NECSUS

'Breaking Bad' and surrealism

Angelo Restivo

To begin with, I would want to stress that in this video – which juxtaposes images from the television series *Breaking Bad* with scenes from the archive of surrealist filmmaking – I am decidedly not claiming that these resonances and rhymes were intentional citations by the production team of the television series. It is certainly true that *Breaking Bad* is rife with echoes of the classical and postclassical cinematic canon, and many of these echoes must be seen as conscious choices on the part of the production. This is clear as early as in the pilot episode, where the savvy viewer can see that in its very inciting premises, the series will be channelling Nicholas Ray's great 1956 melodrama *Bigger Than Life*. In my recently-published book on the series, I track many more of these echoes of the cinematic canon in the series; but what I argue is that these 'cinematic hauntings' have little in common with the blank parody or pastiche that has come to be seen as a central characteristic of postmodern aesthetic practice. Instead (to take the example from *Bigger Than Life*), the

expressive problems faced by the film – how to render visible the new relations between spaces, social subjects, and institutions resulting from the post-war modernisation, from the development of the suburban tract house to the new wonder drugs developed by Big Pharma – now, in *Breaking Bad*, become the starting point for thinking through similar expressive problems within the present historical moment, and within the aesthetic mode of post-network serial television, where the extended form allows us to live with the world of the series over a much more extended period of time.

This move away from blank parody is no doubt overdetermined by a number of 21st century developments. The technological, industrial, and aesthetic shifts that characterise television in the post-network period have not only expanded the possibilities for narrative content on television, but have also expanded formal, aesthetic possibilities as well. And the relentless digitisation of the audiovisual archive allows the images from the cinematic past to hover in the virtual cloud that surrounds us all. These images then come to 'haunt' contemporary audiovisual production: as the expressive problem faced by the contemporary media maker finds its solution via mise-en-scene, this mise-en-scene will often reverberate with images from the archive. Incidentally, I think this idea becomes quite evident when we think about the explosion of videographic criticism in recent years. If we consider, for example, Ariel Avissar's amazing video *Mashup of the Afternoon*, clearly we are not meant to think that Hitchcock was intentionally citing Maya Deren; rather, it seems to me, the idea is that the expressive problem of the two films – how to imagine feminine sexuality within and against the patriarchal structures that enclose it – ends up producing thresholds and passages within the images that are remarkably similar.

This is how I understand the surrealist hauntings in *Breaking Bad*. Certainly, with its dark humour and its frequent juxtaposition of incongruous elements in the frame, the series evinces a surrealist sensibility. But the resonances I found with the surrealist archive were not – as were many of the other resonances I talked about above – immediately apparent to me. They were discovered through close viewing over time; but once again, my strategy was to follow expressive problems and look at how they were handled.

Take, for example, the section of the video – the connection that most surprised me when I found it – in which Walter White's medical diagnosis is juxtaposed against the doctor visit in Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty*. Here I was able to use the activity of pointing – certainly a staple gesture of the doctor visit – to create rather humorous links between the two sequences. But more

important is the fact that, as a narrative trope, the doctor visit has an inherent affinity to surrealism. The doctor's office is the place where the extended line of cause and effect can be put in jeopardy, where we are likely to see an intensive threshold emerge. When we walk in to the doctor's office, we imagine we have decades ahead of us; when we walk out, we might have only weeks or months left to live. The expressive problem presented here is how to register this intensive shift. This is a question of mise-en-scene.

It remains, finally, to talk briefly about the cultural importance of the surrealism in *Breaking Bad*, as surrealism has become an important strategy among some contemporary media makers (especially African-American media makers, from Jordan Peele's *Get Out* to Donald Glover's television series *Atlanta*). For Walter Benjamin, both surrealism and the cinema worked by creating novel and unexpected juxtapositions among the objects, bodies, and spaces in the world. In this way, both have the potential to induce in us a renewed sense of wonder and possibility in the face of our occluded experience of everyday life. And if television, because of its close historical ties to domestic space, has a special relationship to our experience of the everyday, then the surrealist illuminations of *Breaking Bad* (or of *Atlanta* for that matter) have the potential to reorient us in relation to the coordinates of everyday life.

In her new book *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling suggests that contemporary surrealism and Afro-futurism might function in precisely this way, as the production of wonder as a means to combat 'miserabilism' in the wake of increasingly precarious life. Such an engagement with the contemporary world is an immanent one – we never know exactly where it will lead us. As Keeling puts it, '[e]very *now* harbours chaos and, therefore, a capacity for change.'

Author

Angelo Restivo is Associate Professor in the Program in Moving Image Studies, School of Film, Media and Theatre, Georgia State University. His most recent book is *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television* (Duke University Press, 2019). He is also the author of *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Duke University Press, 2002), as well as numerous essays on global art cinema, aesthetics, and theory.

References

Avissar, A. 'Mashup of the Afternoon': https://vimeo.com/304454199.

Benjamin, W. 'Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *Selected writings*, vol. 2.1, translated by R. Livingstone, edited by M. Jennings et al. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999: 207-221.

Jameson, F. 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, I.146, July-August 1984: 53-92.

Keeling, K. *Queer times, black futures*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

Restivo, A. *'Breaking Bad' and cinematic television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.