Epilogue: What Do TV Critics Dream about?

> "Your job is to produce shit."
>
> —a CBS Executive to William Froug, quoted in Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire*

> Now visionary auteurs could make the kind of art that no one thought TV could handle in the first place.
>
> —Emily Nussbaum, *I Like to Watch*

In a short piece intriguingly titled "What Do Critics Dream about?," François Truffaut looks back somewhat nostalgically on his values as a film critic. Truffaut's writing has been notorious for its doctrinaire style, its tendency to overstate its case, and its vacillation between what might be considered love letters and hate mail to his subjects. But in this essay, which frames his film criticism at *Cahiers du Cinéma* and other influential film journals, he is almost dilettantish. He begins by writing about skipping school and sneaking into a theater to watch Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (1942), when he couldn't have been more than ten years old. Later that evening, his aunt takes him to watch the same Carné film, though he cannot admit to her that he has already seen it. So, he watches it again, as if encountering it for the first time. This is the moment when, Truffaut remarks, he "realized how fascinating it can be to probe deeper and deeper into a work one admires, that the exercise can go so far as to create the illusion of reliving the creation."[1] He repeats this experience with Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943) and other films, claiming to have watched his "first two hundred films on the sly, playing hooky and slipping into the movie house without paying."[2] What these formative re-viewings establish is a desire "to get closer and closer to films."[3] But what exactly does Truffaut mean by wanting to get deeper and deeper or

Cinematic TV. Rashna Wadia Richards, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2021.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190071257.003.0006

closer and closer to cinema? Given that he is describing his pathway to film criticism, what does getting deeper or closer afford a critic?

At first blush, in exuberant and evaluative terms, Truffaut appears to be defining film criticism as the art of getting to the core of what he loves about a film or filmmaker. Since he is opposed to seeing film criticism as scientific, Truffaut envisions a kind of writing that lays bare a film's enigmas and exigencies. That is why he writes so fervidly about cinematic particularities: "Renoir's changes of tone, Orson Welles's excesses, Pagnol's or Guitry's carelessness, Bresson's nakedness."[4] Through repeated viewings, Truffaut appears to argue, film critics can uncover the metaphysical singularity that characterizes an auteur. Martin Lefebvre interprets Truffaut's argument as an aspiration for uncovering some grand cinematic truth. Working playfully with the section titles in *The Films in My Life*, Martin Lefebvre argues that "what critics have always dreamt about is knowledge of the 'Big Secret'—all forms of hermeneutics widely attest to this."[5] This "big secret" sounds like the revelation of what early auteurists would have called a film's essence or its interior meaning. Because Truffaut articulates his spectatorial practice in terms of getting deeper and closer to cinema, one might surmise that this criticism as excavation metaphor holds true. However, as soon as we start believing that film criticism is about digging up what makes this or that filmmaker inimitable, Truffaut pulls back a little from that hypothesis. Although the collected essays illustrate his commitment to individual films and filmmakers, here he pauses to consider the overlaps between Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960). He contends that Bergman's film is similar to Hitchcock's and that both films are "a more or less transposition of Charles Perrault's famous story 'Little Red Riding Hood.' "[6] One might wonder if Truffaut is offering a comparative argument here. Before proceeding further, we must admit that he is raising the comparison only to conclude how "Bergman and Hitchcock each expressed part of his own violence with skill and freed himself of it."[7] That is, his analysis emphasizes how each director expresses himself through his material, regardless of their similarities. Still, Truffaut is sensitive not only to Perrault's literary influence but also to the fact that Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* is inspired in part by Akira Kurosawa. His thematic association of Hitchcock with Bergman, followed by his contention that they both rely on Perrault, reveals how easily even auteurist film criticism slips into a relative argument. Though Truffaut is ultimately more invested in unveiling what makes Hitchcock's or Bergman's films truly Hitchcockian or Bergmanesque, in practice, he arrives at that

argument by comparing the two. I am not saying this comparison is intertextual, or even proto-intertextual. But it intrigues me that a search for cinematic uniqueness leads, perhaps inadvertently, to a study of its overlaps, intersections, and borrowings. Although it seems like auteurist film criticism is digging vertically to find Hitchcock's or Bergman's big secret—or, for that matter, Renoir's or Welles's or Bresson's—it cannot help but stretch itself out horizontally.

Television critics have never had an option, if you will, between vertical and horizontal criticism. From the start, TV has been compared, inadequately at first to radio and shortly thereafter to cinema. Dubbed "radio with pictures," the first television studio at NBC, Studio 3H at Rockerfeller Center, was actually converted from a radio studio and retrofitted to make room for bulky television cameras and extremely powerful lights needed to create televisual images. Writers for early television were also imported from other arts. Michael Ritchie recounts an anecdote about a meeting of the members of the New York Dramatists Guild being asked to consider writing for television. One of them reportedly "described what he had seen already on TV as 'amateurs playing at home movies.' "[8] Though predictable in its disdain for the nascent medium, what I find striking about this critique is how readily it evaluates television in relation to cinema. Calling them *home* movies, however, highlights the fact that early TV shows were considered not just tawdrier and more episodic versions of the big screen. They were also an eclectic mix of comedy sketches and musical acts, sports shows and travelogues and cartoons—collectively seen as less sophisticated than "mature" cinema. Except for the serious news hours, TV producers threw anything they could to see what might stick. The CBS executive quoted in the first epigraph was being only a little facetious when asking William Froug, who went on to create *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–64) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–72), "to produce shit."

And "shit" is pretty much what early TV critics called their medium of analysis, so much so that their contempt for television became something of a cliché. As we observed in the introduction, Rudolph Arnheim's view of "television as transmission," or a medium without its own content, took root early on, leading the best critical minds to either shun television or judge it condescendingly. In a remarkable essay on whether CinemaScope can rescue a flagging film industry, André Bazin veers into a discussion of television's drawbacks. At times, he makes this case by overtly comparing it with cinema, arguing that "aside from the fact that television is an industrial

form in whose evolution aesthetic logic plays a very small part, the art of television is probably much narrower than film."[9] At other times, he makes general pronouncements about television that can only be meaningful in relation to cinema, as when he says that "the television picture will always retain its mediocre legibility."[10] While ostensibly criticizing TV's size, sharpness, and technical shortcomings, Bazin and others contribute to a landscape where broad cultural assumptions of television's inferiority become a given. For decades, almost nobody contests the supposition that TV would always be "irredeemably cruder than the cinema."[11] As we know, such a critical environment stunts the development of TV studies for a long time. There are few sustained analyses of television aesthetics or poetics in the early decades of the medium. This is what prompts David Marc to lash out against the critical snobbery, hoping instead for TV's own "Wordsworth who can skip through its wavy woods making sense of its light and dark."[12] Marc is not asking for a high-minded critic who finds something morally redemptive about television. Rather, he believes TV awaits someone who treats it on its own terms, someone who comprehends and communicates TV's values.

In the last two or so decades, we have finally seen an explosion of television criticism that does precisely that.[13] Buoyed by the proliferation of shows on cable networks and then streaming platforms, critics have written voluminously about TV history, style, genres, and specific series. In online venues, they have embraced the long-form narrative strategies of serial television, writing binge criticism on the structure and thematics of individual episodes and how they connect to the series as a whole. In scholarly monographs and edited collections, they have traced the shift in television storytelling, its industrial practices, and its viewership. Arriving as it does after half a century of TV's denigration as a pale impersonation of the movies, one might imagine that critics would eschew any comparison, negative or positive, with the other arts, particularly with cinema. Instead, in popular and academic writing, cinema's shadow looms large over television's recent glorification and its ascension as a true art form. I don't want to retread ground covered in the introduction, but it is vital to recall that much of the recent work on television has highlighted its connection with cinema. Even when a scholar creates a framework for analyzing television on its own terms, he or she cannot help but invoke cinema.[14] The reverse has not been true for film studies, whether at the heyday of auteurism or during its theoretical and historical turns. To put it another way, whereas film studies has been able to explore vertically, television studies

has always been horizontal—a practice that accelerates in the era of complex storytelling.

This is where *Cinematic TV* finds fertile ground for critical work, taking full advantage of horizontal thinking to seek out connections between cinema and television. What this book has emphasized is how thoroughly contemporary serial dramas have absorbed cinema. Two decades into this phenomenon, viewers no longer respond to TV's cinematicity the way Maggie O'Connell (Janine Turner) does, when she is invited to a lavish party at Maurice Minniefiled's (Barry Corbin) mansion ("The Big Feast," 4.21). At the excessive fête to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Minnifield Communications, Maggie is awed by the decadence around her, exclaiming: "It's just like a movie!" In fact, all of *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990–95) is itself "like a movie," given its myriad references to the movies and its systematic engagement with film culture.[15] What might've seemed exceptional then has since become commonplace. More than that, the relationship between television and cinema has developed well beyond that of influence. I have deployed the framework of intertextuality in this book because the inflated notion of influence, which continues to elevate the older medium, is too narrow for untangling the complex threads of cinematic association and appropriation in serial dramas. The four preceding chapters have substantiated this claim, unraveling the numerous connections that chronicle the relationship between television and cinema. It is no longer groundbreaking to suggest this intermedial association, but most have underestimated how wide-ranging it can be. *Cinematic TV* develops an expansive framework for analyzing this relationship in ways that are not reductive or evaluative. To watch serial television is to be struck by the sheer range of cinematic moments or motifs or genre conventions that flash up. Some of these are expected; others are more startling. And none of them functions as facile imitation. Predictable references abound in serial television to known auteurs, from Hitchcock to Kubrick to Tarantino, and scholarly attention has been paid mainly to them. But this book gives at least as much space to the unforeseen references, to minor or non-canonical films, that aren't immediately recognizable. Film history is not written solely out of the still-known; it must also rely on the no-longer-known or the narrowly known films. Contemporary television absorbs them all. As we have seen, serial drama treats film history as though it were an archive of cinematic images. What has interested me most is how a diverse series of films is always hovering in the televisual margins, ready to break through intermedially.

Cinema is not the only medium hovering there though, and our understanding of TV's borrowings ought to not stay static. Serial television remains an evolving genre that has become more and more rapacious as it learns to borrow not only from cinema but also from other media in intricate ways. For instance, a single season of *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–present) contains references to Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and Warner Bros.'s direct-to-video animation, *Tiny Toon Adventures: How I Spent My Vacation* (1992); it reflects as well on artistic trauma by weaving together biographical samplings from Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and Jay-Z. *Atlanta* consistently shows the need for expanding our analytical framework beyond cinema for thinking about serial dramas. *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017–present), on the other hand, appropriates lavishly from television. By exploring the notion of a woman as anti-hero in earnest, it looks to be a thematic rejoinder to *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, whereas it builds on the blue visual filters from *Bates Motel*. Moreover, all of those series's cinematic hypotexts also lurk in *Ozark*'s periphery. *WandaVision* (Disney+, 2021–present) borrows from television too, becoming a virtual archive of TV sitcoms, from *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–57) to *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961–66) to *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969–74). These quotations also recall films that have critiqued classic sitcoms, like Bryan Forbes's *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998). *WandaVision* blends these hypotexts with allusions to the Marvel macrocosm, making it a multiverse series woven solely out of references. Seung-hoon Jeong has recently argued that writing film criticism in the digital era "is modulation now, skillfully rearranging its components, flexibly adapting to diverse yet convergent media, ephemerally produced and consumed while permanently archived and renewed."[16] This kind of discourse is even more urgent for television criticism, where texts come into being rhizomatically and connect relentlessly. Perhaps a few decades ago a TV critic might have dreamed of criticism that takes seriously television's potential, that explores its narrative form, and that deals with television's transformative role in media studies. The visible and invisible biases against television have mostly melted away now, and TV is treated as a viable force rather than a corruptible hack within the new media landscape. After decades of critical scuffles, as Emily Nussbaum puts it, the side involved in a "drunken cultural brawl" to justify television, to legitimize the study of what had long been dismissed, has won.[17] Now what? Panasonic may claim that it is the actual TV set that has become cinematic. But perhaps it isn't aware that it is no longer important to only elevate television by calling it cinematic. In their revised conclusion to *Television Studies*, Amanda D. Lotz and Jonathan Gray argue that

television studies may already be coming to an end as a discrete field and may be subsumed by the more capacious media studies. This transformation is not to be lamented, as "television studies offers vital and important context, history, theory, and framing for studies of phenomena perceived as 'digital.'"[18] I would agree with this assessment; even in the time that it has taken to write this book, various moving-image media have become far more entangled. What a TV critic may need now is a way to work through these multilateral media relationships in order to relocate television within the new media universe.