eric Fryer) was a jerk. Needless to say, portraying Fox as a cranky, unlikable cancer victim was a departure from both the expected and the norm. And so was telling the story of someone most Americans had probably never heard of" (229).

HBO continued to take similar approaches to the sitcom, miniseries, and the dramatic series, and in ways that strengthened its position as the alternative to regular TV. Indeed, numerous series in the late '90s counter the standard fare offered by the networks. The brutal prison drama *Oz* is the prime example. Auster discusses the interest of Tom Fontana (who produced *St. Elsewhere* and *Homicide*) in creating *Oz*, "tempted by the network's offer of no restrictions on language and content" (238). The series was something "no network would even consider doing," Auster writes, and it was the forerunner of programs like *The Sopranos* (238-39).

The reason HBO could be so self-consciously different from the networks is that it is *subscription* TV, which means that it is not "beholden to advertisers and sponsors who might otherwise try to influence programming" (227). Controversy has

nevertheless come with the package, as Marc Leverette, Brian Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley note in the introduction to their anthology. In the 1980s, they write, "HBO was involved in several related lawsuits . . . with cable systems and local statutes, including city and state, which attempted to censor HBO and other pay networks for broadcasting indecent material" (4). And calling attention to the resentment directed at high subscription fees, they recount the protest of "Captain Midnight," an electronic engineer who hijacked HBO's signal at precisely 12:23 AM on April 27, 1986, with a message that stayed onscreen for well over four minutes, interrupting the broadcast of *The Falcon and the Snowman*: "GOODEVENING HBO. FROM CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT. $12.95/MONTH? NO WAY! [SHOWTIME/MOVIE CHANNEL BEWARE!]".

There are also questions about how different from the networks HBO is to begin with. Avi Santo describes HBO as "para-television" in the ways it has "positioned itself in relation to network television" (29): original programming that smells a lot like television, such as police shows, workplace and family dramas; scheduling that borrows strategies from the networks, as when the "Sunday is . . . HBO" ad campaign "intended to create audience identification with Sunday night as belonging to HBO, much as Thursday was long associated with NBC" (27); hiring practices that emphasized television production experience—in addition to Tom Fontana, crossover producers include *Sex and the City*'s Darren Starr (*Beverly Hills 90210* and *Melrose Place*) and *The Sopranos*' David Chase (*I'll Fly Away* and *Northern Exposure*) (26). Furthermore, as Tony Kelso writes, just because HBO brands itself as a quality network does not mean that it is "immune from corporate

influence. It is, for sure, part of the Time Warner empire. If its business model were to yield diminished returns, it is hardly likely that its parent company would simply endorse the cause of producing quality programming for quality's sake and that HBO would not hear from the suits at headquarters" (53).

Serialization is part of the business model. Auster writes that HBO will "allow a series to find an audience": if a show doesn't do well out of the gate, it will stick with it, which has led the network to "become the standard of quality in contemporary American television" (227). The strategy of allowing a series to find an audience brings brand and serial together. According to Kelso, allowing a series to find an audience is a luxury that network television does not have. HBO is driven by subscribers, not ratings: "A commercial show, under the surveillance of advertisers, must immediately post strong results in Nielsen's charts or likely wind up on the chopping block before viewers even have a chance to find the new program in their television listings" (52). I would argue that this strategy of serialization makes sense financially *and* emotionally. On one hand, as Jeffrey Sconce has argued, the very serial elements that have been so long reviled in soaps, pulps, and other 'low' genres are now used to increase connotations of 'quality' (and thus desirable demographics) in television drama" (99).

On the other hand, a serial builds relationships with its audience, providing time for viewers to grow emotionally invested in the world created by the serial, to *want* to keep going back to that world. Auster calls *The Sopranos* "the kind of rich, sprawling narrative that was once the province of the nineteenth-century novel" (241). While Christopher Anderson writes that comparing television series to the

novel "has become a tiresome critical cliché" (25), I like to imagine that the *serial* novel of the nineteenth century is now the province of HBO, and other networks that have followed HBO's lead in strategies of serialization. Like HBO, the most famous practitioner of the form in the nineteenth century—Dickens—knew well the payoff the serial novel could deliver; he knew that rich, sprawling narratives thrive in the serial form, to the financial and emotional benefit of multiple interested parties.[2]

In order to maintain a focus on HBO's history and development as a brand, I will focus on *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Treme* (2010-), *Bored to Death* (2009-), and the 2010 film *The Fighter*, directed by David O. Russell. Chapter One considers notions of endings and finality as they relate to *Six Feet Under*, a show that looks at the transformative potential of death, a potential, I argue, that also works to keep HBO fresh, ever relevant in the cultural landscape. Chapter Two looks closely at the opening credits of *Treme* in order to highlight HBO's distinctly political, even activist dimensions. Chapter Three examines how the first season of *Bored to Death* draws on audience familiarity with *film noir* in order to foreground HBO as a hipster brand community. And the last chapter, in a seeming departure from what precedes it, focuses on the presence of HBO in *The Fighter*, a boxing film that subtly details the story of HBO's own rise to prominence. I argue that *The Fighter* works to strengthen consumers' "faith" in the well-established HBO brand.

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[2] The sitcom is not as "sprawling" or "novelistic" as the serial; it operates differently in the sense that its episodes are self-contained. The viewer of any given episode does not necessarily need to be familiar with its characters, or any overarching narrative that holds the episodes together (though such familiarity might deepen one's engagement with the sitcom). Still, the sitcom as HBO exploits it accords with my understanding of the serial as a "branded development". I will have more to say about this in the third chapter, when I look at *Bored to Death*.

I examine these series (and film) primarily through the lens of affect, which is to say that I see HBO working to forge an emotional bond with its viewers. Reviewing 1990s books on business and marketing, Abigail Cheever has described corporate efforts to develop *relationships* with consumers:

> . . . Mike Moser argues in *United We Brand* that 'it is impossible for a company not to have a personality' (67). The best way to conceive of a brand is to acknowledge this fact up front. If you '[t]hink of your company as a person' (176), Moser claims, you will be more likely to 'create a [brand] personality that connects with people' and thus 'create your own brand community' (77-79).

At its most effective, branding encourages the consumer to love the company. That this notion continues to resonate today is evidenced perhaps most clearly in Saatchi & Saatchi's Lovemarks, a concept that looks to the "future beyond brands." The word illustrates a reverse branding at work. It is as though the company brands the consumer, leaves a mark: "Lovemarks reach your heart as well as your mind, creating an intimate, emotional connection that you just can't live without. Ever. Take a brand away and people will find a replacement. Take a Lovemark away and people will protest its absence. Lovemarks are a relationship, not a mere transaction" (http://www.lovemarks.com/index.php?pageID=20020).

This thesis shows how serialization works to situate HBO in the media brandscape. The willingness of the HBO serial to explore possibilities for social and political transformation gets at the heart of the company's strategy to brand consumers, to nurture a lovemark. Ultimately, the HBO brand itself is a kind of

never-ending serial. Or at least, its formula for success derives from its aspirations to be one, even at a time when we have gone beyond HBO.

Chapter One. The End: Serialized Branding and *Six Feet Under*

The leading story announced by the cover of the March 8, 2010 issue of *Newsweek* is: "Victory at Last: The Emergence of a Democratic Iraq." The text is superimposed on a photograph from 2003, when President George W. Bush proclaimed an end to major combat in Iraq in a televised speech on the *USS Abraham Lincoln*; as he delivered his speech a banner with the words "Mission Accomplished" was prominent in the background (Fig. 1).

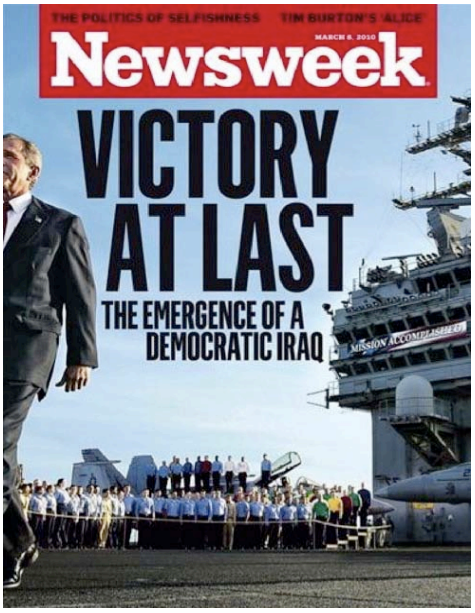

Fig. 1.

Nearly seven years later, the *Newsweek* cover both revisits and deflates the controversy generated by Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech. Bush's head is raised and his gait is steady as he walks toward the future, the very image of a confident, competent leader. Remarkably, the cover elides the extraordinary polarization accomplished by the Bush presidency, encapsulated by this famous event staged aboard the *Abraham Lincoln*. Differences of opinion existed in the country during the two Bush terms, but a false unity imposed by the administration tended to erase it. One way to look at this cover is to recognize the erasure in effect, to see (and

remember) the power of the Bush administration to frame a story of struggling for democracy (within the context of the War on Terror) in its own terms—and to the exclusion of anyone else that saw things differently.

Shortly after the issue appeared, BAGnewsNotes, a website devoted to the analysis of political spin in media images such as this one, questioned the magazine's strategy:

> Isn't Newsweek simply repeating the original sin of declaring "Mission Accomplished" based on the latest supposed milestone—in this case, a highly controversial election that hasn't even taken place yet!) [sic] in a country still deeply divided and loosely stitched together? What does the cropping say about Dubya? Is Newsweek saying he's off the hook? That he gets to put it behind him now?

These questions are effective in encouraging discussion of politically and emotionally charged images circulating throughout media. I would add one more. How does the cropping of Bush—he is both of and apart from that historical moment—invite reflection on the relationships of present to past, and present to future?

It is from this question that I wish to begin my discussion of *Six Feet Under*, HBO, and seriality. A serial is grounded in the awareness of one's relationship to past and future. The *Newsweek* cover opens up a serialized space in the sense that it invites us to look back at that time and speculate about what now lies ahead. The political implications of the cover are relevant to *Six Feet Under*, a serial that crossed Bush's first and second terms: the series premiered on June 3, 2001, and it ended on August 21, 2005. The stories it tells across five seasons engage with numerous

political issues facing the country under Bush's leadership. In an interview with Tim Russert on February 8, 2004, as he was gearing up for re-election in the fall, Bush declared: "I'm a war president. I make decisions here in the Oval Office in foreign-policy matters with war on my mind. Again, I wish it wasn't true, but it is true. And the American people need to know they got a president who sees the world the way it is" (Marinucci). *Six Feet Under* consistently challenged the vision of a world that demanded to be seen in only one way, whether in the America of George W. Bush, or an America haunted by such visions from its past, before Bush even entered the picture. The serial focuses on the lives of the Fisher family, who own and operate the Fisher & Sons funeral home in Pasadena, California. Each episode opens with an ending: we witness the death of a person whose remains will then be prepared for burial, usually by David Fisher (Michael C. Hall), or Federico "Rico" Diaz (Freddy Rodríguez), who works for the family (and wishes to become a partner in their business). Each death has a transformative impact within the family, and the cumulative impact across the serial reflects what makes *Six Feet Under* hopeful in the end: it is always possible to transform official, normative ways of looking at the world.

My general aim here is to explore how the show exploits the serial form to engage its viewers emotionally, and in ways that connect the story world to the world of the viewers. I am particularly interested in the *immersive* and *extractable* dimensions of these emotional investments. Henry Jenkins uses these terms to describe how a story opens up beyond itself, how it can be told and experienced across multiple media within consumer culture: "In immersion . . . the consumer

enters into the world of the story, while in extractability, the fan takes aspects of the story away with them as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life" ("Revenge"). Though I do not focus on fandom as it relates to transmedia storytelling, it will be clear from the following pages that I am a fan of *Six Feet Under*. I hope it will be equally clear how a fandom such as mine reveals emotional overlap between the story world and the world of everyday life—how the lives of fictional characters, for example, might lead to an emotional response such as the one I had to a *Newsweek* cover.

I focus on two episodes, one from the pre-9/11 first season ("Brotherhood" [1:7]), and the other from the final season, after Bush was inaugurated for his second term ("Static" [5:11]). My choosing these two episodes is partly an attempt at navigation. In approaching a single installment of a serial, we need some awareness of how the part relates to the whole; as the serial develops, we come to recognize the unique ways the given installment builds on the past even as it looks ahead to the end. "Brotherhood" and "Static" are useful for the ways they negotiate anxieties generated during the Bush era, particularly anxieties related to war. But they also provide a good starting point for my arguments about the symbiotic relationship between brand (HBO) and serial, as well as the ways a brand functions like a serial, and vice-versa. What I am calling "serialized branding" in this chapter speaks to the interest these two episodes take in *how things end*. The sense of an ending is somewhat antithetical to a serial's nature to keep going yet this sense is crucial to the connections between branding and serialization that I wish to explore in this thesis. I link the different conceptions of endings in "Brotherhood" and "Static"—the end of a

life, for example; the end of an episode; the end of a series—to the emotional dynamics of the Fisher family, and of the families whose lives touch theirs, and potentially ours. It is the affective discourses opened up by the Fisher Funeral Home that drive *Six Feet Under* as a serial, and HBO as a brand.

I. War is Now Behind Us

As I have suggested, death is central to the serial form of *Six Feet Under*—crucial in developing the story of the Fishers as it plays out over time. Every opening death (nearly all episodes have one) becomes intertwined in the lives of the primary characters. Rob Turnock argues that very often the ghosts of those who have died help the main characters resolve specific issues in their lives, and they cease to appear once the characters have worked through those issues. The one recurring ghost, Turnock points out, is Nathaniel Fisher Sr. (Richard Jenkins), killed in a car accident in the pilot episode: his appearances function both to connect the episodes into a larger narrative framework, and to signify the developments taking place in the characters' lives. "As a dead person," Turnock writes, "he can speak difficult truths . . . which the living are often reluctant to admit, even to themselves. Yet, unlike the deceased that the Fishers encounter in their professional lives, Nathaniel's reappearance signifies a longer grieving process—that the Fishers miss him and wish he were there to support and guide them" (44). Dana Heller contextualizes the death of Nathaniel Fisher, Sr. in a Gothic tradition in which the dead function to show that "an innocent fantasy of nationhood" excludes many groups from a sense of national belonging (74). The dead who visit the Fisher family, Heller argues, embody the

experiences and perspectives of the "other" that threatens "what Lauren Berlant calls a 'nationalist politics of intimacy,' a conservative ideological agenda that has personalized the space of citizenship and national culture by making the private heterosexual family the foundation of national survival" (82). The Fisher family thus becomes a site where difference from the norm is welcomed, which envisions possibilities for national transformation. Heller describes the family space in *Six Feet Under* as a " 'Gothic democracy,' a progressive social vision in which abject 'others' direct future narratives of national identity and belonging" (74).

The "episode" of each opening death has implications for the personal transformations *Six Feet Under* makes possible as a serial. For characters and viewers alike, life continues between the episodes; the potential for transformation lies in the spaces between installments, spaces that encourage individuals to reflect on past events before moving into the future. It is true that not all audiences watch (or watched) the show in its original serial format; still, the show consistently draws attention to the way its narratives unfold *over time*, and in ways that invite viewers to reflect on their own positions in time. "Brotherhood" (July 15, 2001) and "Static" (August 14, 2005) reflect both the pre- and post-9/11 worlds through which this sprawling five-year narrative unfolded. The 2005 episode "remembers" the 2001 episode by revisiting the theme of brotherhood, but this time in ways integral to the narrative as it prepares for its own end—and for the beginning of Bush's second term. What links these two episodes across the years is that they feature the death of an American soldier. In "Brotherhood," Victor Wayne Kovitch, PFC (Brian Kimmet), who fought in the first Gulf War ten years earlier, dies from Gulf War Syndrome; in

"Static," Paul Duncan (Billy Lush), a triple amputee Iraq War veteran, commits suicide with his sister Holly's (Amy Spanger) assistance. The representations of these deaths are emotionally and politically charged. Consider Turnock's discussion of "death pollution":

> In *Six Feet Under* the purpose of the Fisher business is the disposal of the dead body. In sociological terms the removal of the cadaver, which is both physically and metaphorically polluting, is a key function of funerary rites. Not only does the physical breakdown and decay of the corporeal body present aesthetic, aromatic and hygienic problems, but also the corpse is a symbolic reminder of the disruptive potency of death—both personal and social. Death happens to us all, and this is potentially terrifying in and of itself for the living. (41)

An important management strategy, Turnock continues, is the "visual control" that the Fishers and Rico have over the dead bodies. "Brotherhood" and "Static" are both invested in strategies of visual control, not just in the preparation of the body, but also in the attention each episode gives to whether or not the dying soldier's final wishes will be honored, and in concerns about how the soldier will be "remembered".

"Brotherhood" opens with an unsettling juxtaposition between the soldier's able body and his dying one; "Static" closes by refusing to show the soldier's body (made whole with prosthetic limbs) on display in the viewing room. These juxtapositions highlight the anger characters express at the state's control, and media representations, of the various images of American soldiers, including soldiers who have died. "Static" opens with a shot of an SUV with a "Support Our Troops"

bumper sticker; in the distance the American flag hangs from a pole at the entrance to a hospital (Fig. 2). Almost immediately, a car disrupts the *mise-en-scène;* the flag and the sticker reappear in a flash, and are gone again, but they haunt the moments that follow. We see a woman at the steering wheel in the truck, crying as she looks at the hospital; we learn that she is there to help her brother Paul kill himself, and then we watch as she sits by his side when he dies. Later in the episode, Claire (Lauren Ambrose) arrives at the funeral home with her boyfriend Ted (Chris Messina) as the Duncans are leaving after discussing funeral arrangements for Paul. She spots the bumper sticker on the Duncans' truck (Fig. 3). Drunk and angry, she launches into a diatribe aimed at Paul's mother and sister, without realizing who these women are:

> What a bunch of bullshit! Why don't you try driving something that doesn't require so much gas for starters if you're so fucking concerned? Dozens of fucking Iraqis are still dying every day! The whole world hates us for going in there in the first place. And terrorists are still going to be blowing shit up in this country for the next hundred years. And the best thing she can think to do about it is put a sticker on that enormous shit box. You know they still bring the wounded soldiers back at night so the press can't even film it and nobody sees! American soldiers are still being fucked up every day and they don't even tell us. And it's all so you can put gas in this enormous fucking car of yours to keep everybody feeling really fucking American!

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

This tirade is partly in keeping with the impetuous and rebellious character Claire has played throughout the show's five-year run. It is also consistent with Claire's struggles to deal with the death of her own brother, Nate—it comes at the heels of similar outbursts earlier in the episode. Yet Claire remains unaware of Holly's role in Paul's death, of whatever factors led Holly to decide to assist her brother's suicide. The opening shot of "Static" gives context to the sticker that Claire sees only as ornamentation for a gas-guzzling SUV. "Support Our Troops" hangs over this scene, in which Holly offers an ironic kind of support, and harkens back to the earlier moments of Holly in the truck, which brings into the open the deeply emotional and political complexities circulating within a slogan meant to promote national unity.

This is not to say that Claire's anger does not strike a realistic note. As Claire points out, the highly politicized bumper sticker becomes even more charged stuck as it is on an SUV. In *Tourists of History*, Marita Sturken argues that the SUV is a symbol of American military might, and points to the Hummer as "a key symbol of the post-9/11 era" (87). With its own history as a military vehicle in the 1991 Gulf War, the Hummer was marketed to make Americans feel safer in troubled times, despite American contributions to all the trouble. Claire's anger finds support in

Sturken's reading of the Hummer's cultural resonance: "The Hummer is a potent symbol of gas-guzzling denial on the part of Americans at a time when the country's insatiable desire for oil has taken it into yet another war" (89). Trucks such as the one driven by the Duncans were marketed in advertising discourse at the time to conflate nation with family. "Defending the home and the desire to feel 'at home' are key elements in the imperial policies of the U.S. government after 9/11," writes Sturken. "Underlying both are notions of innocence and comfort; the home that must be defended from external threat is articulated as a site of innocence, and the desire to feel at home in the United States and in the world is enabled by the idea of comfort" (41). To buy an SUV *is* to support the troops, in the sense that support for the troops is support for a war that makes it possible to buy an SUV while staying distanced from what the politics of such a purchase might mean. It is a strange cycle: "the militarized home, with its military vehicle in the driveway, offers the only comfort available in a time of uncertainty, when each day the policies of the U.S. government increases the risk to its citizens" (90).

In using the familiar, widely circulating media image of the SUV, *Six Feet Under* reveals what Samuel Chambers would call its own "cultural politics," "the mutual imbrication of culture with politics, or of politics with culture" (9). All television shows, Chambers argues, have "a political *potential*," often tapped by those who "read" them (9-10). "Brotherhood" also highlights the complexities hidden by the slogan "Support Our Troops" by exploring characters' responses to the death of Victor Kovitch, a veteran of the first Gulf War. The episode pits Nate Fisher against Victor's brother Paul, who wants his brother's body to be cremated and disposed of

as quietly as possible because of the contempt the brothers had for the army. "Vic hated the army," Paul tells David and Nate. "Me and him have been fighting the army for seven years. No one will say the word Gulf War Syndrome." After the body is delivered to the funeral home with two medals taped to its chest—put there by someone who wants Nate to investigate further—Nate will learn that Victor wished to have a military burial, in spite of Paul's claims to the contrary. The episode traces Nate's efforts to honor that wish. It ends by dismissing neither Paul's anger nor Victor's desire, as Nate puts it, "to believe that what he did in the Gulf meant something."

That Victor believes in his work during the Gulf War is evident from the video letter he sends home to his parents from the Gulf. [3] The episode opens with a close-up of Victor as he steadies the camera and prepares to address his family. He speaks about the day-to-day routine of life as a soldier: "Mostly we're filling sandbags and cleaning vehicle filters. This war it's particularly important to keep the mechanisms clean because of all the sand, which can be as much of a threat as any missile Saddam can send. Capt. Sommers says—I can't say much, but pretty soon we're going to get in the real action. And we're well-prepared." As Victor talks to the camera, we hear his buddies horsing around in the background; finally, one of them enters the frame, puts his arms around Victor, and offers his own address to the camera: "We're protecting your ass, folks. I love you, America. Thank you." The

[3] Victor's video belongs to the tradition of dramatizing soldiers' experiences in war by reading and/or dramatizing the personal letters that recount those experiences. Television examples would include Ken Burns' use of letters in his 1990 documentary *The Civil War*, and, more recently, a tighter focus on a single character writing letters to a girl back home in HBO's miniseries *The Pacific* (2010).

friend then walks to the camera and picks it up, disturbing the image. When Victor playfully pushes his friend away and re-steadies the camera—"Sorry, Mom"—the "other" camera slowly tracks back to reveal to us that this letter has unfolded on a television screen. Victor's family is not being addressed in this shot; instead, the camera moves back from the TV and then tracks past dozens of video cassettes piled on a VCR (Fig. 4), then past a young man sitting on a bed with a bandaged head—we are in some kind of hospital—then along the space opposite the television screen. We see a remote fall softly and lifelessly from a motionless hand, then Victor's face, staring at nothing, and finally the entrance of Paul, who tells his brother that he brought the latest video of *South Park*.

Fig. 4.

In the present of 2001, the cassettes are caught between past and future: they represent a format that was on its way out, moved out of the way by the popularity of DVDs. Even *South Park* is on tape, a strong hint, along with the stack of tapes, that Victor has not gone past the VCR. I would argue that the emphasis on old media is an index of old media *representations*. The episode's opening invites comparison between Victor's take on "this war," and that offered by the American media in 1991; at the same time, his optimism, along with the friend's playful comments about

protecting and loving America, hint that this private video letter is reflective of official discourses surrounding the war. In her discussion of how news is "performed," Margaret Morse has recalled television's "patriotic fervor" of the time. Morse looks at what she calls the "sincerity" effected by the anchor on American national news, and the feeling such sincerity creates for viewers that the anchor is there with them, addressing them directly and delivering the news in a personal, affective way. As the Gulf War got underway, television news became "militarized":

> Instead of sound bites from "real" people, that is, troops or civilians, weapons such as the Stealth were personalized as hometown heroes and military spokespersons became television hosts with the power to make the press into secretaries for oral dictation. Reporters in the field were sent into the desert without an uplink. Even the president had to defend his supreme anchor position against the wild popularity General Schwarzkopf had garnered as the chief anchor of war reporting. (213-214)

Victor shares something of the anchor's sincerity in this video, which is after all addressed to his family. His comments point to the appeal he would have as a real person whose real experiences could be exploited as a sound bite for a reporting that created support for the war. Even so, nothing in Victor's video suggests dissent on his part; rather, it communicates a strong sense that he believes his work in the Gulf *does* mean something. When Paul claims that he and Victor had been fighting the army for seven years, and when he implies media complicity in cover-up work with

his comment that "Gulf War Syndrome" is never brought up, getting at the truth of Victor's final wishes for a military funeral becomes that much more difficult. Nate's efforts at uncovering Victor's wishes dramatize the problems associated with seeing the real in media representations. Is the Victor who just died the same Victor who greets us from the Gulf War in 1991?

The scene illustrates that from its beginning *Six Feet Under* questioned the coherence of national narratives, suggesting here, for instance, two months before 9/11, that the story of the Gulf War must now include the impact of Gulf War Syndrome. Heller would say that calling attention to such inclusion is a consequence of Gothic democracy: "the contradictory powers of the dead to decentre our master narratives and at the same time grant us the kind of singularity that enables the coalescence of diverse national stories, a manner of affirmative dislocation that constitutes a passionately political force of belonging" (84). When Nate collects Victor's personal items, he sees posted on a cabinet door a makeshift collection of material ranging from photographs, to a "Support our Troops" sticker, to newspaper clippings, including the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* from February 28, 1991, which declares in a headline: "Bush Halts Combat. 'War is Now Behind Us,' He Says" (Figs. 5-7). Like the remote control he dies holding, these postings are a measure of Victor's agency: they are *his* selections, *his* organization. The power of editing and time-shifting implied by the remote—pausing, rewinding, fast-forwarding are also methods of selection and organization—raises unanswerable yet important questions about what Victor might have been looking for with that remote in his hand. Is he reaffirming the patriotic feeling he had in 1991? Is he searching for the

sense of belonging created by the horseplay in the 1991 video, but undermined in 2001 by a political disregard for Gulf War Syndrome? The postings raise the same questions, and compile a record of Victor's response to the Gulf War, writ large on the cabinet door.

It is impossible to know what Victor was thinking when he selected and organized these things to post. Still, in the context of an episode that addresses both Gulf War Syndrome and Victor's pride as a soldier, the postings invite our attention to an individual's desire to belong, to have his story told. The headline announces the end of war, and the personal photographs of camaraderie that surround the front-page clipping emphasize Victor's desire to belong, even as they lend a celebratory tone to the organization. But the sticker at the bottom of the display casts doubts about whether support of our troops has extended to those suffering from Gulf War Syndrome. Additionally, the war coverage in the *Times* on February 28 reflected American ambivalence toward the war, with stories ranging from the celebratory ("Feeling on Top of the World") to the critical ("Some still doubt whether the war was necessary or wise"). Victor's postings quietly complicate the notion that the war is now behind us, even in 2001.

Fig. 5.


Los Angeles Times

Bush Halts Combat

'War Is Now Behind Us,' He Says

Feeling on Top of the World

POWs Begging Not to Be Sent Back to Hussein's Iraq

Crowds Cheer Liberation Day in Kuwait City

Ethics Panel Says Cranston Broke Rules in Keating Ties

Special Forces: U.S. 'Eyes' Deep in Enemy Territory

Fig. 6.


COLUMN ONE

Feeling on Top of the World

■ The prevailing sentiment across the country is that the nation showed its greatness in standing up to Saddam Hussein. But some still doubt whether war was necessary or wise.

By BARRY BEARAK
TIMES STAFF WRITER

ON THE LIBERATION OF KUWAIT

In Washington

In Riyadh

President Bush announces a halt in con

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf outlines

strategy, and joy fills the streets in Kuwait

In Kuwait city

Fig. 7.

II. Commodifying The End

"Brotherhood" certainly creates the sense that Victor's story has come to an end, but *Six Feet Under* makes clear that its influence never does. In the context of the serial's narrative, the episode shows Nate not only coming to terms with his own position in the family business. Earlier episodes had traced his reluctance to stay and work after he returns home for his father's funeral, but this one shows him beginning

to embrace his role in the business as the one who ministers to the bereaved, and who honors the life of the dead, a role that will affect the serial's direction in later episodes, and later seasons. "Brotherhood" also acknowledges the traumatic presence of other national stories, in addition to Victor's, by focusing on brothers Nate and David, who are at odds over Victor's military burial, David holding out for Paul's consent. The episode ends with Paul's presence at the military burial—he has honored his brother's wish—and with David's comment to Nate at the military cemetery: "You did the right thing today." "I know," Nate replies. "It feels kind of good, doesn't it?" His response elicits a reflective look from David, whose story over the past several episodes had focused on what "doing the right thing" means. Indeed, the episodes leading up to "Brotherhood" center on David's own political awareness as it relates to his tortured efforts to come out of the closet (which largely make up his story arc in the first season of *Six Feet Under*).

Two episodes earlier, in "An Open Book," David becomes a church deacon, and his work in this capacity corresponds with the work Nate will do on Victor's behalf. It turns out that David is the swing vote in the decision on whether a new, politically active priest will be hired for St. Bartholomew's. The candidate, Father Clark (Raphael Sbarge), is certainly aware of this; his conversation with David is a manipulative effort to get that vote. In a scene that takes place in the church, as he and David walk down the aisle and toward the altar, the candidate complains about the parishioners' complacency: "This is one of those congregations that thinks sitting through church once a week absolves them of all moral responsibility, and they can ignore the plight of others." As examples of others' plights, he includes stories of "the

gay kid who gets strung up, or the black man who gets dragged behind a car, or someone's mother living in a box." When David says he had no idea how "political" being a deacon would be, Clark replies: "Religion is politics. Jesus was a revolutionary. He threatened those in power, and they had him assassinated. And they'd do the same thing to him today."

Father Clark's comments to David extend beyond the story world of *Six Feet Under*. The "gay kid" and "black man" he mentions are clear references to the murders of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming on October 12, 1998 and James Byrd in Texas on June 7 of the same year, stories that likely would have been familiar to viewers in 2001, and, like the media's representation of the 1991 Gulf War, had already been absorbed by the flow of television. "Real" stories thus circulate through a media landscape that includes HBO's *Six Feet Under*, and when Clark refers to them, he creates the potential for both David *and* viewers to respond. His complaint about parishioners' feeling absolved of moral responsibility by sitting in church once a week, for instance, calls to mind the weekly ritual of watching *Six Feet Under*, as when the program originally aired. In a self-reflexive reference in the same episode, we see that Sundays for David are set aside not only for church, but for HBO: we see David and Keith enjoying an episode of *Oz*, which at the time of "An Open Book" and "Brotherhood" was in its fourth season.[4] The nesting of an episode of *Oz* in an

[4] This domestic moment anticipates the "queer family" that David and Keith will form by the fifth season, according to Chambers. Further, the episode of *Oz* creates overlap between the real world of HBO and the story world of *Six Feet Under*. "Oz didn't make you a bitch," Keller tells Beecher, drawing laughter from David and Keith that suggests possibilities for camp in this brutal prison drama, and thus the appeal it might have for a range of audiences. The *Oz* reference also functions as a narrative guidepost: "An Open Book" closes with David kneeling in prayer in his

episode of *Six Feet Under* illustrates the layering that gets at the heart of HBO's identity as a brand. It's not just that the network promises to offer programming different from so-called regular TV; HBO promises that it will never stop doing so. HBO doesn't "end," in other words, as *Oz* will, or as *Six Feet Under* will. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is when a new show is "nested" at the edges of an established show, whether HBO airs trailers right before or immediately after, or follows a known show with the introduction of a new one. The programming might change, but HBO keeps going.

Jason Mittell has argued that the experience of a television serial changes when it is nested in a box set of DVDs; he explains that his viewing of the first season of *Six Feet Under* led him to see the image on the box cover as less about death, and more about the show's interest in "sexual experimentation and expression". Mittell compares such "serial boxes," as he calls them, to the VCR recordings of an earlier time (from the 80s, say): "These recordings were bound to an original time and place, marked by the station identifications and advertisements as belonging to a broadcast, with the flow between programs as a strategy designed to yield high ratings and audience continuity" ("Serial Boxes"). Boxed sets of DVDs, though, are uprooted from their original time and place, and establish instead a "key site of extratextual meaning . . . both as an object to be owned and a narrative to be experienced."

It is in this site, I would argue, that serial and brand come together. The box cover for the fifth season calls our attention to the end of the series: Claire drives the

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bedroom, seeking guidance for how to live his life as a gay man; framed by the bars of the window blinds and the shadows they cast on the wall, the scene suggests the extent to which his life in the closet tells an emotionally devastating story about imprisonment.

lime-green hearse into the sunset, and beneath the image on the right are the words, "Everything. Everyone. Everywhere. Ends" (Fig. 8). The narrative resonance comes not just from the hearse, or the fact that Claire drives it—the hearse is important throughout the serial, and the scene on the cover encapsulates the narrative tensions and resolutions emerging from the theme of family business. The resonance also comes from the very act of opening the box. Beneath the cover is the encasing for the DVDs; on *this* cover's white background we read: "Six Feet Under. 2001-2005." The presentation resonates with the fade-to-white epitaph that would mark a character's death toward the beginning of every episode. Lifting the cover reveals the epitaph for the series, adding to the sense of loss that the ending of a series can bring, and working in tandem with the final episode, which intensified the sense of loss by marking the future deaths of the show's central characters that lived during the serial years from 2001 to 2005. The object status of the box, though, softens the emotional blow. The epitaph is itself printed on the cover of another container within the box, which on opening reveals some of the characters who populate the world of *Six Feet Under*, and the DVDs that keep them alive. The box contains the things that make a return to the show possible.

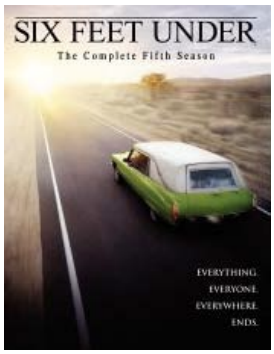

Fig. 8.

It also contains an invitation to rekindle or discover love for other serials packaged by HBO in including a promotional flyer for shows such as *The Wire*, *Sex and the City*, and *Deadwood*. These shows, too, are objects to be collected, owned: the back of the flyer shows the different box sets stacked together like books, and the front conjures the boxes standing side by side as though on a bookshelf. We certainly do not have to purchase the DVDs in order to watch these serials—we might rent or borrow one; we might stream an episode. But the box does raise questions about *how* the serial is packaged, questions I take up in the next chapter, when I discuss *Bored to Death*. The box also invites reflection on *where* the serial goes once it's packaged, and on the ways it becomes incorporated into specific contexts, such as one's private collection, or a library's holdings. The box as object to be sought out for a particular space contrasts with what Anne McCarthy would call "ambient television," the continuous flow of television in public space. I go to that space now as a way to conclude my discussion of "Brotherhood" and "Static," and the political implications they have for serialization and branding.

McCarthy writes that "the TV sets installed in public zones of transit, work, and service—places where waiting often predominates over other activities—become meshed with the features of their environments in particular ways. There is something very distinctive in the fact that waiting rooms are often serialized environments" (495). McCarthy's point here is that television's address in public spaces comes to us *in parts*, whether it is to the flyer leaving CNN on the plane only to be welcomed by it upon entering the airport (or vice versa), or the diner watching a movie over a period of daily lunch breaks. The hospital rooms where Victor and Paul die are

serialized environments. When Paul brings the "latest" *South Park* to Victor in "Brotherhood," it is not only the case that Victor had perhaps been waiting for it, expecting it before he died. The opening scene also makes clear that this is an established event for the brothers: Victor waits for Paul's visits. There is no television visible in the opening of "Static," but there too, Paul waits for his family's visits, and, now, for his sister to come with the injection that will kill him.

McCarthy points out, "Waiting areas are not places where we dwell; they are places we occupy temporarily, on the way to somewhere else" (496). In "Brotherhood" and "Static," though, the soldier is at his last stop: Victor and Paul are each waiting for death. As they wait, the difference between public and private is collapsed. The stack of videos, the collection of newspaper clippings and photos—these things bespeak Victor's private space. But his room is also public: we see that he has at least one roommate, for example, and when the worker collects Victor's personal possessions for Nate, we recognize that people have shared this space with Victor in professional capacities. In "Static," Paul shares space with other patients, and he is enveloped by hospital sounds (the PA system, ringing telephones, voices and footsteps). Holly pulls the curtain around the bed to create a private space and then asks Paul if he is certain he wants to go through with it.

The *location* of the TV set in these spaces is telling as well. McCarthy describes a doctor's office in which the highly visible television draws viewers' attention to the institutional nature of the surroundings—the fluorescent lights, coat pegs, "waiting-room furniture." The promotional material that surrounds the television—information from drug companies, applications for credit cards—

indicates the terms of address: "This positioning makes the console an instrument of public address rather than private entertainment; to look in its direction is to be reminded, simultaneously, of the medical orientation of the space and of the availability of alternative, and perhaps more health-related, texts with which to spend time waiting" (497). Victor's television watching cannot escape the institutional space that contextualizes it. Still, his television watching has made this space more habitable, which foregrounds "the possibility that television might also make the waiting room a place where one wants to remain—making it more like a place of dwelling and attachment" (McCarthy 496). And located at the foot of his bed, the television seems to be another personal possession belonging to Victor, as though it is his TV, used to stake out his own private space as he waits to die.

Paul's private space in "Static" is marked by the personal possessions on his bedside table as well—magazines, cards, and a stuffed animal—but it is overwhelmed by the institutional nature of the room (Fig. 9). As he dies, we hear the barely audible sounds of a television located somewhere near him.[5] Though it is difficult to understand, the program we hear while Paul dies sounds like a news show; it mentions money, debt, and the economy, which speaks obliquely to the financing of a war that has irreparably damaged his body, and that has led him to the choice he makes in the hospital room. At the same time, whatever questions are raised about the war are muted by the near-inaudibility of the program.

[5] It is possible that this is a radio program rather than one on television; indeed, after Paul's epitaph appears on the screen, the scene opens on David in bed, awakened by a radio news report on a fugitive, which reminds him about his own past ordeal of being kidnapped and assaulted (4.5: "That's My Dog"). Television or radio, though, Paul dies amid the ambient noise of media in a room he cannot call his own.

The stuffed animal at his bedside works in the same way; that is, the nearly missed background detail speaks (almost inaudibly) to some of the cultural responses to the trauma and suffering brought on by the war in Iraq. In addition to SUVs and Hummers, Sturken writes of the presence of the teddy bear across crises from 9/11 to Oklahoma City as an example of "comfort culture" in the United States. She traces the teddy bear as "grief commodity" from the beginning of the AIDS crisis in the early 80s, arguing that "the teddy bear doesn't promise to make things better; it promises to make us feel better about the way things are" (7).

Fig. 9.

Teddy bears speak to American notions of innocence while masking the political complexities underlying traumatic events. People very well might feel better, but the teddy bear keeps them at a distance from the historical or global contexts in which traumatic events unfold, so that instead of engaging with these contexts, people become "tourists of history." Objects such as the stuffed animal at Paul's bedside, "no matter how well intended, cannot be innocent. They evoke innocence, they sell innocence, and they promote it, but in their very circulation they participate in a comfort culture that simplifies and reduces, that effaces political complexity" (94). George W. Bush's war in Iraq is a case in point: it "was sold to Americans as a war that would demand of them no sacrifices, a fiction that has

necessitated the attempted erasure of the more than three thousand American war dead, the many tens of thousands of wounded soldiers, and the actual costs to American taxpayers and to social systems" (18). The cuddliness and comfort provided by teddy bears make it easier to look away from the social consequences of the Iraq war, including the destruction of people like Paul—the disfigurement of a body, a death by suicide.[6]

The comments made by Holly and her mother when they confer with David and Federico point to tensions between the comfort and anger circulating through their grief, and reveal the critique at the heart of "Static." "Can you make him look whole again?" asks Paul's mother. Federico promises that prosthetic limbs are on order to make Paul look natural, which draws this exclamation from Holly: "Can you make him stand and walk around, too? Can you make him maybe, like, talk and tell everybody it's all good and it's really no problem to be dead? Maybe just stick your hand up inside his head and, you know, 'Everything's fine! Everything's fine! [Holly lifts her hand and makes it "speak" like a puppet.] Freedom, freedom, freedom!'" The primary reason Holly is against making Paul look whole again is that "it's not real." Paul's death, like Victor's, makes us look death squarely in the eye, challenging us to challenge the master narratives on war. Even if only for that night's episode, we confront war's destruction in the death of Paul, which exposes

[6] Army suicides have developed into a crisis that Paul's death anticipates. See, for example, *Salon*'s series of articles "Coming Home: The Army's Fatal Neglect." The 2009 series begins by calling attention to the reporting *Salon* had done in 2005: "Preventable suicides. Avoidable drug overdoes. Murders that never should have happened. Four years after Salon exposed medical neglect at Walter Reed Army Medical Center that ultimately grew into a national scandal, serious problems with the Army's healthcare system persists and the situation, at least at some Army posts, continues to deteriorate."

business news and stuffed animals and bumper stickers for the ways they structure our comfortable environment.

The deaths of Victor and Paul in "Brotherhood" and "Static" pose challenges to a narrative that insists everything's fine. In creating a serialized space, *Six Feet Under* makes room for many ghosts whose lives tell stories that have been buried for too long, strengthening possibilities for personal, social, national transformation. But what happens after *Six Feet Under* ends? As the five-year run comes to a close, Claire is on her way to New York City, where she has taken a job as a photographer, and we see her driving through a vast, open landscape that emphasizes the hopeful possibilities of moving forward—and recalls the image on the box cover of season five. The sequence alternates shots of Claire driving with shots of the events she will experience as she ages. We recognize by the end that these are the events she recalls as she lies on her deathbed; the landscape through which she drives thus reveals a life-affirming present that is invested with both past and future.[7] Yet this is not quite the ending the box cover hints at. Claire heads into the sunset not in the green hearse—which breaks down on her for good in "Static"—but in a brand new Prius, a gift from her boyfriend Ted. The green hearse brings to the fan's eyes all sorts of stories and experiences traced out by *Six Feet Under*; its replacement by a Prius

[7] Sean O'Sullivan has compared the stagecoach in *Deadwood* to serialization, describing it "as a conveyance pursuing a long journey broken up into parts, a contraption not unlike serial fiction" (122). Its presence throughout *Deadwood* is an indication of the ways old and new constantly inform the serial world: new details introduced in one installment become old in the next one, but all details become essential to navigating the complex world of *Deadwood*. We need "to become locals very quickly," O'Sullivan says, "or get the hell out of town." I would argue that a similar metaphor is at work in Claire's car: the momentous occasions in her life are broken up by images of the car as she heads into her future.

emphasizes life after the show. The serial has come to its end, but it ends with a brand-affirming moment promising more to come. After all, it's not a car. It's a Prius.

Chapter Two. Sounds Like HBO: Affective Politics and *Treme*'s Opening Credits

In an open letter to New Orleans, published in *The Times-Picayune* on April 11, 2010, *Treme*'s creator David Simon acknowledges an inaccuracy that many viewers would be sure to catch during that night's HBO premiere. Set in November 2005, three months after Hurricane Katrina, the pilot shows a local chef finding a pre-packaged serving of Hubig's pie in her purse, which she will serve as dessert in her restaurant because she has nothing else to offer. The detail is anachronistic. Since Hubig's didn't reopen until February 2006, Simon himself writes, "any such pastry found in a woman's purse should by rights be a pre-Katrina artifact and therefore unsuitable for anyone's dessert." This will be one of many questionable details in *Treme*, Simon goes on to concede, but every one of them will be put in service of a fictional account of post-Katrina New Orleans meant to have an impact in the real world: "By referencing what is real, or historical, a fictional narrative can speak in a powerful, full-throated way to the problems and issues of our time. And a wholly imagined tale, set amid the intricate and accurate details of a real place and time, can resonate with readers in profound ways." The seemingly inconsequential detail of Hubig's pie matters because *someone* will recognize why it doesn't fit. For Simon, the detail encapsulates the tensions between fictional representations and real-world experiences, and the exploitation to which these tensions can lead.

That real lives and real suffering are exploited for dramatic purposes is always a possibility in *Treme*, if not an inevitable reality. And Simon knows it. "We have trespassed throughout our narrative," he confesses in his letter. "And soon enough, the true nature of our many slights and affronts, our intentional frauds and unthinking

miscalculations will be subject to the judgment of you whom we have trespassed against." Ultimately Simon pledges to the city a respectful "thematic" portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans, and welcomes the judgment of those who understand more fully what it is like to live there. But he asks New Orleans to recognize that "it may take at least a few episodes . . . for all of us to figure each other out." Simon's concerns point to two themes I wish to take up in this chapter. First, Simon's awareness of being an outsider is reflective of the interest the show takes in the relationships between locals and outsiders, who trespass against the city when they adopt the tourist's gaze. Second, his hope that the show and New Orleanians might eventually figure each other out reflects the promise *Treme* makes as a serial: to shape an imaginative portrait that over time will reflect an authentic New Orleans, one that those who live there will know and recognize, and one that those who see it from the outside will respect.

If *Treme* and HBO risk inviting the tourist's gaze, then, they also complicate that gaze. This chapter considers how emotions emerging from tensions between insider and outsider extend to and circulate through the opening credit sequence. I look closely at the opening sequence because of the ways it "packages" both New Orleans and *Treme* for viewers' consumption. The opening acknowledges the possibility that the show—and by extension, HBO—is exploitative, that it potentially trespasses against New Orleans by turning it into a tourist site for those viewers approaching it from "outside". Simon's address to New Orleansians notwithstanding, the looming anxiety in *Treme* is the possibility that it is a show packaged primarily *for* outsiders. The opening sequence highlights the spectacle of disaster on one

hand—images of destruction and suffering that had become familiar to many Americans in the months after Katrina; and on the other hand, the spectacle of tourism—images of community and celebration that seem to package New Orleans itself as a place worth visiting. The juxtaposition of these spectacles raises the specter of disaster tourism that haunts the show. From the outset—that is, from *Treme*'s opening credits—HBO acknowledges the opportunity for profit that the disaster of Katrina has made possible in the first place.

The opening credit sequence reveals the affective politics at the heart of the show, because it also invites a more respectful look from outsiders than that generally exacted by disaster tourism. It disavows the spectacles it presents, and promises to focus instead on the lives and stories of those who have been directly touched by the disaster. The sequence is important because it forms a way station between the "inside" of the story world, and the "outside" from which viewers enter. It creates the space that encourages viewers to reflect on what it means to look at post-Katrina New Orleans. As with other opening sequences on HBO, the credits deepen in meaning as the serial progresses. Images of damaged homes, old photographs, and the accompanying song by John Boutté ("Treme Song") provide viewers an updated map every new episode for negotiating the show's increasingly dynamic tensions between outsider and local; distance and proximity; the aesthetic and the tactile. This chapter is about the complicated emotions that emerge when viewers engage with oppositions such as these. Ultimately, HBO packages *Treme* so that outsiders will come to respect post-Katrina New Orleans without trespassing against it. But *Treme* remains a package, to be opened and consumed by viewers. In the end, its opening is

a mark of HBO's strategy as a brand, which is to exploit without appearing exploitative. And there's the rub: just as they hold outside and inside together, the opening credits also demonstrate the paradoxical inextricability between HBO's drive for profits, and *Treme*'s respectful approach to a New Orleans whose besiegement initiated the drive.

I. Blooms of Mold

Combining both still and moving images, the opening credits are full of details not directly related to the serial, but to the historical events that contextualize it—namely, Hurricane Katrina. The opening suggests a timeline, creating a sense of pre-Katrina life, and then moving from an aerial image of Katrina to post-Katrina images of the city. Accompanied by a series of guitar chords, the first three shots are in black and white, and visualize the energy and spontaneity of a parade: musicians in the first and third shots, shots that frame the second one of people dancing, as though absorbing the people who follow the parade in the New Orleans tradition of the "second line". A rapid succession of color shots of parade images follows, each shot synchronized with the music's increasing tempo. A sudden cut to an aerial image of Katrina is next, but we are so close to the image that we don't recognize it as a hurricane until the camera almost instantaneously zooms back.

If we are placed above Katrina at this moment, the next shot takes us inside the hurricane—specifically, a building's interior, where we look out at the wind's destructive impact. The shot after this seems to affirm the effect by showing water rushing towards us through a doorway. A series of shots of the hurricane's aftermath

follows, beginning with the image of a flooded neighborhood, the skyline of New Orleans in the background. While a shot of former Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director Michael Brown suggests the national import of Katrina,[8] local trauma is emphasized: shots include a car submerged in water and a building's wall marked with the words "Possible Body". The sequence does not mean to separate the national from the local, but rather to emphasize the tension between the two. The visual connection between Brown and post-Katrina New Orleans suggests that local trauma is traceable in part to the neglect and exploitation by the Bush administration (as embodied by Brown).

The editing is frenetic. The general pattern, as with the first visual of the hurricane, is that we are so close to the destruction that we don't recognize what we are looking at until we move away. In a shot that will introduce the sequence's recurring motif, black marks against a white background are indecipherable until the camera reveals a man and woman in embrace looking at the mildew that has begun to grow and spread on the ceiling of their home. The camera zooms back in a flash, and then, more slowly, moves toward the damage before cutting to another image of mold. As the sequence ends, the mold settles not on walls or doors or ceilings, but old photographs, making it difficult to tell the photographic image apart from the mildew's marks. The title itself reflects a similar invasion: the letters T-R-E-M-E are

[8] Brown was the embodiment of both the Bush administration's ineffective response to Katrina, and the cronyism that made things even worse in New Orleans. Naomi Klein calls FEMA a "laboratory for the Bush administration's vision of government run by corporations." She goes on to explain, "In the summer of 2004, more than a year before Katrina hit, the State of Louisiana put in a request to FEMA for funds to develop an in-depth contingency plan for a powerful hurricane. The request was refused" (409). Brown is perhaps most famous for Bush's praise of him in the days after Katrina: "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job."

artfully laid out, but mildew-black, with a drop of water streaming down from the R, and against an attractive background that nevertheless invokes the presence of mold (Fig. 10.).[9]

Fig. 10.

Reviewers have commented on the significance of the mildew in relation to the larger themes of *Treme*. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Nancy Franklin is struck by an artistry in how the mildew is presented: "The marks left by the flood and the toxic mold that flowered in people's homes form the background to the names of the casts and the creators. The flood lines, seen close up, are painterly, their drip marks seeming to betray an artist's hand, and the blooms of mold come in a range of colors; each frame looks like a work of abstract art" (66). Reviewing for NPR, David Bianculli compares the mildew-marked walls and ceilings to Katrina's impact on the

[9] On a blog kept by Desedo, a New York City firm that "creates content and strategy for new media and multicultural markets," Ryan Reynolds, a guest blogger from an outside branding firm, admires the title's font, calling it "an accurate example of hand-painted lettering that instantly conjures an image of the New Orleans culture. Because it's handmade, it's also real—the stylistic affectations and imperfections are what give it character." By contrast, he says, the font for the titles in the rest of the opening credits are like "an antiseptic book report." Reynolds is disappointed with what he sees as an inconsistency in the credits, but I would argue that the inconsistency is entirely consistent with the show. The tension between local and outsider is rendered here in terms of what appears to be handmade, and what appears to be mass-produced. The lettering of "Treme" invokes a sense of the local. The comparatively standardized font of the other titles is more detached *because* it's antiseptic, emphasizing the local realities as they are written in the mildew's print. See http://desedo.com/blog/treme-type/.

lives of *Treme*'s characters, writing that the characters "have been marked just as clearly, but they're all determined to move ahead." Taken together, these readings point to the potential problem Simon himself recognized in his letter to the city: representations of the city in its suffering might lead to a distancing aestheticization of the city, or as I suggested above, exploitation for dramatic purposes. In responding to the "blooms of mold" in the opening sequence, or to the metaphorical value of the mold, are viewers moved by the imaginative reconstruction of real-life events, or by the real-life events themselves? *Treme* is on the one hand overtly political, encouraging viewers to make connections between, say, Michael Brown and post-Katrina New Orleans. But it is also potentially exploitative in the sense that in relying on real-live events for the stuff of good drama, it creates a story world that can become the primary attraction. *Treme* risks not seeing the mold for the blooms.

The positioning of the names of the cast and creators against the background of the mold suggest an approach to the tensions between the political and aesthetic dimensions of the show. In his letter to New Orleans, Simon emphasizes that the representations throughout *Treme* will remain detached from the real experiences being represented:

> . . . the writers, directors, cast and crew are not in any way trying to supplant the historical record, or, for that matter, the personal memories and experiences of real New Orleanians. To the extent actual individuals have inspired or informed a character or a moment, we acknowledge that these characters are nonetheless make-believe.

> Real folks are entitled to real lives, and to have those lives considered distinct from any and all moments in a television drama.

In drawing the distinction between television characters and real folks, Simon acknowledges the parallel lives that structure *Treme*. This is most evident in the opening credits, when a given name is seen along with the mold: the presence of the cast and creators is noted, but so is that of the real folks, whose re-imagined stories are reflected in the mildew that had such real, tangible impact on people's lives in the days following Katrina. The mold thus becomes a metaphor for the historical record and personal memories that the fiction can touch on, but never fully reveal. The way the mold is filmed—extreme close-up; quick zoom back; slow approach back—acknowledges tensions emerging from the parallel lives, between, for instance, what is truly felt and what is representational. The effect is disorienting. It is also thematically important for the way it speaks to what can be disorienting in watching *Treme*, especially for those who do not live in New Orleans (or never have): the feeling of being immersed in the world it represents, even while remaining distanced from it. The distinction Simon makes between television and real life becomes instructive here, because being a local or being a visitor makes a difference. The show ultimately seems to place a delicate and sensitive premium on the side of the local in that it settles time and again on the question, what *does* it mean to live here?

Upon repeated viewings, *Treme*'s opening has the potential of becoming less disorienting than what viewers may feel initially. The opening credit sequence de-emphasizes the detachment of voyeurism and focuses instead on the feelings of intimacy that emerge from a sense of *being* local. Jennifer Barker has written of the

tactile experience of cinema, an experience characterized not by the distance felt by viewers, but by closeness. "To say that we are touched by cinema indicates that it has significance for us," Barker writes, "that it comes close to us, and that it literally occupies our sphere. We *share* things with it: texture, spatial orientation, comportment, rhythm, and vitality" (2). Our first look at the mildew is mirrored in the looks of the man and woman in embrace; it is as though we share the same space (Fig. 11). Their embrace underscores both the intimacy and detachment that will structure the rest of the sequence. Their touch is one of comfort, emotional support. But the rubber gloves the man wears is an index of the tactile threats revealed in this image: the gloves remind us that the mold in the house is toxic, touching it potentially dangerous. The camera's rapid zoom back from the mildew mirrors the physical act of recoiling from something, out of disgust, or even out of fear of contamination. Barker would describe this zoom as a "gesture" made by the film, and one that forms common ground between the body of the film and the bodies of those who view it: "We comport ourselves by means of arms, legs, muscles, and tendons, whereas the film does so with dollies, camera tracks, zoom lenses, aspect ratios, and editing patterns, for example" (77). The film gestures again when the lens slowly zooms back in, equating the desire to look more closely with the physical act of leaning forward. When the opening sequence introduces the mold, then, it blurs the boundary between distance and proximity by linking *looking* with touch and comportment. It connects viewers to New Orleans by drawing them closer to the material reality of post-Katrina life.

Fig. 11.

Even before the mold is introduced, the first three shots have the feel of decaying film footage; they are full of scratches that invite us to consider the material surface of the film being used as much as they do its representations. This materiality is part of what Barker calls the "film's skin," that border between what the film "perceives" in the world and what it "expresses" to the viewer.[10] When a film motivates bodily response, the film and the viewer make "skin contact" with one another: the feelings of, say, disgust and desire inspired in a viewer instantiate how film "expresses the world and reveals it, in a way that the viewer can see and feel" (29). Yet full access for the viewer is impossible. As Barker explains, "I may touch the film's surface, but I cannot touch either the entire process of its making or the pro-filmic world of which it is a trace." The representations of movement and dancing in the first three shots of *Treme*'s opening sequence have a sensuality that is heightened by the scratches that dance on the surface of the film. The scratches remind us of the goings-on inside the cinematic apparatus, that the activity we see

[10] According to Barker, the film's skin is not reducible to *just* the materiality of the film, but rather "includes all the parts of the apparatus and the cinematic experience that engage in the skin's activities" of connecting the self with the world, the body's inside with the world outside it (29). When film and viewer touch each other, each becomes intertwined in the other's life. See Chapter One, "Skin," in *The Tactile Eye*, especially pp. 26-34.

represented has a counterpart in the activity visualized by the very materiality of film. The quick-cut editing of the shots that follow matches its pace with the rhythm of the drum we hear in the soundtrack, throwing viewers into further physical engagement with the film's internal rhythms and forces. We feel what the film feels.

The representations of mildew complicate the question of what film and viewer are "supposed" to feel. The looks of the man and woman in embrace suggest the emotional devastation caused by Katrina, yet successive shots of mildew are painterly, as Franklin has described them. In resembling brushstrokes, the mold is affecting in the possibility that it represents something else, something other than a dangerous growing mold. These images—fraught with tension between disgust and attraction, sadness and hope—embody the ambiguity that drives the opening sequence, and they extend to the devastating and celebratory images included in the montage. It is as though two sensibilities fight for control of what the sequence "means": on the one hand, the need to recognize the real devastation in New Orleans; on the other, the desire to participate in the culturally celebratory representations delivered by the show. John Boutté's "Treme Song" becomes important in light of this representational control. The lyrics celebrate "jamming and having fun," and function both as a kind of caption to the images of parades, music, and dance, and as ironic commentary on the images of a less ideal version of the city.[11] The opening credits thus recognize that the look *Treme* gives New Orleans is complicated, even contradictory.

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[11] Ben Collins, writing for mtv.com, claims that the song "will go down in history as one of the all-time greats." Collins examines different songs in the show as they relate to specific characters.

Although the credits open every new episode, repeated viewings of them do not render the sequence static, as if it has said all there is to say. Just as the story world of *Treme* opens up as the serial progresses, the sequence resonates with details that potentially help viewers engage more fully with the serial as it continues. In other words, the sequence both shapes and is shaped by the story world to which it provides viewers a point of entry. Such a strategy is reflective of the stock HBO puts in its opening credits. The opening of any given HBO show is meant to be read in relation to the content it introduces, and more often than not cues viewers in on what to "look for" as they experience the various installments. In their discussion of the "Vampire Politics" of *True Blood*, for example, Lisa Nakamura, Laurie Beth Clark, and Michael Peterson call this show's opening credit sequence an "aesthetically stunning hoax" for the ways it misleads viewers in their expectations of what the show will be about. Fraught with Gothic images of the American South, the sequence suggests that vampires will be used as a metaphor to examine "ongoing historical violences" related to race relations and civil rights struggles in the South. But race is "repressed," they write, and "displaced onto the credit sequences, which lead the viewer to expect extensive engagements with civil rights struggles, racialized violence, and affectively charged engagements between whites and blacks. Instead, this affect is entirely located within relations between vampires and humans."[12] I

[12] In addition to the academic criticism by Nakamura, et al., a range of writing has acknowledged the importance of HBO's opening credits. Top-ten lists of best opening sequences routinely include HBO offerings; indeed, one reviewer is inspired by one "to recognize the network that deserves the most accolades for their incredible opening credits, and that's HBO" (Samaniego). A *Newsweek* article in 2008 laments that, to "save precious seconds, many shows have jettisoned opening credits in favor

contend that the opening for *Treme* is just the opposite; that is, it gets viewers to engage with the politically and emotionally charged questions the serial raises from week to week. If the atmosphere created by *Treme* often seems too celebratory, the opening sequence tempers the celebration with tactile reminders of Katrina's legacy. It reminds viewers that Katrina is still with us.

Yet the opening sequence demonstrates that touch can be healing as well as disruptive. The unfolding stories and the lives of the characters are refracted through the images in the sequence, most markedly in the old photographs that structure the last thirty seconds. Two sets of photos are put on display. The first is strongly suggestive of private lives: newlyweds; a picnic celebration; children on the stoop; a family at play. The second captures a more public dimension of New Orleans life: a pastry chef at work; musicians in parade; Mardi Gras costumes. The camera does not settle on a single photo. The photos in each set overlap each other, creating a collage of images that we do not look *at*, so much as *over* as the camera slowly tilts downward. We can touch and be touched by *moving* pictures, Barker writes: "The viewer caresses by moving the eyes along an image softly and fondly, without a particular destination, but the film might perform the same caressing touch through a smoothly tracking camera movement, slow-motion, soft-focus cinematography, or an editing style dominated by lap dissolves, for example" (32).[13] *Treme*'s sequence performs the caress by a smooth downward movement over the collection of photos.

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of a brief flash of a logo, à la 'Lost'"; singling out the opening sequence of *True Blood*, the article calls readers to "Give HBO Some Credit" (Alston).

[13] Barker invokes here Roland Barthes' discussion of *studium* and *punctum* in photography as a way to consider caressing touches between viewers and film. The *punctum* is that indefinable something that disturbs the *studium*, those recognizable cultural codes in the photo, and that touches or "pricks" us at the same time.

Viewer and film embrace in these moments, like the couple in one of the early shots, and the affect is located in the photos themselves, which bring viewer and film together.

Roland Barthes writes of the "blind field" created by the *punctum* of a photograph. The blind field is the "life external" to the photo; it gives spectators the sense that they're not just looking at butterflies "anesthetized and fastened down" (57).[14] As the fictional world of *Treme* opens up, so too do the photos that touch us at the opening of every episode. We may recognize parallels between the families and individuals depicted in the show, and those who pose for the camera in the photographs; or between the cultures celebrated by the show, and those reflected by the photos. Barthes argues that the *punctum* is not necessarily the same for all spectators, and that indeed people will be touched by different things, no matter how trivial or inconsequential—the fold of a collar, interlaced fingers. As we come to know the world of *Treme* more fully, the potential increases for viewers to recognize in the photos a fullness lived and experienced in the blind field. The stories may be fictional, but the fullness they represent is real.

Post-Katrina images and images from a more distant past: together, they bear witness that Katrina has now become an important aspect of New Orleans's history. The image of Michael Brown is crucial because it raises the question of what kind of response this history deserves from viewers of *Treme*. Forty-nine seconds into the

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[14] Barthes writes that the spectator is anyone who looks at a photograph, any "of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives" (9). I will follow Barthes in using the word *spectators* to describe those who look at photos. In using *viewers*, I mean to emphasize the specific act of watching *moving* pictures, or film (i.e., the opening credit sequence).

sequence, before the first set of photos is displayed, there is a shot of the former head of FEMA being sworn in before Congress on September 27, 2005, for a hearing on the ineffective federal response to Katrina. In heated and confrontational testimony, Brown insisted that what he called a "dysfunctional Louisiana" was to blame for the mounting problems in the days after the hurricane, not the federal government.[15] Appearing in the opening credits, the figure of Brown pointedly reflects what amounted to the non-response of the Bush administration. The sequence's tactility works to expose the administration's distance from a city that desperately needed its aid, a distance that was only increased through Brown's finger pointing and blame-shifting. Tactile evidence of damage done and the hopeful embrace to which that evidence leads creates spaces for emotional response where originally there was no official response of aid. In imagining real-world experiences, the very production of *Treme* thus becomes a political act; in drawing viewers' emotional response, it creates the possibility for viewers' reflection on the political dimensions of the show's real-life events, and, most significantly, the development of an affective solidarity with the victims in the form of the proximate compassion of a fellow local rather than the distant pity of a touristic outsider.

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[15] For stories about the hearing, see http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-09-27-brown_x.htm; http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/28/national/nationalspecial/28response.html?scp=3&sq=michael+brown&st=nyt; http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/09/27/katrina/main886469.shtml?tag=currentVideoInfo;videoMetaInfo.

II. Packaging Politics

Treme acknowledges the complexities of affective politics. There is an ethics of response, the serial argues, as it traces tensions between insider and outsider. In particular, Albert Lambreaux (Clarke Peters) embodies the complexities of responding to *Treme*. "Reclaiming" low-income housing that the city has closed down, and using the local media to bring attention to his efforts, Lambreaux draws attention to the importance of local activism, to the political reality of post-Katrina New Orleans. He also draws attention to local tradition. He is a Mardi Gras Indian Chief, about whose spectacular costume Franklin writes: "I'd never seen anything like it in a TV show. And yet it didn't strike me as exotic, since that's a word I would use to describe something I felt distanced from. But here I felt a strong connection" (68). She feels intrusive, she says, for liking what she sees on the show, and she wonders if this is Simon's point: "The series virtually prohibits you from loving it, while asking you to value it." Celebratory spectacle and political engagement are in tension with one another in the character of Lambreaux. He embodies the insider/outsider dynamic that drives the show.

Matt Sakakeeny sees Lambreaux's role as Indian chief as both authentic and inauthentic. A local musician and professor of Music at Tulane, Sakakeeny keeps a remarkably detailed blog that helps viewers decode the local references and use of music on the show.[16] Like Franklin, he sees something compelling in Lambreaux's first appearance in costume, but there is also something off about the performance that might indicate the efforts of local consultants to keep details about the memorial

[16] Sakakeeny is unimpressed with the theme song: "I'll go on record with an official 'meh'" ("opener").

chant hidden, “to guard what is historically a secretive community practice.” Lambreaux “chants a tune so wrong,” Sakakeeny writes, “with words so profoundly made-up, that it takes a potentially gorgeous surreal scene into la-la land. And a feathered tambourine? Goodness no.” In another appearance, Lambreaux performs a memorial chant for a member of the tribe whose decomposed body he had found. A Katrina Tour interrupts him. As tourists snap away with their cameras, Lambreaux stops his chant and scolds the bus driver. A local, the driver suddenly realizes the voyeuristic implications, and he apologizes to Lambreaux, who with others standing with him, watches the tour bus drive away. The authentic and inauthentic come to a head when Lambreaux and the others watch the Katrina tour bus depart. As Sakakeeny explains:

> Disaster tourism is the most polarizing example of the ‘representing New Orleans’ dilemma; locals are acutely aware that tourism is the basis for the local economy, that tourists come looking for a New Orleans experience, and that post-Katrina this includes a ‘devastation tour,’ but what is representation and what is reality when a back-a-town neighborhood becomes the set for Disaster Disneyland? For the bus passengers, stumbling into an informal performance of the most elusive local cultural tradition is a bonus of epic proportions. But for the Indians, this is an intrusion into a community whose culture is always under siege at one level or another . . .

According to Sakakeeny, what distinguishes the authentic from the inauthentic is the closeness that marks one’s relationship to the city. Anyone is welcome to be a local,

but the difference between outsider and insider "is between those who participate in culture and those who passively consume it."

The tension reflected in Lambreaux between respectful participation and passive consumption is intensified by the presence of "volunteer tourists" in the second episode. Students from Wisconsin end up in New Orleans because they were inspired to go there to help rebuild damaged areas. They ask Davis (a local DJ played by Steve Zahn), temporarily and begrudgingly working as a hotel concierge, for recommendations on how to spend their evening. He gladly directs them off the beaten path for "local" experiences. Their work as volunteers seems derailed as a result, and the culturally celebratory dimensions of their mission become clear when they return to the hotel the next morning bleary-eyed and, in spite of living like locals, bedecked like tourists. At one point during the night, they are asked if they had even heard of the Lower Ninth Ward before Katrina, which further complicates the notion of what New Orleans "means" in the eyes of those who look at it from outside. In following *Treme*, do outsiders similarly "visit" New Orleans as tourists whose sympathy keeps them from seeing the real thing? When does the active participant become the passive consumer?

In some ways, the opening credits make these questions all the more difficult to answer. The credits create a tactile experience, as I have argued, that creates the feeling of closeness and active participation, and undermines the distancing effect of passive consumption. But the sequence also works to credit HBO. As previously mentioned, one distinguishing mark of HBO is the attention it gives title sequences, the efforts to create an artful, intricate introduction to a given program. These

sequences are reflective of HBO's cachet as "quality" television, in other words. Christopher Anderson writes that HBO distinguishes itself by "cultivating an aura of artistic achievement" (37). Working from Bourdieu's description of the "aesthetic disposition," Anderson argues that HBO's dramatic series, starting with *The Sopranos* in 1999, have fostered "the cultivated expectation that watching certain television series requires and rewards the temperament, knowledge, and protocols normally considered appropriate for encounters with museum-worthy works of art" (24). The cultivation of distinction is sustained by what Bourdieu calls the "social alchemy": networks of parties each with their own interests for promoting a cultural production as a work of art, including public relations and marketing for HBO; newspapers and magazines whose reviews and articles of HBO shows seek out their own audiences; critics whose work effects a "cultural consecration of HBO" (38). Franklin's discussion of the mold, and the value she sees in Lambreaux's costume, are caught up in this social alchemy.

So are *Treme*'s opening credits. There is no getting around the fact that the opening is part of HBO's branding strategy to mark *Treme* as another of its "high quality" shows. In the credits for those whose labor has gone into the production of the show, the name David Simon alone underscores the distinction, connecting this new series to the critically acclaimed *The Wire*, which Simon created for HBO in 2002 (it ended in 2008). And placed beside other names not as fully recognizable as his, "David Simon" promotes the aura of authorship that Anderson sees as crucial to the artistic integrity of HBO's brand identity: "HBO promotes the creators of the drama series and encourages reporters to flesh out their biographies so that the public

learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series, no matter the scale and complexity of the production or the number of people involved in bringing it to the screen" (36).

Yet David Simon is not the only name to strengthen the value of *Treme* to HBO, and HBO trades on this fact. One need only visit *Treme*'s website to find an opportunity to "Purchase the anticipated album, featuring music from John Boutte, Dr. John, Kermit Ruffins and more"; or go "Inside Treme" for a page that provides further links to authentic "inspirations behind the episode shared by a production insider"—which open access to musicians who have cameos, for instance, or to the real-life places depicted in the show. Rather than "compete" with HBO for viewers' attention, these things work to strengthen HBO's value; they demonstrate what Henry Jenkins would call "spreadability": "the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and cultural worth" ("The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"). HBO strengthens its economic value by exploiting multiple platforms. As Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture*, "Brand extension builds on audience interest in particular content to bring them into contact again and again with an associated brand" (69). This repeated contact intensifies the feelings consumers have for the brand, even if the brand doesn't take center stage. John Boutte and Dr. John may be artists with their own distinctive styles of music, but in their connection to the brand, they sound an awful lot like HBO. Sounding like HBO bespeaks the unmistakable cultural worth that *Treme* possesses as well. Boutte and Dr. John are authentic marks of the local, and if HBO builds audience loyalty by foregrounding names such as these, it is at the

same time creating opportunities for viewers to solidify their status as insiders, to take New Orleans seriously, and approach it with respect. HBO targets *active* rather than passive consumers, consumers whose purchases will extend their engagement with the cultural issues explored by the show.

What, then, is the value of *Treme* to New Orleans? And, following Franklin, what does it mean to value this city? When Jenkins discusses spreadability, he mentions the notion Jason Mittell offers in response, *drillability*, the desire to explore a story world more deeply, and to discover what else exists within it. Mittell argues that the complexities of serialized storytelling allows an immersion not readily fostered by spreadability: "Even when they are enabled by the spreadable technologies of online distribution, both licit and illicit, the consumption patterns of complex serials are typically more focused on engaging with the core narrative text than the proliferating paratexts and fan creativity that typify spreadable media." Mittell goes on to assert, "One text can inspire fans to both drill and spread." *Treme* exemplifies HBO's successful balancing act: it is at once characterized by drillability and spreadability. The opening credits clearly inspire the latter, not just in the brand affection they foster, but also in their use of photographs, which have generated historical and aesthetic interest. Cultural history is noted by Lewis Watts, for example, whose shot of the Mardi Gras Indians is included in the second set of photos:

> The image used in *Treme* was taken at the home of Cherise Harrison-Nelson, who is the daughter of Donald Harrison Sr., who was the Chief of Chiefs of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians. It shows the

> West African tradition of paying tribute to the ancestors by pouring a libation, and it is indicative of the broad cultural traditions that are prevalent in Louisiana. (Rappaport)

The photos have a financial value, too, in their potential to be bought and sold as "art". Items for a March 2010 auction meant to benefit the New Orleans Musicians Assistance Foundation (an auction sponsored in part by HBO) include some of these photos, so that the opening credits potentially strengthen the name recognition for artists such as Watts ("To the Ancestors"), David Rae Morris ("Waterlines"), and Eric Waters ("Squirky Man").

Yet *Treme* is also very much a drillable text in its potential to inspire viewers to engage thoughtfully with New Orleans. To look at the opening credit sequence so closely, for instance, is to begin the kind of forensic work Mittell sees as characteristic of complex serials; moreover, to look so closely allows us to keep our focus as the serial moves forward. In his discussion of title sequences, Myles McNutt writes that "HBO, with its enormously long credits sequences, almost always places a chapter break after the opening on their DVDs, which indicates that they're aware how often those sequences are skipped." I propose that such a break included in a given DVD episode is a hint that the opening sequence is a chapter in its own right. Or better: a familiar, yet transforming "prologue" that calls for repeated viewing with every new episode.[17] To watch the opening sequence with every episode is to

[17] I am grateful to Mike O'Brien for the insight of the opening sequence as prologue. McNutt himself must sense the importance of watching opening titles as part of any new episode, rather than a "stand-alone" feature. He admits, after all, that in spite of the DVD chapter break, he "usually ended up watching the Six Feet Under openings . . . and the same goes for The Wire."

unearth those clues that keep us attuned to the complexities, and affective politics, of *Treme*.

In a 2007 interview with Nick Hornby, Simon uses what he calls the "bad metaphor" of travel to describe the experience of watching *The Wire*. "There are two ways of traveling," he says. "One is with a tour guide, who takes you to the crap everyone sees. You take a snapshot and move on, experiencing nothing beyond a crude visual and the retention of a few facts." The second way is more time-consuming, requiring the structure of "a long-form series or minseries." The serial form allows you to stay in a place for a long time, Simon suggests, and this allows you to "have a sense of another world entirely." It is instructive to note that many officials in Baltimore, where *The Wire* was set, were concerned that the show would damage Baltimore's image. "After the airing of the first season," writes Blake Ethridge, "13 of the 15 members of the Baltimore City Council introduced a resolution condemning Simon's work" (161). Leaders wanted to develop a tourist economy for Baltimore: "the basic infrastructure of the economy is its branding as a tourist destination, the branding that brings jobs and revenues to the city" (162). Simon wanted Baltimore to represent a forgotten America, one neglected and marginalized by rampant, destructive capitalism, as he tells Hornby, "so that by the end of the run, a simulated Baltimore would stand in for urban America, and the fundamental problems of urbanity would be fully addressed." Baltimore leaders saw things differently: who would want to visit a city such as the one depicted on *The Wire*?

In the case of *Treme*, the question is who *wouldn't*? The serial celebrates a city that almost seems too good to be true, as though, with *The Wire* in its rear-view mirror, it means to brand New Orleans as a tourist destination. One way to value the city, perhaps, is to visit it after all, to celebrate its food, its music. The value of *Treme* is that it challenges viewers to be mindful of the celebration, to recognize that there are other important things to discover, and to develop over time an awareness of where to look for them.[18]

In the seventh episode, LaDonna Batiste-Williams (Khandi Alexander) has just identified the body of her brother—a Katrina victim—when she steps out of the makeshift morgue, a truck trailer, where the body had been stored under the wrong name for almost five months. Once outside in the parking lot, she finds herself surrounded by a line of trailers that seems to go on forever. LaDonna is overwhelmed by the physical presence of the trailers—she is barely perceptible in the center of the shot (Fig. 12). The forensic work done over the previous episodes by LaDonna and Toni Bernette (Melissa Leo), who helped LaDonna trace her brother to this morgue, parallels the kind of work viewers are called to do in the opening credits, in which one of the final shots prepares us for the moment of LaDonna in the lot, even as, in repeated viewings, it will be haunted by that moment: a child riding a bike

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[18] In his review of *Treme* for *The New York Review of Books*, Nicholas Lemann compares the show with *The Wire*, which was in his mind a more compelling sociological portrait of Baltimore than the portrait of New Orleans. As a native, Lemann has a vested interest in the show. He writes, "I was born in New Orleans; my family has been living in southern Louisiana since 1836, and most of my relatives are still there. So I can't help looking at *Treme* as a long-departed native, and judging it for accuracy and acuity" (49). His judgment is that, while effective in representing the city, the show's "culturally celebratory surface" keeps viewers from seeing the root causes behind the disasters resulting from Katrina, and the "seemingly never-ending aftermath" (51).

next to a line of FEMA trailers that seems to go on forever (Fig. 13). Looking around to see where the noise is coming from, Ladonna is also overwhelmed by the whirring of the generators that provides electricity to the trailers. In a show that celebrates the music of New Orleans, such a "repulsive" sound is a contrasting reminder of the problems that continue to exist. Toni poses a question that viewers are meant to take up for themselves: "How is it that a young man can be sent to a distant parish, die in custody, be autopsied, and lay in a morgue for months without anyone figuring out who he is?"

In creating the potential for this kind of political engagement, *Treme*'s opening credits suggests the possibility that HBO manages to wash its hands of exploiting a city and people devastated by Katrina. Ethridge claims that television and HBO can "become the critical space of affect and argument" (161). And Simon himself tells Hornby that if he didn't make his arguments on HBO, he would make them elsewhere: "Fuck it, I'm happy to be getting paid what I'm paid to make a television show about what I would normally write magazine articles and newspaper series and narrative tomes about." If you're going to get paid anyway: Simon's comment hints at the ways profits and politics are bound up together in HBO's packaging of *Treme*. HBO *wants* to sell the show, it wants to find an audience; but these goals do not "cancel out" the package's cultural worth. Exploitation is always a possibility, but *Treme* balances tensions between insider and outsider through a drillability and spreadability that target *active* consumers—consumers who buy into the political value the show holds in post-Katrina America. To say that HBO does "good work" with the production of *Treme* is to acknowledge both the distinction

HBO means to market as a brand, and the authentic engagement with cultural issues encouraged by the show. It is to take seriously the affective politics of *Treme* and David Simon that HBO promotes.

Fig. 12.

Fig. 13.

Chapter Three. Part-time Noir: *Bored to Death* in 2009

The animated title sequence of HBO's weekly series *Bored to Death* opens with a shot of what appears to be a detective novel. The show's title is emblazoned on the cover; under the title, a man enters a darkened room while a woman in the shadows sits watching his entrance. The book then moves towards the viewer and suddenly flies open to the text. The words on the page collapse and turn into pictures of two characters: Jonathan Ames (Jason Schwartzman) and his girlfriend Suzanne (Olivia Thirlby). The premise of *Bored to Death* is that after Suzanne leaves him (he has failed to keep his promise to cut back on drinking and pot-smoking), frustrated writer Jonathan rediscovers his love of mysteries, which leads him to play the unlikely role of private detective in Brooklyn. In the first episode, a stack of books in his apartment topples over to reveal a copy of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*. Jonathan begins to read it, which inspires him, not to work on his own second novel, but to advertise his services as an "unlicensed private detective" on Craigslist. The eight episodes of the first season (the second season ended in November 2010; HBO has renewed the series for a third) trace Jonathan's case history, from "The Case of the Missing Screenplay" to "The Case of the Stolen Skateboard" (Episode Four) to "The Case of the Beautiful Blackmailer" (Episode Six).

As these titles suggest, *Bored to Death* has a self-reflexive playfulness about it. The tagline "noir-otic comedy" advertises its roots in film noir, and nearly every episode draws on stylistic and thematic features associated with noir to structure the comedy. In addition to the Chandler novel, other cues lie in the atmosphere and

characters—poorly lit streets, seedy motel rooms, smoky bars, *femme fatales*, alienated anti-heroes. In the first episode, "Stockholm Syndrome," Jonathan is hired by a teen-aged girl to find her sister, whom the teen-ager believes to have been kidnapped by the sister's boyfriend. Jonathan finds the sister with her boyfriend in a sleazy room of the Valmont Hotel, where the two have gone, it turns out, for sexual role-play; as the boyfriend eventually explains to Jonathan, they need the room "to make it authentic" and because "We need to stay in our roles." The episode ends with Jonathan's embarrassing arrest and a warning from the police not to impersonate a detective again.

Performance drives the series. And what reveals the neurotic sensibility at the core of its comedy is that the characters we meet seem "miscast" for their roles. Jonathan hardly fits the bill of the detective associated with Raymond Chandler, for example; occasionally, the people who hire him or work with him remark that he does not look the way they thought he would: he looks too old for one person, not tough enough for another. These awkward first impressions raise interesting questions about audience expectations when it comes to noir. What is the detective *supposed* to look like? Where does the frame of reference originate? My aim here is to examine the *packaging* of noir in *Bored to Death*. The series foregrounds audience knowledge of noir, but it does not necessarily demand that audiences have that knowledge, or that they must be familiar with, say, Raymond Chandler to enjoy it. Yet the invocation of noir has a purpose. On the one hand, it holds up a lens for viewing gender relations in 2009, especially in terms of what it means for child-men to enter adulthood, and how women might help them get there. But as I argue in the second

part of this chapter, the use of noir in *Bored to Death* functions as part of a larger marketing strategy, an advertisement for what HBO has to offer.

I. Doting Mommies, Spectacular Bodies

Bored to Death is not a serial in the ways I have discussed *Six Feet Under* and *Treme* as serials. Though there is an overarching narrative and a sense of character development that connects the episodes and "continues" the story, the show aligns itself more closely with the sitcom than it does the serial. Each episode runs under thirty minutes, focusing on a single case that viewers would be able to follow, even without knowing all the details of the show's story world. The highly episodic nature of *Bored to Death* would seem to disqualify it from consideration as an HBO serial. But this does not mean that we must then think of the show as a conventional sitcom—that is, a traditional network sitcom.

We might do better to think of *Bored to Death* as drawing on the traditions of the HBO sitcom, which would position the show as another branded development. Like *Six Feet Under* and *Treme, Bored to Death* works toward sustaining viewer engagement with the HBO brand—and with HBO's brand of comedy in particular. Lisa Williamson writes that comedy series such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-) create a documentary feel, from the diegetic presence of documentary filmmakers, to editing that invokes documentary traditions—what John Caldwell calls the "docu-real," she writes (110). Network television traditionally relied on the docu-real to break out of standard formats with the aim of attracting new audiences, usually during sweeps periods, but for

subscription-only HBO the docu-real becomes a distinctive brand signature. "By creating a distinct visual aesthetic that will attract sustained media attention," Williamson argues, "each show attempts to break through the clutter produced by the numerous broadcast and cable programs available in the post-network era and convince viewers that such sitcoms are worth paying for. In doing so, these shows alter the very nature of the sitcom form" (111).

One effect of the docu-real, Williamson continues, is that real and fictional are blurred. And for HBO sitcoms, this blurring extends beyond the form to create a kind of hip awareness: those in the know will recognize the sitcoms' self-conscious incorporation of "well-known celebrities playing versions of their public personas. This means that viewers are expected to possess a certain level of media awareness if they are to recognize not only the visual signifiers of other television forms, but also the various levels of performance at work" (117). As we will see, *Bored to Death* is no different from the HBO sitcom, as Williamson describes it, in that it takes viewers' media awareness for granted: it is not just that audiences will recognize celebrities; the savvy will understand how this sitcom *uses* celebrity as well. What makes the show so interesting as a branded development is how noir is thrown into the mix.

Writing in 1998, James Naremore points out, "not everyone in the world is aware of the term *film noir*, and people find different uses for the things they read or see. Even so, self-conscious forms of noirish narrative continue to appear all around us, blurring the line between our fictional and real landscapes and contributing profoundly to the social *imaginaire*" (255). *Bored to Death* is situated in what Naremore calls the "noir mediascape," the cultural contexts in which understandings

of noir are both created and disseminated. Naremore looks at the "sordid pulp fiction" covers of *The New Yorker*'s fiction issues or noirish graphic novels such as Frank Miller's *Sin City* as points in the noir mediascape, and goes on to analyze the repackaging of noir in three films from the 1990's: *The Underneath* (1995), *Sling Blade* (1996), and *Lost Highway* (1997). His conclusion is that noir is here to stay:

> Art pictures like the ones I have described, some better and some worse, will continue to appear on theater screens, as will the noirish blockbusters and the hard-boiled action movies. If this diverse mixture of things does not exactly constitute a genre, it nevertheless coheres around a taste and a set of market strategies that are ongoing and relevant. . . . [T]he history of noir is not over, and it cannot be given a single explanation. No doubt movies of the noir type have always appealed strongly—but not exclusively—to middle-class white males who project themselves into stories about loners, losers, outlaws, and flawed idealists at the margins of society. The different manifestations of noir, however, can never be completely subsumed under a single demographic group or psychological theory. (276)

As he does throughout *More than Night*, Naremore emphasizes the problematic nature of defining noir as a genre. "It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term," he writes in his opening chapter (9). We know what noir looks like, in other words, even if we cannot agree on whether it is a genre or a style or a tradition. *Bored to Death* is just one more manifestation of noir in the mediascape, as evidenced by images HBO uses to market the series. An

ad for the season premiere (Fig. 14) shows Jonathan on a rain-slicked street, lit by seductive neon lights in the background and a lonely lamppost in the foreground. The lamppost holds Jonathan's missing pair of shoes, a clue Jonathan notes with purpose. This is a show, HBO promises, that will have the look of noir, even as it will nod in other directions. *Bored to Death* is a "noir-otic comedy," reads the ad, and its central character is a delightful loser: "How he solves anything is a mystery."

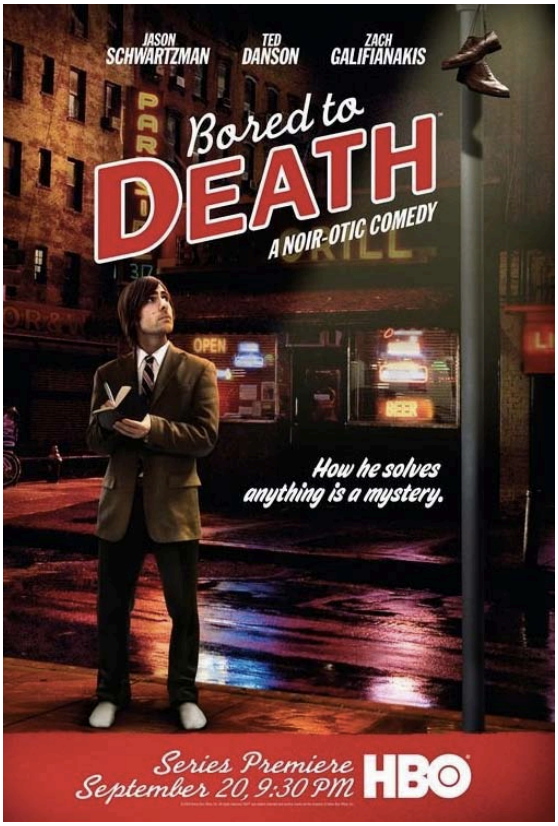

Fig. 14.

Popular critical reception of the series indicates that its appeal and detraction go beyond noir. Heather Havrilesky writes in Salon.com that "'Bored To Death' may be a parody of noir, or maybe it's a dramedy that dips into detective novel tomfoolery, but most of all, it's a story that revels in the realm of those strange overgrown children who use artistic pursuits to justify their weak little whimpering selves." Other critics have questioned how noirish the series is to begin with. James

Poniewozik of *Time* thinks highly of *Bored*, but sees it as "sort of the TV equivalent of an indie-film screwball comedy." He cites the guest appearance of Jim Jarmusch as himself in the third episode as "fitting" for the indie sensibility projected by the series. Less enthusiastic, *Slate*'s Troy Patterson complains that self-indulgent indie-film hipness overwhelms the noir:

> You can hardly see the noir here for all the brightness of the brownstone-lined streets. At one point, Jonathan takes on a pro-bono case for an attractive vegan woman who wants to retrieve her son's stolen skateboard. Client and PI share an embrace that topples two glasses of carrot juice. I love Parker Posey, but it feels like a punch line to the unwitting joke of the show's indie-culture pile-on to say that the vegan is played by Parker Posey. *Bored to Death* is in the key of a mild Sundance flick about a lovelorn sweetheart and the zany dudes who aid and abet him.

No fan either, David Hinckley of *The New York Daily News* argues that the stylistic gimmick of the series falls flat. "In classic film noir, dramatic lulls often can be camouflaged by style," he writes. "The way scenes are filmed, the way the detectives wear their hats, the way the dames move. Jonathan knows this, but the show never quite makes it happen. He's supposed to be a neurotic slacker who escapes into this cool new world, but even there, he still comes off as a neurotic slacker."

Much of the popular reception sees *Bored to Death* as anything *but* noir. In a positive review for *The Boston Globe*, Matthew Gilbert writes that the series "never quite qualifies as a neo-noir, as it finds its real subject in smirking at the denizens of

the Brooklyn coffee shops and the Manhattan literary parties that Jonathan stumbles through." Gilbert is right, I think, in pointing out that the series laughs at Brooklyn's denizens. I would revise his claim by arguing that the series pokes fun mostly at Brooklyn's *male* denizens. The three males on whom the show focuses are ambivalent about the prospect of settling down, of growing up. The oldest, George Christopher (Ted Danson), has been divorced three times, and lives large as swinging bachelor and editor of the *GQ*-like magazine *Edition NY*. Yet his life is empty and boring, and he cultivates a friendship with Jonathan (who sometimes writes articles for the magazine) in the hopes of recovering a sense of vitality: he brags to Jonathan about a sexual conquest that makes him feel fifty again (1.3); another encounter, he tells him, "was like a moment out of Proust" (1.4). Through Jonathan, George meets Ray Hueston (Zach Galifianakis), an aspiring comic-book illustrator who lives with his girlfriend Leah (Heather Burns), and who is saddened by the notion of being alone, yet trapped in a misery which has him promising Leah at one turn that he'll go to therapy in exchange for sex (1.3), and practicing platonic "intimacy exercises" with her at another (1.5). Jonathan himself is devastated when his girlfriend Suzanne breaks up with him in the season's first episode, but one of the running smirks of *Bored to Death* is that he continually fails to see how fun life can be without Suzanne around to pester him about his drinking and pot-smoking.

A telling moment occurs in the second episode, when Jonathan and Suzanne meet in a coffee shop. "I need you, I miss you," Jonathan tells her. "I have no toilet paper, no food, no toothpaste. I need you." Suzanne replies: "You miss me shopping for us." What Jonathan misses, in other words, is a domestic economy that works to

his advantage. It is one thing to be nagged about drinking and smoking; it is another to be looked after. Such tension is presented as the source of the neurotic personalities that dominate the series. Soon after this conversation, Ray enters the coffee shop and trips over a baby stroller. This is what the future holds for the man who stumbles into adulthood, the moment hints, a suggestion underlined by the overwhelming presence of strollers scattered throughout the coffee shop. Here is the specter of family and domestic responsibilities that will be the final blow to a man's freedom; indeed, the very presence of the strollers interferes with the characters' ability to move.

Jonathan's age suggests that he is caught, at thirty, between youth and adulthood. In the fourth episode, he agrees to help Michelle Whiting (Parker Posey) by recovering her son's stolen skateboard. An adolescent bully has taken it, and Jonathan enlists the help of Ray to get it back after being threatened by the bully and his friends. The episode is a tongue-in-cheek elegy to the passing of childhood. George's Proustian reflections, what he calls the "childhood connections," become increasingly important to him ("I feel like a child again," he will say in a pot-induced haze in the sixth episode). There is Ray's remark that the skateboarders "are the kids who used to beat you up and probably still will." As Ray watches from his car, Jonathan desperately snatches back the skateboard, dashes off, and then plants himself in a sitting position and propels himself downhill, bullies rolling after in mad pursuit. The image of a man barely able to navigate a careening skateboard illustrates the pleasures *Bored to Death* takes in the antics of men who behave like boys, who, like George in his sixties, do not yet want to grow up.

What about girls, though? George's comment in the fifth episode that *Edition* has "lost 37% of our women readers" jokingly raises the question of just how large the female readership would be for a men's magazine like *Edition* in the first place. The comment also raises questions about how far the appeal of *Bored to Death* would extend beyond (white, middle-class?) male viewers. Reviewing the premiere for PopMatters.com, Daynah Burnett writes that although it is "undeniably smart," *Bored to Death* reveals "regressive gender politics": "the dames here could be easily plucked straight from [Jonathan's] 1930s detective novel urtexts. . . . [W]omen are buxom objects, helpless victims or doting mommies, described by sexist shorthand ('She was my best ex-wife'). On a subway, Jonathan marvels at a curvy brunette by declaring, 'The world is completely melting and yet beautiful women are still being produced.'" Burnett wonders if such "wincing moments" anticipate by the end of the season "an apt post-modern femme fatale (mom?)."

The doting mommies are positioned as the most threatening characters in the series, to be sure. Usually, they give the men an excuse to spend time with each other rather than with women. The problems in Ray's life with Leah—principally, his frustration in not having sex with her—stem from the divorced Leah's exhaustion from mothering two daughters, an exhaustion that invites more sympathy for Ray than Leah. A lesbian couple, Leah's friends, plays the role of nurturing mommies-to-be in convincing Ray to be the biological father of their child, but in the seventh episode, "The Case of the Stolen Sperm," Ray and Jonathan discover that the women had launched a cottage industry of collecting and selling Ray's samples to other lesbian couples. Even the doting mommy who initially appears sympathetic in "The

Case of the Stolen Skateboard" ends up rejecting Jonathan. A single mother, Michele Whiting seduces him into playing the role of the father by recovering her son's skateboard; he agrees to help her after making out with her, which causes, as Patterson notes in *Slate*, the two glasses of carrot juice to topple over. When he returns the skateboard at the end of the episode, she thanks him and then shuts the door, leaving him out on the stoop: she no longer has any use for him.

Rejections and betrayals such as these make a spectacle out of the male body. The three neurotic men at the center of the series are self-conscious that their bodies might be *undesirable* to the women they find attractive. None of the three is what Peter Lehman and Susan Hunt, discussing Ray (Thomas Jane) in the HBO series *Hung*, have described as a "body guy," a male character who functions to "awaken, arouse and fulfill the sexual desires of a beautiful woman who is initially involved with a boring, sexually incompetent mind guy." The three are more closely allied with the mind guy: all are associated with art, creativity—George as editor, Ray as illustrator, Jonathan as writer (and, really, private eye). Largely what makes these three so neurotic is what seems to be their own awareness that their bodies are something of a liability in their sex lives. True, George delights in his promiscuity, and he marvels at how often he has "fucked" over the decades (1.7). Still, he is self-conscious about his *aging* body—after pot, his drug of choice is Viagra—and his wealth and power are arguably at the core of what makes him desirable. Ray's weight is the object of numerous jokes, from the animated version of Ray in the opening credits—dressed as a superhero, his held-in stomach pops out into a pot belly—to the disgust one potential mother (hilariously underplayed by *The Daily*

Show's Samantha Bee) expresses when she sees that Ray is the sperm donor.

Lehman and Hunt's reading of *Hung* is helpful in clarifying the extent to which Jonathan succeeds as body guy on *Bored to Death*. Their article describes the body guy in the context of what they see as an emerging genre, which they address more fully in their book *Lady Chatterley's Legacy in the Movies: Sex, Brains, and Body Guys* (2010). They explain: "we identify a new body guy film genre that features a sexually gifted hero with a good sized penis and nearly magical sex style." They argue that the HBO series *Hung* undermines any critique it offers of American society by focusing on, even celebrating, the pleasures provided by the well-endowed body guy. "In brief," they write, "the series tries to tie Ray's big penis to hard times, but ends up focusing on the good times that the big penis—and only the big penis—can bring." Such an approach reveals a contradiction in *Hung*:

> We explore the anti-intellectual aspects of the appeal of this genre which portrays the world of the mind and intellectual men as deadly dull while celebrating the penis and penetration sex as what contemporary women in the film audience need and want for their fulfillment. *Hung* gets caught in a contradictory attempt to both celebrate and critique Ray and his big penis and in so doing also depicts the world of the mind and of professional men as dull and boring and represents their bodies and sexual skills as mediocre or even incompetent in comparison to Ray's.

Whether or not *Bored to Death* belongs to the body guy film genre (if there is consensus that it even exists), the show draws on some of the conventions Lehman

and Hunt find in *Hung*, especially in the frequent juxtapositions the series makes between the body guy and the mind guy. In the second episode, "The Alanon Case," a woman hires Jonathan to discover whether or not her boyfriend is cheating on her. Jonathan follows the boyfriend, Gary, into a drugstore, where he calls Suzanne to boast that he has taken on the domestic responsibilities of shopping. It turns out that Gary is attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with Suzanne (they are there as "friends and family" of their "alcoholic" partners—that is, Jonathan and the woman who hires him). Jonathan misreads their interaction as a romance, and is so consumed by jealousy that he blows his cover.

The episode works as a kind of parody of the body guy genre. Jonathan is taken aback by Gary's handsomeness—almost to the point of speechlessness when he first sees his portrait photograph—and the entire episode playfully reveals Jonathan's anxiety that he cannot, well, measure up. Jonathan follows Gary into Gary's gym, where the two exercise side-by-side on stationary bikes, a juxtaposition of contrasting bodies that turns into a visual joke. Gary is comfortable, clearly at ease in the gym. Jonathan is inept in his performance of masculinity. To get a sense of whether or not Gary is cheating, he talks about the gym as an ideal place for "looking at women," and offers sexist commentary on the women working out: "It's like a Lamaze class over there." After an annoyed Gary cuts his workout short, Jonathan falls off the bike, but bounces back up and looks around as though nothing happened.

Just before this scene, Gary buys products in the drugstore that are all connected in some way to bodily functions: Metamucil, toilet paper, and condoms. Acting as naturally and as inconspicuously as possible, Jonathan follows suit, placing

the same products in his own basket. When he gets to the condom display, he realizes that Gary has bought the package marked XL. Suddenly self-conscious when he realizes that an attractive woman is watching him, he grabs as many packages (XL) as he can and throws them all in his basket. The episode ends with Jonathan's confrontation of Suzanne and Gary at a diner, where accusations fly: Gary accuses Jonathan of stalking him; Jonathan calls the "well-endowed" Gary a "Metamucil addict"; Suzanne shoots back, "How do you know he's well-endowed?" At the end of the scene, Gary shoves Jonathan into a table, and Jonathan ends up leaning against the wall in a booth, buried by condom packages, as though to mock his body guy pretensions. The moment of humiliation in front of his ex-girlfriend invokes the dynamics of the genre as Lehman and Hunt envision it: Gary as body guy emphasizes the sexual incompetence embodied by Jonathan.

II. Bored to Death *as Pseudo-Memorial*

According to John Caldwell, "cross-promotion occurs when major studios or conglomerates acquire television, cable networks, and new media sites to advertise and promote their own feature films and television programs on other platforms within the conglomerate" (275). One conglomerate Caldwell cites is Universal/NBC Productions/MSNBC. *Bored to Death* foregrounds Time Warner/Warner Brothers/HBO in using Zach Galifianakis, one of the stars in Warner Brothers' summer hit in 2009, *The Hangover*. The series and the film essentially promote each other, with the series serving as potential reminder to viewers of Warner Home Video's DVD release of *The Hangover* on December 4, 2009. A major advantage of

cross-promotion, Caldwell writes, is that "studio or networks can create and encourage (well in advance of the release) intertextual references to released films or their stars within existing dramatic or entertainment series (since most studios have both film and television production arms)."

Even when *Bored to Death* goes "outside" of its brand, however, it works to advertise for HBO. The series depends on numerous actors and images and conventions to open up avenues to the familiar, with Ted Danson as perhaps the most obvious example, promoting his appearance as himself in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which preceded *Bored to Death* in HBO's Sunday lineup for Fall 2009. Yet the series also emphasizes that it is something different from the familiar, something that "stands out." The guest appearances of Jim Jarmusch (1.3) and Parker Posey (1.4) lend the series an indie cachet, as we have seen from Patterson's review; and the use of Jason Schwartzman, who got his start with Wes Anderson and less "mainstream" films such as *Rushmore*, highlights a distinctive quality HBO wants viewers to find in *Bored to Death*, a selling point that here is one more show that proves the advertising slogan: "It's not TV. It's HBO."

Noir-otic as it may be, *Bored to Death* relies much more on these kinds of intertexuality than it does on themes or styles associated with noir. The series functions as a "pseudo-memorial," Altman's term for the function of today's genres to tap on and create spectator memory. The pseudo-memorial relies on generic intertextuality, Altman argues, "so that the media can offer viewers a new 'home' located in previous media-viewing experiences and the comfort of recognizing generic references" (194). HBO's recent "Sunday Night" promo illustrates this

concept by inviting viewers to "stay home" with characters from shows they know and recognize. The spot rotoscopes familiar characters taken from scenes in numerous HBO series including *Flight of the Conchords* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* with viewer stand-ins engaged in familiar domestic activity like eating dinner or doing the laundry. One scene shows *Curb*'s Larry David apologizing for sending a child's pet bird up the chimney. Another shows *True Blood*'s Vampire Bill standing in the laundry room with a woman who invites him to "grab a bite sometime." "How about tonight?" he suggests. Sunday night with HBO similarly encourages all viewers to put their own domestic chores on hold for the evening, to give vampires and other familiar characters permission to enter their home.

The promotion further illustrates the concept of "appointment television," which Henry Jenkins defines as "Programs that viewers make a conscious decision to watch as opposed to viewing when they happen across them while channel zapping" (280). With DVR's and OnDemand viewing, it is certainly possible to miss HBO on Sunday nights, but the promo nevertheless substantiates appointment television in suggesting that its products are worth finding the time to watch. HBO has run numerous ads in the past for its Sunday schedule. Noteworthy in this one is the *interaction* that takes place between characters and viewers. The promo appears to nod to "old" ways of consuming television—at home, at a specified time—but the interaction across different places within the home is a vision of what Jenkins describes as "participatory culture." "Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles," he writes, "we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of

us fully understands" (*Convergence Culture* 3). Such participation leads to *convergence,* "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2). Online discussion groups and chat rooms, "spoiler" strategies, fan culture, conflicts between "grassroots artists" and "commercial media producers" over intellectual property (21)—these are among the instances of convergence Jenkins examines in his study of "convergence culture."

The interactive websites for its various programs reveal HBO's efforts to construct viewer participation into "brand communities," a concept used by marketing researchers, as Jenkins explains, "to better understand why some groups of consumers form intense bonds with the product and, through the product, with fellow consumers" (79). The websites are all set up in the same way: at the top is a bar that will help viewers navigate their way to other HBO offerings; underneath are links to discussion groups or "Community," and links to information "About the Show," to "Cast and Characters" and "Episode Guide". There are also show-specific links, from "Lloyd's Diary" on *Entourage* to "Margene's Blog" on *Big Love* to "Creator's Blog" on *Bored to Death*. In effect, the official websites "blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages" (Jenkins 20). To be a fan of any show on HBO is to be a fan of HBO.

A character's blog ostensibly allows viewers to continue to experience the world of the show beyond its episodic constraints, thereby extending the "viewing experience" to other media. This strategy exemplifies "second shift programming," a

concept Caldwell traces back to a 1999 sweeps week marketing event: NBC drew viewers to a variety of "brands" by connecting the television show *Homicide: Life on the Streets* to the website Homicide.com, where they could follow the second shift of detectives at work, after the TV detectives "left their one-hour broadcast 'shift'" (280). According to Caldwell, the "stunt suggests that institutional relationships and industrial leveraging may have been far more important that the aesthetic forms that comprised the event. 'Authorship' for the show was explicitly claimed by many involved in the effort" (281). The promoted companies included NBC, NBC Digital Productions, NBC.com, and Microsoft, which used the show to promote its Windows Media Player. Caldwell writes that this early example of convergence "begs the question of whether film studies can continue to talk productively about texts, aesthetics, ideology, and identity in new media . . . without also talking about the industrial landscape and marketing practices that animate and fuel new media development on a wide scale" (282).

The "Creator's Blog" on *Bored to Death* is itself a case in point for looking at the marketing practices behind the series. The label "Jonathan's Blog" would have blurred the line between character and creator, given that the central character shares the creator's name. Assigning authorship to the "creator" seems to preserve the boundary, yet it is difficult to separate the entertainment from the marketing in the blog, where numerous brands are promoted, including (perhaps especially) that of "Jonathan Ames." Ames's blog covers each of the season's eight episodes, recounting the personal experiences that led to a specific scene, for example, or describing the real places in Brooklyn filmed for the series that viewers may then

choose to see on an interactive map on the website. The final episode "Take a Dive" stages an evening series of promotional boxing matches between George's *Edition NY* and *GQ*: fighting for *Edition*, Jonathan, Ray, and George are each matched against representatives from *GQ*. The "real" Jonathan Ames blogs about the experiences that inspired his writing of the episode:

> My inspirations for this fight business are the following: Fighting as the "Herring Wonder," I had two amateur boxing matches, one in 1999 (against a performance artist) and one in 2007 (against a writer), and a few years ago *New York Press* and *The L Magazine*, here in New York, had a boxing match to take out their animus for each other's publication in the ring. I wasn't part of that, but it set a precedent in my mind for two magazines fighting, and thus I felt it wasn't beyond the pale for *Edition NY* and *GQ* to go at it. To read about my fight experiences, I've written essays on the subject in three of my books: *My Less Than Secret Life*, *I Love You More Than You Know*, and *The Double Life Is Twice As Good*.

The blog thus functions as a tool for advertising, not only the books that Ames has written, but also for promoting Jonathan Ames as personality, a quirky "character". Describing Gleason's Gym, where the training sequences for the episode are filmed, Ames invites viewers to see the real story behind the boxing match: "To see a few pictures from my fights go to www.jonathanames.com and click on 'boxing.'" Circulating within the convergence of media in *Bored to Death*, the blog is a masterstroke of self-promotion.

In directing viewer attention to the inspirations and places behind the episodes, the blog also reveals a "behind-the-scenes" marketing strategy. Such a strategy is hardly a new phenomenon, writes Caldwell, citing numerous examples in Hollywood of film and promotional material meant to let viewers in on the secrets and magic of the industry. "What digital technology brought to the making-of prototype are the ideal conditions under which the genre can be exploited as a dominant on-screen form," he argues, going on to claim that making-of strategies "allow studios and networks to exploit artistic buzz and spike economic profits for their conglomerates and mother brands" (284). Caldwell finds in the DVD a "striking" venue for exploiting buzz and realizing profits, primarily because it creates "a cultural interface in which critical discourses (aesthetic analysis, knowledge about production technologies, working methods, and behind-the-scenes information) can be directly discussed and negotiated with audiences and users without critical/cultural middlemen" (298). In writing about the boxing matches on *Bored to Death*, Ames looks ahead to the DVD that will inevitably follow the series. He praises "Oliver Platt [as] a genius of physical and verbal comedy—on the DVD we have to include the extended scene of Oliver writhing in pain in his corner after the first round," and suggests that funny footage missing from the episode might be included down the road: "I wish we could have included the whole thing for the broadcast, but, I guess, that's what DVDs are for."

Particularly striking in the boxing matches as they play out on the episode is the thrashing delivered to one of the critical/cultural middlemen. The fictional *Slate* reviewer Louis Greene (played by John Hodgman, also known as *Daily Show*

commentator and ironic PC-pitchman for Mac) falls at the gloves of Jonathan Ames, whose victory exacts personal revenge for Greene's harsh and caustic review of Ames' first novel. The match is suggestive of the way convergence culture enables a DVD to anticipate and deflate any negative buzz. "Sometimes," says Caldwell, "studios will actually savagely ridicule their own failed film in order to 're-create' it as an 'intentional' camp or cult classic" (301), as seen in the bonus tracks on the DVD of *Showgirls*, where "MGM works overtime to create camp" (301-302). The culmination of the first season of *Bored to Death* in the boxing ring works like a bonus track commentary on a camp dimension that almost automatically renders the series impervious—or, at least, indifferent—to whatever negative reviews might crop up. Critical hot air will be about as threatening as John Hodgman raging in the ring. And in keeping with camp's delight in facing off high culture, the boxing match positions *Bored to Death* as a product with few pretensions to undermine its wide appeal.

I would argue that the show often exemplifies what Barbara Klinger calls "mass camp": what makes it self-consciously "smart" is that it knowingly draws on and reflects audience interest in what the stodgy Louis Greenes of the world would find low and inferior. Emerging from the 1950's, when mass culture "brought a fearful reaction from many intellectuals about the general lowering of cultural standards," the idea of mass camp reflects camp gone mainstream (137). Because of a shift "which granted television shows, genre films, and paperback novels a certain status, the proclamations of the superiority of low art, which had always defined camp taste for its more marginalized audiences, gradually became part of a mass

aesthetic." Mass camp is less risky than more group-oriented forms of camp. With mass camp, everyone is in on the joke. Another function of the boxing matches, then, is to make camp spectacles outs of queer representation. As early as the second episode, when Jonathan trails Gary through the city streets, *Bored to Death* delights in displays of homoerotic tension. "I can be Brad Pitt and you can be Edward Norton," Jonathan says to Gary in the diner, alluding to *Fight Club* (1999). "Now stand up and strike me like a man." By the eighth episode, a remark made by Richard Antrem (Oliver Platt) in a promotional interview for the *Edition*/*GQ* smack-down points to the long-obvious running joke about the male camaraderie and competition in the series: "I think that a homoerotic subtext is precisely what this fight needs to make it more lively."

Go back to that fight in "The Alanon Case." Gary's first appearance in the episode is in the photo Jonathan admires, an image he inserts in the pages of *Farewell, My Lovely* when he follows him. Within the framework of noir, it is worth comparing Gary's portrait with that of the eponymous character in Otto Preminger's 1944 *Laura*, often cited as an early model of noir. Robert Corber has written about the impact of this film in Cold War America, arguing that the spectacle of homosexuality embodied (diegetically and extra-diegetically) by Clifton Webb's Lydecker potentially functions as a site for gay male spectatorship. Corber writes: "The position Lydecker occupies in the film's visual economy insists on the legibility of his body. Like Laura, he is constantly framed as an icon, or object to be looked at, and thus is aligned with the surface of the image" (64). Even if *Laura* does not sustain it, such a spectacle poses a challenge to the "normal" heterosexuality

contained by the narrative in allowing gay male spectators to reject that normalcy by staying on the surface. *Laura* and other films noir thus "inadvertently affirmed the practices and modes of identity gay men had created in response to their oppression. In privileging surface over depth, film noir encouraged what I have called 'camp' modes of spectatorship" (66).

Corber describes a camp aesthetic different from mass camp. In *Bored to Death*, the spectacle of Gary does not need to insist on its own legibility, but instead flirts outright with the gay desire underwriting Jonathan's competition with Gary. At the end of the episode, any repressed desire he has for Gary seems to have channeled itself to light-hearted banter on the subway in which Jonathan and Ray imagine what sex with each other might look like, a conversation that follows Jonathan's observation that "beautiful women are still being produced." These are among many scenes that invite camp readings of stylistic performances in the series that hardly take themselves seriously.

In addition to the "villainous" lesbians, the show includes episodes detailing Ray's anxiety at a colonoscopy performed by an over-the-top gay man (1.2); as well as an entire storyline on George's date with a man after his therapist tells him that bisexuality "will help me appeal to women readers" (1.5), followed by his self-parodying enlightenment that "thinking in terms of man and woman [is] binary. It's boring." Whether viewers wince at scenes like these, or whether they read these scenes from a homophobic perspective, or from one that recognizes and delights in the sheer artifice of these stereotypes, is a matter of *how* they are positioned to read. "Given mass camp's availability to many as a sensibility," Klinger writes, discussing

Rock Hudson in the films of Douglas Sirk, "how spectators read the artifice of the past depends substantially on their already established, heterogeneous, lived political positions. With a Sirk film, they may respond homophobically to Hudson, with a postfeminist consciousness to gender, or with uncommitted enjoyment of cinema's anachronisms" (156).

Although Klinger's focus is on 1950's melodramas, and the ways camp emerges from the distance between present-day audiences and movies from the 50's, her argument gives us a lens for seeing how *Bored to Death* might frame its own relationship with past viewing experiences. The boxing matches invite camp responses against the backdrop of the impromptu match in the earlier episode "The Alanon Case." Perhaps they also become camp at one remove from *Fight Club*; perhaps the "homoerotic subtext" invites positive or negative camp readings against queer representations invoked from television past and present. Again, viewers need not recognize all the specifics; but, to return to Altman, HBO relies on previous media-viewing experiences circulating throughout *Bored to Death* to make the series "feel" comfortable, familiar. Viewers are invited to make themselves at home, even if they do not always remember where they have seen these things before.

It is in light of mass camp that the drugstore scene in the second episode offers more to look at than meets the eye. Knowingly or not, the scene invokes an important moment in another crucial film associated with film noir, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. When Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) discuss their plans to murder Phyllis's husband in further detail, they meet in Jerry's Market, surrounded by mass-produced commodities that, as

Naremore puts it, “can be packaged and arranged in neat rows; they talk about murder in public, but the big store makes them anonymous, virtually invisible to shoppers” (89). Gerd Gemünden looks at the scene in its historical context, showing how it works as “a reminder of the abundance of consumer goods during prewar times as well as a promise for a speedy postwar recovery” (43); and Naremore demonstrates how Jerry’s is one more example of a “massified” public world explicitly associated with Phyllis so that “the bad girl represents Culture” (88-89). What is revealing about the scene in which Jonathan is surrounded by mass-produced commodities is the way it speaks about the mass culture of our own time. Looking at a 1950’s film review by James Agee that makes an undignified connection between women and laxatives, Klinger reveals a tendency of the era to associate “women and the debasing effects of mass culture” (77). Jonathan’s frenetic grabbing of Metamucil and toilet paper in the drugstore illustrates mass camp at its most mainstream: immune from high-culture snobs like Louis Greene, we revel in the low.

And noir is in on the joke. *Bored to Death* relies on a cultural familiarity with parody, working from decades’ worth of television and movies that, as Klinger shows, reflect an “awareness of conventions on the part of media producers and audiences alike” that have made parody popular (138). Klinger writes that parodies are effective in “cashing in on the audiences’ conversancy with conventions to create self-reflexive comedies from dramatic remains” (138-139). Not all viewers may be aware of the conventions (or styles or traditions) that *Bored to Death* makes fun of; moreover, the show is often less interested in parodying noir than it is in establishing its own brand(s) of comedy. As pseudo-memorial, it cashes in on audiences’

conversancy with conversancy; that is, it certainly has noir "in mind," but it also draws on audience familiarity with parody and what parody does, as well as other familiar forms across different media, to keep audiences coming back.

Indeed, the regressive gender politics that provide numerous wincing moments for Daynah Burnett arguably have more in common with what David Denby calls the "slacker-striver genre" than they do with noir. In a 2007 article for *The New Yorker*, Denby writes about Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up* (2007). He sees it as a "disenchantment of romantic comedy," a film about the bummer for male slackers in striving toward adulthood:

> The perilous new direction of the slacker-striver genre reduces the role of women to vehicles. Their only real function is to make them grow up. That's why they're all so earnest and bland—so *nice*, so *good*. Leslie Mann (who's married to Apatow) has some great bitchy lines as the angry Debbie, but she's not a lover; she represents disillusion. As Anthony Lane pointed out in these pages, Apatow's subject is not so much sex as age, and age in his movies is a malediction. If you're young, you have to grow up. If you grow up, you turn into Debbie—you fear that the years are overtaking you fast. Either way, you're in trouble. (65)

The end of the first season of *Bored to Death* sees its child-men, if not grown up, at least more mature. And as in the slacker-striver genre, women help them in the process. The first season ends with resolution across the board. George finds meaningful reconciliation with his favorite ex-wife. Ray exits the season with vigor,

renewed by the lustful desire the "violence" of boxing has generated in Leah. Jonathan seems to have gotten over Suzanne and enters a new relationship with Stella (Jenny Slate), a woman who loves smoking pot as much as he does.

Even though Stella keeps seducing Jonathan away from work on his second novel, she acts in the final episode as a stabilizing influence. "What do you love?" she asks, encouraging Jonathan to embrace his work and write about what he loves. His reply is a good description of the show's sensibility: "I love being a part-time private detective." The noir in *Bored to Death* goes to work only part of the time—focusing on slacker male-bonding antics, the final couple of episodes almost lose sight of the noir-otic framework. Not that the series needs full commitment for the success HBO envisions; after all, noir is just one more experience that comes out of the past.

Chapter Four. Beyond HBO

On May 6, 2007, police arrested HBO chairman and CEO Chris Albrecht in Las Vegas for assaulting Karla Jensen, his girlfriend at the time. Two stories emerged in the ensuing media attention. The first was that Albrecht had a history of abuse of women, and the second was that HBO worked hard to keep some of those incidents from surfacing. Both stories put HBO in a bad light. Within three days of his arrest, Albrecht was fired.

The end of Albrecht's tenure at HBO coincided with the end of the show that helped raise the cable channel to prominence. *The Sopranos* ended its run on June 10, which led to speculation about where HBO could possibly go after such groundbreaking success. As Steven Zeitchik put it in *Variety*, looking ahead to the finale, "HBO finds itself in an unusual position: reveling in one of the triumphs in the history of television at the exact moment it frets over what to do when that triumph ends" (16). If HBO has changed the face of television, Albrecht is undoubtedly a key figure in the transformation. In a *GQ* profile in November 2010, Amy Wallace quotes HBO notables including David Chase, Alan Ball, and Tom Fontana, who all testify to the ways Albrecht dared to encourage their own creative energy. "No person is more responsible" for the current respectability of television, Wallace writes, "than Albrecht, and sometimes it almost seems he creates entertainment in his own image. *Bold* is the word most people use to describe him. *Risk-taking*" (123).

Albrecht's arrest in Las Vegas becomes relevant here. Wallace reports that the former chief executive denies any efforts on HBO's part to cover up his violent incidents with women. She also reports on the skepticism surrounding that denial,

which brings to light the possibility of a conflicted sensibility: "numerous sources say that although Albrecht often championed women in the workplace, his interactions with them could also be belittling—even destructive" (128).[19] The conflicts and contradictions often characteristic of the HBO serial thus invoke the real world that produces them, as though the notion that Albrecht creates entertainment in his own image extends to other descriptions besides "bold" and "risk-taking".

One detail that stands out in Albrecht's story is that he and Jensen were in Vegas to watch the boxing match between Floyd Mayweather and Oscar de la Hoya, which was televised by HBO for pay-per-view (Finke). It is a detail that encapsulates the serial experience: the end of Albrecht's tenure not only coincides with the end of *The Sopranos*, it also looks back to the beginning of HBO, when boxing matches were a defining feature of its programming. This chapter reflects on what HBO looks like now, in 2011—four and five years, respectively, after *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* have ended, and amid the ongoing *Bored to Death* and *Treme*, whose endings we do not yet know. My lens is David O Russell's *The Fighter*, the 2010 boxing movie distributed by Paramount.

Russell's film creates ambiguity about who "the fighter" really is by focusing on two stories in particular, those of comeback boxer Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg)

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[19] See Wallace's profile, "Violence, Nudity, Adult Content," for further details on the arrest. Wallace writes that in the days after the arrest it was Nikki Finke who blogged about Albrecht's interactions with women at HBO. See Finke's blog at http://www.deadline.com/2007/05/what-happens-in-hbo-stays-in-hbo/. Finke writes that she means to "add a bit more" to a story that the *Los Angeles Times* originally broke. For that story, see Claudia Eller's article "HBO chief accused of assault in 1991" (http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/09/business/fi-hbo9). See also the collection of essays on HBO *It's Not TV*. Leverette, Ott, and Buckley look at the arrest in their introduction, suggesting that, coupled with the end of *The Sopranos*, it marks the beginning of what they call the "post-HBO era" (7).

and his half-brother Dicky Eklund (Christian Bale), who fights a crack addiction. I am interested in the story the film tells about HBO. In looking back at the experiences of Micky and Dicky, the film casts glances at HBO's history, and at the importance to that history of boxing matches and documentaries. I will continue here to reflect on the conflicts my thesis has traced in the HBO serial—conflicts between the sense of an ending and the promise of perpetual branded enjoyment; generic expectations and marketing surprises fostered by convergence; political engagement and profitable spreadability. I also intend for this chapter to function as a conclusion, an open-ended ending: I will suggest that we are in a post-HBO era, and then consider what it means in an era of media convergence to say that we have gone beyond HBO.

Wallace recounts in the *GQ* profile Albrecht's story of what he calls the "'the HBO shrug'—the who-knows-if-this-is-gonna-fly-but-let's-go-for-it bravado that was the norm while he was there" (123). When Albrecht and his then boss Jeff Bewkes took a meeting with Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg about making *Band of Brothers*, the story goes, Bewkes pledged far more money than what he and Albrecht had agreed to commit. When Albrecht asked why, Bewkes shrugged his shoulders in nonchalance. The story is meant to illustrate how the network has changed: "'HBO has lost its shrug,' Albrecht says, sounding more sad than critical." I see *The Fighter* as an indication that Albrecht may be right. HBO has a kind of extended cameo in the film. It plays a bold, risk-taking channel that aims to strengthen consumers' faith in the HBO brand at a time when many are wondering if the company has lost its shrug.

I. Historic Fights

Although *The Fighter* is not an HBO Pictures production, HBO's fingerprints are all over the film. Released by Paramount, the film's production credits include Relativity Media, Mandeville Films, and Closest to the Hole (Debruge). Whatever nostalgia *The Fighter* might create about the early (or, earlier) days of HBO is countered by the sense that HBO continues to be culturally relevant. The cross-promotional strategies we considered in the discussion of *Bored to Death* are also at work in Russell's film. Melissa Leo as Alice Ward, for instance, invites recognition from her recent role as Toni on *Treme*. And Mark Wahlberg, as one of the film's producers, draws attention to other projects associated with his name. Closest to the Hole is his production company, and in addition to *The Fighter*, HBO programs including *Entourage, In Treatment,* and *Boardwalk Empire* have benefited from its support. Even the boxing matches—with the HBO logo prominent in most of Micky's fights—look beyond what accounted for HBO's early success, and emphasize the continued import sports have in HBO programming, whether the program is, well, a boxing match, or an installment from sports series such as *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* (1995-) and *Hard Knocks* (2001-2002, 2007-), or a fictional sports serial such as the recent *Eastbound and Down* (2009-), which follows the antics of an obnoxious, has-been professional baseball player making a comeback bid.[20]

[20] *Inside the NFL*, which launched in 1977, might be listed here as well. HBO dropped the program in 2008, but it was picked up by Showtime, where it continues to air (wikipedia).

Sports programming contributes to the distinction HBO markets as central to its brand identity. As Toby Miller and Linda Kim have observed:

> In accordance with its status as "quality television," the network . . . pioneered various technological and stylistic norms for presenting sport, such as the delightfully named Punchstat (which provides a count of the number of blows boxers land on each other), microphones near management, Spanish translations, and cameras above the action. (223)

Boxing was from the start a core feature of HBO sports. HBO officially became a satellite-cable service in televising the "Thrilla in Manila" on October 1, 1975, the heavyweight match pitting Muhammad Ali against Joe Frazier. The fight was "a hugely popular success for all concerned," writes Gary Edgerton; "In one fell swoop, HBO became a national network, ushering in television's cable era (1976-94) with its first full year of regularly scheduled satellite-delivered programming" (2). After that, HBO boxing developed into its own brand, as though it was something different from HBO even as it helped define it.

Miller and Kim discuss the ways HBO has monopolized television coverage of boxing. At the beginning, it took advantage of other networks' practical abandonment of the sport, "which mostly circulated through closed-circuit arena screenings. The station approached the leading promoters and offered to pay a fee to co-screen events, arguing that the station posed no threat to the existing model because of its tiny size" (228). Since then, HBO has not only arranged specific fights, but also decided how those fights would be televised. The result is that the channel

has turned into a kind of corporate boxing promoter—raising all sorts of ethical questions having to do with conflict of interest—and the fights it promotes have become by general consensus unexciting, boring. Contracted boxers are often matched against opponents they could easily defeat, so that "leading talent [is] either protected from potential humiliation or reserved for pay-per-view, thus adding to fans' financial burden on top of subscribing to a premium channel ($40 to $50 per fight in addition to the $10 and $12 monthly fees)" (229).

Indeed, though it remains a key component of HBO sports, boxing has come to be derided by many boxing fans. Miller and Kim write in 2008, but their comments on the boxing community's "restive" fans, increasingly impatient with HBO's approach to televising the sport, go some distance in explaining the channel's recent loss to Showtime of the fight between Manny Pacquia and Shane Mosley on May 7, 2011. Boxing writer Thomas Hauser sees this loss as the most recent development in the long, gradual slide of HBO boxing, a decline he attributes mostly to a corporate leadership in the channel's sports programming that is both out of touch with, and condescending towards, the sport and the community that follows it. In spite of its many advantages, especially economic ones that derive from the strength of the HBO brand, "HBO Sports programming has lost its edge. It has become formulaic. It's far less innovative and daring now than the documentaries . . . not to mention offerings such as Boardwalk Empire. It has become tired and less appealing to young viewers, who will make up the next generation of premium-cable subscribers."

Against the backdrop of Hauser's criticism, *The Fighter* is fascinating for the way it connects HBO to an innovative television emerging from not just boxing, but also documentary and drama. As I suggested above, the film plays with the idea that a single fighter's story is being told. Brothers Micky and Dicky are both staging comebacks, and though they wage different fights, one brother's story is bound up with the story of the other: the stories are so overlapping and mutually influential, addressing the larger family dynamics that give them context, that the film becomes a family melodrama, a genre that has become closely associated with the HBO brand. In other words, the film explores the love, anxiety, problems, and development in family in ways that *The Sopranos* does—and in ways we have seen in this thesis that shows like *Six Feet Under*, *Bored to Death*, and *Treme* have done. Looked at from such a perspective, *The Fighter* is an HBO offering.

HBO's presence is marked most overtly by the use of televised boxing and documentary. Peter Debruge suggests that HBO is stylistically important to *The Fighter*. He writes in his review of the film:

> It's not insignificant to the look and feel of "The Fighter" that HBO was the one to document this chapter in the siblings' lives, since the network also rewrote the rules by which prize fights and family sagas are told. With the exception of one slo-mo montage, the matches are depicted like pay-per-view events, cutting between long shots and ringside reactions (as they would on TV, complete with instant-replay capabilities and video-style pixelation) rather than privileged close-ups.

Prize fights and family sagas: Debruge brings together the two features that are arguably most significant in accounting for HBO's success. *The Fighter* attaches no less weight to Micky's (televised) fights in the ring than it does the (televised) documentaries that track Dicky's struggle against addiction. Periodically, we see Dicky being interviewed on camera, and realize that these interviews go into the making of an HBO documentary, which in the film is titled *Crack in America*[21]. *The Fighter* opens with one of these interviews—introducing from the outset the film-within-a-film motif—and soon after follows crack-addled Dicky who brags that HBO is making a movie about his comeback. The HBO plug, like the dramatic boxing matches, rests not on specific content as much as it does on *what HBO has to offer*. Boxing, family sagas, documentary: there is plenty to choose from under the auspices of the HBO brand.

Of course, abundant choice does not automatically equate with freshness, with innovation or risk-taking. Given HBO's success with serialized television, it is ironic that its boxing franchise has become so stale. In the right light, boxing could be another HBO serial. In the first of his two-part story on "What HBO Should Do Now," Hauser offers eight suggestions for how the company might make boxing exciting to watch again, including televising better fights, and replacing its uninspired broadcasting teams. One suggestion is particularly worth noting: "Rather than pre-select 'stars,' HBO Sports should let stars emerge from exciting competitive match-ups." In suggesting the tendency of HBO boxing to be rigged, Hauser speaks to one

[21] The documentary in the film, as Debruge points out, was based on the HBO's 1995 *High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell*, which included Dicky as one of the profiles.

pleasure of seriality, that of *not knowing* where the story will go, but thriving on the excitement of getting there.[22]

Sports usually offer this kind of pleasure anyway. Any season for any given sport is a serial: fortunes rise and fall; plots twist all over the place, and can be shaped by what takes place on or off the field (or court, track, ring, etc.); subplots and intrigues proliferate, taking fans down unanticipated side-paths; heroes and villains are always at it, and in the most exciting seasons no one can be certain of who will end up winning it all. And it is the media that structure the serial. Boxing is no different. Miller and Kim consider its narrative dimensions as it relates to television, arguing that it's typical of how "TV narrates sport in general. Training in commentary emphasizes personal, gladiatorial aspects. In place of the thick description offered by radio, the thinness of television commentary individuates, seeking out personal difference, 'character,' history, and conflict. Embellishing sport with drama is integral to the narrative" (227).

It is tempting to claim that diegetic narration (by newspaper, for example, or radio, or television) in sports movies is a genre in its own right—the sports-casting film, say. *The Fighter* is mindful of the way television narrates boxing, but it is especially mindful of the way HBO narrates the sport. As with Micky, it's not TV

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[22] Any narrative system, one might counter, is rigged in the sense that we are always at the mercy of a story someone else is writing. Still, there is something undetermined in a serial narrative that unfolds over time, not only, as we saw in the first chapter, because a serial is constantly *renewing* itself, but also because the spaces between installments nourish—or at least create the potential for—an ongoing collaboration between writer(s) and reader(s): responses from fans, for instance, or discussions between them, can have an influence on the direction(s) the story will take. Hauser's "What HBO Should Do Now" is a case in point; in suggesting ways to make HBO boxing better, is he not suggesting ways to improve the story?

that mediates Dicky's fight, it's HBO. The documentary in the film serializes his story as we have seen it unfold; that is, it gives us installments of Dicky's struggle, characterized by living vicariously through his brother's triumphs, and his inability to let go of his own days as the "Pride of Lowell," particularly a match against Sugar Ray Leonard (he held his own, he boasts)—a fight that was itself televised by HBO. Though Dicky's claims about the movie HBO is making immediately strike us as suspicious, it is not until his girlfriend asks the filmmakers what the movie is about that our suspicions are "officially" confirmed by the diegesis. As Dicky gets high, they reply that it is a documentary about crack addiction. The moment recalls Victor Kovitch's hospital-room television in *Six Feet Under*'s "Brotherhood" in that different media representations share screen space. Just as 1991 and 2001 merge in that episode, here a 1995 representation of HBO's representation of Dicky Eklund merges with a present-day representation of that representation.

This *mise-en-abîme* effect is characteristic of what Thomas Elsaesser has called the "Mind-Game Film." Elsaesser doesn't see the mind-game film as a genre, but rather a "phenomenon" (14) indicative of profoundly changing experiences of cinematic spectatorship. Some of its components are recognizable from narratology: "single or multiple diegesis, unreliable narration and missing or unclaimed point-of-view shots, episodic or multi-stranded narratives, embedded or 'nested' (story-within-story/film-within-film) narratives, and frame-tales that reverse what is inside the frame (going back to *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* [1919])" (19).[23] The mind-game

[23] As this comparison to *Dr Caligari* suggests, Elsaesser acknowledges that mind-game films have roots in earlier cinema, and also in specific genres (e.g., horror or science fiction) and directors (e.g., Fritz Lang, Hitchcock). The mind-game film is

film thus challenges classical, linear forms of storytelling, so that "the spectator's own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision, new reality-checks, displacements, and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space, and the presumption of a possible switch in cause and effect" (21).

I would not necessarily describe *The Fighter* as a mind-game film. But the motif of the screen within a screen points to the phenomenon by encouraging spectators to put different pieces of the story together: not just Dicky's profile as it is presented by the documentary, but the documentary as it fits with other elements of the film—other characters, other realities. (Consider, for instance, that Dicky sees a show about his boxing comeback in what is really a documentary about addiction.) What makes *Crack in America* so interesting when it is finally screened in the film is that it is being screened in different spaces—the jail, where Dicky is; Micky's apartment; the family room where Alice and her daughters have gathered to watch; the room where Micky's ex-wife watches, with their daughter and her husband. Debruge says that this approach "allows the director to cycle among his ensemble to observe how all the key players react to public humiliation." This makes sense, but more telling to me is the way the sequence cycles through different spaces. Though a narrative purpose is clearly being served—the documentary brings the family together—also emphasized is the way these different audiences are networked; the

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"new" in the historical sense: "what is at stake are new forms of spectator-engagement and new forms of audience-address" (16). Elsaesser's essay "The Mind-Game Film" is one of the contributions in a compilation titled *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland (2009). Films discussed in the book include *Lost Highway* (1997), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Memento* (2000), and *Run Lola Run* (1998).

scene is punctuated by the phone calls characters make to each other, talking about their experience of watching Dicky on TV.[24]

This network enacts what Elsaesser would call "multiple entry-points" (36). The family "enters" the documentary from different spaces, yet the documentary is "accessible" to every member (in the sense that Dicky has interacted in some way with those who watch him; he has made a personal appearance in everyone's life). Classical Hollywood, Elsaesser reminds us, works on the same principle, and makes a movie accessible to everyone, "no small achievement," he writes, "when one considers that multiple entry-point means":

> audiences of different gender, different age-groups, different ethnic or national identities, different educational backgrounds, but also quite literally, audiences that "enter" a film at different times during a given performance (on television) or at different points in history (the "classic" or "cult" film). Films have also had to perform well on different media-platforms, at least since the 1960s: as theatrical releases, as television re-runs, as pre-recorded videotapes. Since the 1990s, the marketplace has expanded (it has become global, rather than merely US-domestic, European, Japanese, and Australian) and the platforms have diversified: besides the ones named, one needs to add: a film's internet site, the movie trailer, the video-game, and the DVD. (37)

[24] Later, Alice will narrate to Dicky, who listens on the phone from jail, Micky's fight against Alfonso Sanchez as it plays out on TV.

Elsaesser goes on to write that the multiple entry-points have become considerably more complex, and that constructing those entry-points is now "a truly daunting challenge, when one considers the proliferation of reception contexts and media-platforms." The dispersed family members watching *Crack in America* speaks to the multiple spaces inhabited by the film's audiences—including potential audiences—spaces that are separate and distinct from one another, but networked together by the media experience created by *The Fighter*. The space of the Hollywood film has expanded, we might say, and, as Elsaesser argues, cinematic spectatorship must now be understood in terms of "the (meta-)contact established by the different interpretive communities with the films, across the 'rules of the game' that each community deems relevant and by which it defines itself." (Consider that everyone watching *Crack in America* has his or her own interpretation: Alice doesn't want her grandson to see Dicky in the documentary; Micky doesn't want his daughter to watch, either, but his ex allows it to "Let her see who her uncle is, who you are"; and even Dicky comes to be shamed when he sees how he has disappointed his community.) Like the family members watching the documentary, we inhabit our own space as we watch them watching, a space that is further complicated by the fact that we watch it in the frame of a film called *The Fighter*.

When Christian Bale accepted his Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 2011, one of the people he thanked was Dicky Eklund. "He's had a wonderful story," Bale said, "and I can't wait to see the next chapter of his story. If you want to be a champ, if you want to go train with him, go meet with him. dickeklund.com. Go do it. Check him out." Bale's tribute was an advertising boon for dickecklund.com—the

plug overwhelmed the website with a dramatic increase in traffic, causing it to crash (Talarico). According to the site, Eklund offers physical training sessions for individuals and groups, with sessions including a range of choices, from boxing lessons to cardio boot camp. Understandably, his business seeks to capitalize on the success of *The Fighter*, highlighting the connection between Eklund and Bale: "Train with the boxing legend . . . the man portrayed by Christian Bale in 'The Fighter'". The feel-good ending of the movie, affirmed by Bale in his Oscar speech, continues on in dickeklund.com, which promises that, if you want, you can be a champ.

I do not deny that Eklund's story is an emotionally powerful one. My point is that dickeklund.com becomes another entry-point to *The Fighter*, which helps Eklund promote his own brand of personal transformation. Bale's plug thus enacts a powerful sponsorship of small business and the good it inspires (anyone can be a champ), a sponsorship that enables viewers to come back to *The Fighter* and recognize its own inspirational mission. By the end of his speech, it is sponsorship by the powerful that Bale praises: he thanks "our producers" and "Paramount for pushing this out there and letting people know it exists. So many movies are just brilliant but nobody ever knows about them." A game of *mise-en-abîme* is in effect. Frames shift and overlap so that, for example, if Eklund's story continues beyond *The Fighter*, it is also reabsorbed by *The Fighter*, which itself creates an entry-point to the corporate space of Paramount, whose good work is measured in part by making movies like *The Fighter* possible.

II. Beyond HBO

Where does HBO fit in all this? Response to this question is partly a matter of keeping our eyes on the shifting frames. In its original coverage of boxing and the documentary, HBO functions as a framework for the stories of Micky and Dicky, but those stories are "re-framed" by Paramount's *The Fighter*. Even so, as with dickeklund.com, HBO potentially benefits from the feel-good aura of the movie. In their discussion of HBO sports, Miller and Kim describe the channel's marketing of sports as a conscientious and educative way to consider American social and historical issues. The approach "matches the overall branding of the network," they argue.

> It cultivates a corporate social responsibility (CSR) ethos, even as it claims to be driven by consumer desire. Such rhetoric is now virtually universal in the annual reports and executive suites of major multinationals, alongside the mantra of growth and profit. CSR is said to generate new markets, massage labor, deliver positive public relations, and heighten recognition. (226)

We have seen this CSR ethos at play in the affective politics of *Treme,* where HBO seeks a balance between social responsibility and growth and profit. Miller and Kim argue that what credibility HBO has as promoter of social responsibility is deflated when one considers the ethical problems surrounding HBO boxing.[25] In *The Fighter*,

[25] There is the problematic appeal HBO boxing might have to some audiences, for instance. Miller and Kim write, "Boxing has a dirty little secret—illegal betting—that is at the core of its popularity. It seems safe to assume that much of the audience is being enabled by HBO to participate in this activity; that gambling encouraged them to subscribe in the first place" (228-229). Miller and Kim also condemn the "extraordinary irresponsibility of the network and the sport in permitting" profits at

HBO stands to strengthen its brand by feeding off the inspirational, hopeful stories framed by the movie, while at the same time obscuring the problems faced by its beleaguered boxing brand. This scenario is consistent with the outlook Miller and Kim have for HBO's business model as they see it reflected in the boxing franchise. The network, they conclude, "will continue to be a loyal wing of a clinical, cynical, secretive multinational corporation, even as it bizarrely identifies itself with quality and progressive politics through CSR rhetoric" (231).

Do I reach a similar conclusion? This thesis has examined the strategies underlying the HBO brand, but it has also taken very seriously the progressive politics associated with the network. As of this writing, there is no reason to think that HBO will do anything but continue to be a loyal member of the Time Warner family. Nor is there any reason to see HBO as somehow transcendent of capitalism, as Miller and Kim have demonstrated. Yet, while I also find something distressing in the CSR ethos they criticize, I wonder whether this ethos is more a reflection of the ways capitalism naturalizes its processes—capitalism is good *because* it's socially responsible—than of HBO's bizarre business strategies. HBO has created a space for audiences and fans to engage with political and social issues, and while this has proven to be a successful business model, the engagement is real, not automatically incompatible with social or personal transformation.

Part of the problem of reconciling the corporate with the socially responsible in HBO may have to do with cinema's current crisis, which Elsaesser sees typified by the mind-game film, and emerging from the changing ways of understanding the

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the expense of athletes' health and safety (230-231). In the context of HBO's efforts to market its own brand of CSR, these claims seem fair.

relationship between spectator and screen. We experience a movie such as *The Fighter* in ways that take us beyond *The Fighter*, for example, and while that experience might be richer as a result, it also bespeaks strategic business practice, for, as Elsaesser writes, a film must be constantly aware of the profits it will accrue in its "afterlife" (as a DVD, or in international markets) (39). The film continues to "live," then, even after it has ended, and in this sense cinematic spectatorship might be said to approximate televisual spectatorship. Films do not come to us in the kind of "flow" that characterizes television, the never-ending stream of programming that gives television its quality of always-being-there, of "liveness". But in today's world films do create the space for spectators to continually interact with them. As numerous critics have proposed, we have arrived at Cinema 3.0, the cinema of the "interactive" image.[26]

Television similarly fosters interactive experiences, though its sense of liveness makes those experiences different. In his 2000 historical-theoretical study *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Jeffrey Sconce explains that liveness is a result of both television's technology of constant electronic transmission and the programs it broadcasts; together, technology and programming

[26] In addition to complex storytelling, Elsaesser looks closely at the database or the archive as forms of interaction. The frame of reference for many of these critics is Deleuze's notion of the "time-image," which he uses to describe the moment in cinematic history—after WWII—when spectators had to be more active in making sense of onscreen images, often presented in no rational order (as with flashbacks, dream sequences, etc.). See Kristen Daly's "Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-Image," which draws on the work of Elsaesser and other critics writing about new media to demonstrate how "the time-image gives way to the interactive-image" in recent films (82). See also the anthology *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, edited by Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003), especially Barbara Filser's "Gilles Deleuze and a Future Cinema: Cinema 1, Cinema 2 – and Cinema 3?" (214-217).

create the feeling that the spectator is always being addressed "in the present, the now" (173). Seriality is a *narrative* strategy for what Sconce calls TV's "unbordered empire of flow" (174). It creates the sense that the characters in the narrative worlds we visit week after week have lives that parallel our own, and that those TV worlds always exist, "even when we are not watching. Combining this sense of parallelism with television's unique capacity for open-ended narrative runs, TV characters and their worlds become 'real' in a way fundamentally different from that of the cinema and other media" (175). In the eleven years since Sconce's book was published, we have seen television's capacity in this regard expand. Convergence culture has strengthened the sense of real worlds, real characters by making it possible to visit whenever we want, beyond the appointed times, and, as with cinema, across multiple platforms. The concept of flow has thus itself expanded over the past decade, and now reaches beyond television, as Henry Jenkins's definition of convergence suggests: "Perhaps most broadly, media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them. Convergence is understood here as an ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems, not a fixed relationship" (*Convergence Culture* 322).

Study of the "HBO serial" helps us recognize some of the contradictions that thrive in this moment of media convergence. Shows such as the ones I have considered in this thesis encourage an interaction that has the potential to be meaningful, even highly personal, the potential to extend beyond their own diegetic worlds to touch ours. Such a potential raises the kinds of issues I have explored here,

issues not defined or "contained" by HBO: media complicity in the enthusiastic promotion of war; what New Orleans "means" in the post-Katrina, post-Bush world; cultural anxieties about masculinity. Yet in exploring these issues, we interact with the HBO brand at the same time, even when we go beyond HBO—to Jonathan Ames's Brooklyn, to David Rae Morris's photography or Paramount's *The Fighter*. We come to associate these issues, or the willingness to raise them, with HBO; we come to expect that HBO will deliver similar products in the future. Consequently, it might become easier for us to look away from what makes us uncomfortable: unsavory business practices, a CEO's violent acts.

In *Haunted Media*, Sconce describes the "faith" people come to place in broadcasting. "The cultivation of 'faith' in the listening audience . . . must be seen as a process every bit as political as the actual information carried by radio and television. Such faith is a form of social control linked, not to the actual messages of the media, but to the very intractability of the apparatus itself" (113).[27] I would argue that brands cultivate faith in similar ways. Brands present themselves to consumers as things that are always there for them; the cultivation of loyalty and love ultimately works to strengthen the brand, and consumers' faith that it will not let them down. Is faith in a brand also a form of social control? Reviewing the criticism on where cinema will take us (31-34), Elsaesser wonders whether we are headed in the direction of discipline and control, where media will become a kind of all-encompassing surveillance system; or whether we are on our way to something better:

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[27] For a fascinating discussion of how the 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds* posed a challenge to Americans' faith in radio broadcasting, see chapter three in *Haunted Media*, "Alien Ether," especially the section titled "The 'Panic' Broadcast," pp. 110-117.

will the complexities of mind-game cinema "train new cognitive skills and teach appropriate ways of responding to and interacting with automated systems of surveillance and control" (33)? The faith that lies at the heart of what have been called "brand communities" contributes to this speculation of where our story goes from here. A brand community describes the intensity of the relationship that consumers form both with the brand, and with each other, through their love of the brand. Jenkins writes, "Participation within such communities does not simply reaffirm their brand affiliation but also empowers these groups to assert their own demands on the company" (80). There is something hopeful in this notion that consumers can have a profound influence on the development of a brand. But ultimately is it the group or the company that is being served? Are both served equally, if in different ways? Moreover, why do these questions matter? Are there reasons to be concerned that it looks like a brand will always be there, framing our relationships with each other, and the world(s) we live in? The very notion of a brand community is haunted by the hopeful or bleak possibilities of what community will come to mean in the future.

And so is the notion of the HBO serial. If convergence culture accommodates our desire to explore serialized space, it also ensures that HBO will be with us every step of the way. Even if we go beyond HBO—as if the complexities and pleasures of serial entertainment transcend the marketplace—we will find that our interactions continue to develop in a world of brands: the FX serial; the AMC serial; the Showtime serial. Faith in one brand works as an affirmation of faith in branding itself. This is the apparent contradiction: a brand is a "known" thing, of permanent

and fixed quality, yet ever changing and full of possibilities, like an open-ended serial. A brand keeps the story going forever.

In *The Fighter*, Dicky has faith that ESPN will "come through" for them, and deliver a good fight for Micky. But it is HBO that delivers the good fights after all. The film implicates the network for pitting weaker boxers against stronger ones. Micky is cast in the role of the weak, the so-called "stepping-stone" boxer. When Micky visits him in jail before fighting Sanchez, Dicky warns, "HBO is invested in the Mexican. . . . They don't care if he kills you." When it's a sure bet that Sanchez will destroy Micky in the ring, the commentator jokes about the offerings of subscription TV: "Someone should pay me to watch this." But Micky pulls off a stunning upset. He makes the fight worth watching, which casts HBO's boxing coverage in a more favorable light—its televised fights are the stuff of Hollywood movies.

The Fighter ends with Micky's fight for the Welterweight title in London against Shea Neary. His win hardly stages the end of his story, but instead sets off an in-between space that looks ahead to a bright future, when "Micky Ward went on to three epic fights with Arturo Gatti, bringing his first seven-figure payday." After the Neary match, the ringside commentator celebrates a victory that belongs clearly to Micky, and possibly to another fighter (you know who) that promises to deliver: "He's done it again! The grinding, gutty Micky Ward pulls out another big victory!" That the story of Micky's rise to the top is invested with the story of Dicky's own triumphant fight against the odds injects dramatic energy into an HBO brand

currently beset by its boxing franchise, and often defined by its glory days of old, but betting on the future with products like *Boardwalk Empire* and *Game of Thrones*. What happens next for HBO will be caught up in the developments of convergence culture. As long as these developments continue to accommodate the complexities of seriality, I think seriality will continue to be an integral part of HBO's brand identity. HBO has had a profound influence on discourses about television and televisual spectatorship, and that influence, as I have argued, owes much to processes and strategies of serialization. HBO has established the serial as a model both for a drillable, ever-expanding *narrative* world, and a continuous, never-ending programming that aims for undying consumer loyalty. The HBO serial in the coming years will continue, if not to shape, then to engage with cultural conversations about television. Such engagement is part of an unchanging distinction that HBO means to market.

In a *New York Times* article appearing on the day before I write this paragraph, Manohla Dargis wonders what many others have been wondering in our discipline of "Film Studies": what is cinema? Dargis writes:

> Digital technologies have sharpened the image and clouded the question of what is cinema. It's too early to know what has been lost and what has been gained along the way, other than a sense of consumer convenience. These days, at the very least, I try to not call a movie (as in moving picture) shot on digital a film because, well, it isn't one even if it looks like a close approximation. But as James Cameron's "Avatar" and other digital productions prove, you don't

> need film to create cinema—from the Greek word kinema, which suggests motion and emotion. (15)

If we buy into the argument that we are in the era of Cinema 3.0, then it is fair to claim that there are blurred boundaries and frequent overlap between cinematic audiences and television ones: interaction creates the potential to take us across multiple platforms. Dargis's question thus inspires another, similar yet different: what is television? HBO has raised this question in its history, and it continues to do so now, when the ways we think and talk about television are dramatically different from how we viewed it in, say, 1983. My hunch is that the HBO serial will continue to contribute to—and capitalize on—discourses surrounding the changing ways we interact *with* media, and *across* media. What does it mean, for example, to have Martin Scorsese direct the first episode of *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-)? What does it mean to have Todd Haynes adapt *Mildred Pierce* (2011) as a mini-series? What does it mean to have *The Sopranos*' James Gandolfini star in the HBO film *Cinéma Vérité* (2011), which looks at perhaps the first reality-TV show, *American Family* (1971)? I hope my thesis will contribute to the ways we explore questions like these as we move towards a new HBO, beyond HBO.

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