

Bookshelf Ambassadors: Humanities through the Arts

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Chapter 13

TELEVISION AND VIDEO ART

The Evolution of Television

Television, the most widely used artistic medium in contemporary culture, grew out of the radio broadcasts of the early decades of the twentieth century and developed in part from the traditions of drama and film. Because it was a product of a commercial culture, and because the Federal Communications Commission and governmental agencies that oversaw its early development insisted on its goals being devoted more to entertainment than to education, television has been shaped by the needs of advertisers. This was not inevitable but a decision made by politicians in the United States. Television developed differently in the United Kingdom and other nations; but now, more than eighty years after the widespread introduction of television programming, the model established by the United States has become the norm.

Television was originally ignored by filmmakers because the inherent limitations of the medium held them back. Standard-definition television images are projected at thirty frames per second, instead of

twenty-four, in order to overcome the limitations of the low-resolution image itself. The pixels in a video screen do not admit the range of contrast and the level of detail and resolution that are common to the continuous imagery of film. The interior of the cathode-ray tube has 525 vertical by 740 horizontal lines of pixels (a pixel is a group of green, red, and blue light-emitting phosphors), and because of technical limitations, the actual screen size is close to 480 by 740 pixels.

Today the use of digital projection and digital cameras has made some of those limitations less significant. Current television screens are large enough to create

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home theaters. High-definition broadcast standards have closed the gap between television and film to a considerable extent. High-definition flat screens can contain 1,080 vertical by 1,920 horizontal pixels, permitting vastly improved details from both broadcast television and DVDs.

PERCEPTION KEY Television and Cinema

1. To what extent does watching a film on television make it more difficult to have a participatory experience as compared to watching the same film in a theater? Does the size of the moving image determine or limit your participatory experience? Is the absence of a large audience a contributing factor?
2. What kinds of shots dominate television programming: close-ups, midrange shots, long shots? Are there any visual techniques used

in television that are not used in film?

3. The video screen has less tonal range than film and less ability to represent detail. How do television programs try to accommodate these limitations? How pronounced are the differences in visual quality between television and film?

The Subject Matter of Television and Video Art

The moving image is as much the subject matter of television and video art as it is of film. The power of the image to excite a viewer, combined with music and sound, is more and more becoming an intense experience as the technology of the medium develops. Surround sound, large projection screens and LCDs, and the development of digital high definition have transformed the “small box” into an overwhelming and encompassing television experience that can produce almost the same kind of participation that we experience in a movie theater.

The subject matter of a given television program can range from the social interaction of characters on programs such as *Seinfeld* (1990–1998), *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), and *NCIS* (CBS, 2003–present) (Figure 13-1) all the way to the political and historical issues revealed in *Roots* (ABC, 1977) and *Holocaust* (NBC, 1978). Programming can be realistic or surrealistic, animated or with living actors, but in all cases the power of the moving image is as important in television as in cinema.

Video art is, however, the antithesis of commercial entertainment television. Because broadcast television centers on the needs of advertisers and depends on reaching specific demographics, it has

become slick and predictable. There is little room for experimentation in commercial television, but the opposite is true for video art. Artists such as Nam June Paik and Bill Viola are distinct in that their work has pioneered the use of video terminals, video imagery and sound, and video projection as fundamental to the purposes of the video artist.

Instead of a single image to arrest our attention, Nam June Paik often uses simultaneous multiple video monitors with different images whose intense movement is rarely linear and sequential, as in conventional broadcast television. His images appear and disappear rapidly, sometimes so rapidly that it is difficult to know exactly what they are. Paik has inspired numerous contemporary artists who work

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FIGURE 13-1

NCIS, Naval Crime Investigation Service. Set in Washington, D.C., this long-running series has been popular since 2003.

Photo: Monty Brinton/CBS. ©2009 CBS Broadcasting Inc. All Rights Reserved/Courtesy of Everett Collection

with and interact with monitors to achieve various effects. Bill Viola's work is often composed of multiple projected images using slow motion and low-volume sound. His work is hypnotic and so profoundly anticommercial that it forces us to look at the combination of visual and aural imagery in completely new ways. Video art surprises us and teaches us patience at the same time.

Just as television programs and films can be experienced on computer screens, cell phones, and tablets, the same is true for video art because it is an international movement. The Internet permits us to see the work of a great many leading video artists from around the

world at our convenience.

Commercial Television

For more than half a century in the United States, a few major networks—National Broadcasting Corporation, Columbia Broadcasting System, American Broadcasting Company, Public Broadcasting System, and Fox Entertainment—dominated commercial television. In the United Kingdom, the British Broadcasting Corporation was the primary source of commercial television. Similar patterns existed in other nations. Since 2000, however, the spread of cable service has enlarged the sources of programming and has begun a major shift in the habits of viewers, who now have

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a much greater range of choices among hundreds of channels. Today cable service is threatened by innovation because the habits of viewers are constantly changing.

The Television Series

Studying the content of early situation comedies reveals much about the social structure of the family and the larger community. Early comedies were often ethnic in content: *The Goldbergs* (CBS, 1949–1955) portrayed a caring Jewish family in New York City. The show ended when the family “moved” to the suburbs. *The Life of Riley* (NBC, 1953–1958) starred William Bendix as a riveter in a comedy about an Irish working-class family in Los Angeles. *Amos and Andy* (CBS, 1951–1953), which moved from radio, was set in Harlem, but because of complaints about black stereotypes, it was soon dropped

by the network. Yet it had been a popular program even among some African Americans. These early shows, including *The Honeymooners* (NBC, 1952–1956, specials in 1970), with Jackie Gleason, usually portrayed urban working-class families facing some of the same everyday problems as did the audience.

All in the Family (1971–1979) (Figure 13-2) was something different from the ethnic comedies. Archie Bunker was the model of the unaware bigot, prejudiced against Jews, blacks, and foreigners. At the time, the politically incorrect language was shocking on mainstream television. But the show was considered one of the most important comedies of its era. The subjects it tackled—racism, homosexuality, feminism, the Vietnam War, abortion, rape, impotence, cancer, religion, and more—became part of the national conversation. Because the Bunkers had their daughter, Gloria, and her husband, Michael, living with them, the show offered a contrast between the war years generation and the Baby Boomers, who saw the world with a different lens.

FIGURE 13-2

All in the Family. In a typical scene from the series, Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) spars with his neighbor, George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley).

©Zuma Press, Inc./Alamy

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PERCEPTION KEY Early Situation Comedies

Because early comedies are widely available from downloads and on DVD, you may be able to view a sample episode from one of the series mentioned in the text, as well as from *Leave It to Beaver*, *Gilligan's*

*Island, Father Knows Best, Happy Days, I Love Lucy, or M*A*S*H*, in order to respond to the following:

1. How does the structure of the situation comedy differ from that of a standard film?
2. Who are the characters in the comedy you have seen, and what is their social status? Is there any awareness of the political environment in which they live?
3. What are the ambitions of the families in any of these situation comedies? What are they trying to achieve in life? Are you sympathetic to the older characters? The younger characters?
4. Compare any one of these situation comedies with a comedy currently seen on TV. What are the obvious differences? Based on your comparison, how has society changed since the earlier situation comedy? Do any of the changes you note imply that these comedies have a content that includes a commentary on the social life of their times?
5. What are the lasting values—if any—revealed in the early situation comedies? If there are any, which ones seem to have changed profoundly?

The Structure of the Self-Contained Episode

The early television series programs were self-contained half- or one-hour narratives that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. The episodes of each program were broken by commercial interruption, so the writers made sure you wanted to see what happened next by creating cliff-hangers. But each episode was complete in itself.

Because there was no background preparation needed, the viewer could see the episodes in any order and be fully satisfied. Until late in the 1980s, that was the standard for a series. In the popular western series *Bonanza* (NBC, 1959–1973), the characters generally remained the same, the situations were familiar and appropriate to the locale, and the sense of completion at the end of each episode was satisfying, as it is, for instance, in most films.

The pattern was constant in most genres of dramas. Recent crime dramas, *Law and Order* (NBC, 1990–2010), *CSI* (CBS, 2000–2015), and each of their “branded” versions, follow the same pattern. Each of these successful series depends on a formula. *Law and Order*, the most successful show of its kind, relies on interpreting versions of recent crimes (“ripped from the headlines”). There is a clear-cut division between the police, who investigate a crime, and the prosecutors, who take the case to court. *CSI* (Figure 13-3) in its several versions usually follows two separate killings in each episode and spends a great deal of time in the lab, analyzing fingerprints and other forensic details. So far, these have held the attention of mass audiences. But the structure of these shows is predictable, and each episode is, for the most part, complete so that no one who comes to any episode needs to be “brought up to speed” in order to appreciate the action.

The important thing about the usual series episode on television is that it is self-contained. It does not need preparation in advance, nor does it need explanation. It is a “one-off” each time the program airs. What do not change—usually—are the characters, the locale, and the time when the program airs.

FIGURE 13-3

CSI, *Crime Scene Investigation*. Elizabeth Shue and Ted Danson have “a meeting of the minds” from an episode of one of the longest-running police procedural programs.

Photo by Michael Yarish/©CBS/Courtesy Everett Collection

The Television Serial

One type of program with which commercial television has set itself apart from the standard production film is the serial. Whereas the standard production film is about 120 minutes long, a television serial production can be open-ended. Soap operas, daytime television’s adaptation of radio’s ongoing series, are broadcast at the same hour each weekday. Viewers can begin with any episode and be entertained, even though each episode has only a minor resolution. Early television soap operas such as *Another World* (NBC, 1964–1999), *The Secret Storm* (CBS, 1954–1974), and *Search for Tomorrow* (CBS, 1951–1986) were continuing stories focusing on personal problems involving money, sex, and questionable behavior in settings reflecting the current community. In Spanish-language programming, *telenovelas* do the same.

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FIGURE 13-4

Roots. In this scene from Alex Haley’s television miniseries, the most widely watched drama of its time, Kunta Kinte (LeVar Burton) represents Haley’s ancestor as he is brought in chains from Africa.

Courtesy Everett Collection

In a sense, the structure of the soap opera contributed to television’s development of the distinctive serial structure that remains one of the greatest strengths of the medium. Robert J. Thompson has said, “The series is, indeed, broadcasting’s unique aesthetic contribution to

Western art.”¹ The British Broadcasting Corporation can be said to have begun the development of the serial show with historical epics such as the hugely popular open-ended *Upstairs, Downstairs* (BBC, 1971–1975) and twelve-part *I, Claudius* (BBC, 1976), both of which are now available from download sources and on DVD.

Roots: The Triumph of an American Family The first important serial program in the United States was *Rich Man, Poor Man* (ABC, 1976), a twelve-episode adaptation of a novel by Irwin Shaw. But the power of the serial was made most evident by the production of *Roots* (ABC, 1977), which was seen by 130 million viewers, the largest audience of any television series (Figure 13-4). More than 85 percent of all television households were tuned to one or more of the episodes.

The subtitle of the serial, *The Triumph of an American Family*, focused the public’s attention on family and family values. Alex Haley’s novel represented itself as a search for roots, for the ancestors who shaped himself and his family. African American slaves were ripped from their native soil, and the meager records of their travel to the West did not include information about their families. But Haley showed how, by his persistence, he was able to press far enough to find his original progenitor, Kunta Kinte, in Africa.

Roots, which lasted twelve hours, explored the moral issues relative to slavery as well as racism and the damage it does. The network was uneasy about the production

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and feared it might not be popular, which is the primary reason the twelve episodes were shown on successive nights. The opening

scenes of the program, not in Haley's novel, show white actor Ed Asner, then a popular television figure, as a conscience-stricken slave boat captain. This was intended to make the unpleasantness of the reality of slavery more tolerable to a white audience. The network executives were, as we know now, wrong to worry, because the series captured the attention of the mass of American television viewers. Never had so many people watched one program. Never had so many Americans faced questions related to the institution of slavery in America and what it meant to those who were enslaved. *Roots* changed the way many people thought about African Americans, and it changed the way most Americans thought about television as merely entertainment.

Home Box Office: *The Sopranos* From 1999 to 2007, in eighty-six episodes, David Chase's epic portrait of Tony Soprano and his family riveted HBO cable viewers. Unlike all other shows in the gangster style, *The Sopranos* (Figure 13-5) portrayed Tony as a fragile, haunted man seeing a psychiatrist. His dysfunctional family attracted much more attention than any normal Mafia activities would ordinarily have done. Because of the show's quirkiness, the major networks, ABC, CBS, and Fox, rejected the series. Because HBO was a subscription service, and not available on the airwaves, *The Sopranos* had the advantage of being able to use language characteristic of mob characters, an advantage that made the series achieve more credibility.

The Sopranos's narrative line was extended throughout the six-season run of the show. The standard episodic self-contained structure was abandoned early on and, as a result, HBO established new expectations on the part of its audience. *The Sopranos* was

FIGURE 13-5

The Sopranos. Paulie Walnuts (Tony Sirico) and Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) in front of their meeting place, Centanni's Meat Market. Paulie is getting a suntan.

Source: HBO

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FIGURE 13-6

The Wire. In this scene from the final season of the series, Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) and Felicia "Snoop" Pearson (Felicia Pearson) are young drug lords whose irrational violence alarms their older criminal counterparts, whose own behavior was murderous enough.

Source: HBO

the first major extended serial to change the way in which viewers received their dramatic entertainment. In 1999 that was completely new to television, but today it is common for viewers to wait before watching all the episodes of a given season. The term "bingeing" was applied to viewers who watched the first thirteen episodes of a Netflix release of *House of Cards*, a study of British politics, all at a marathon single sitting.

HBO has produced several extended series since *The Sopranos*, including *Deadwood* (2004–2006), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014), and *Game of Thrones* (2011– present). None of these, however, rises to the artistic level of its finest production, *The Wire* (2002–2008).

Home Box Office: *The Wire* While *The Sopranos* portrayed the life of a Mafia family, another crime drama aimed at portraying the city of Baltimore as a way of demonstrating that all the segments of a community are interwoven. David Simon, formerly a reporter for a Baltimore newspaper, and Ed Burns, a former homicide detective, are responsible for creating the drama, drawing on their personal experience. *The Wire* is about the frustrations of a police unit that tries

to use wiretapping to track the progress of street criminals deep in the drug trade (Figure 13-6). Their successes and failures are the primary material of the drama.

The Wire won many awards over its five seasons, although it never won an Emmy. Critics have described the drama as perhaps the best ever produced for television. Its success depended on a gritty realism that often introduced uncomfortable material. The drama focused on six segments of the community: the law, with police, both black and white, using sometimes illegal techniques in response to frustration; the street drug trade, largely dominated by young black men; the port of Baltimore, with its illegal immigration schemes and other criminal activity, run essentially by white union workers; the politicians of the city, all with their own compromises, both black and white; the public school system, which houses some of the criminals

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FIGURE 13-7

The Wire. Omar Little (Michael Kenneth Williams), an avenging spirit, intends to wreak vengeance on Marlo and Snoop, who have killed his lover and his close friend.

Source: HBO

for a while; and the newspapers, whose news coverage turns out not always to be honestly produced.

The bleakness of the portrait of the city is a call to action. The real mayor of Baltimore approved the project and gave considerable support for its production in the face of a possibly damaging view of the city partly because cities like Baltimore all face the same range of problems. Seeing these problems for what they are helps to clarify the true values that all such cities must recognize. A true portrait is a first

step in restitution.

Michael K. Williams, who plays Omar Little (Figure 13-7)—a gun-wielding thief who specializes in robbing criminals, who cannot go to the police—stated in an interview that “what *The Wire* is, is an American story, an American social problem. There’s a Wire in every . . . city.” Not every city is willing to face the truth. Omar Little is gay, dangerous, but living by a rigid code of his own design. He was in many of the sixty episodes. The NAACP presented him an award for his acting in *The Wire*.

The drama appeared, like *The Sopranos*, on Home Box Office. Numerous websites detail the episodes and provide information on each character in the drama as well as on the critical reception of the drama. The extent of the drama, which is serial rather than episodic, is much greater than what could be achieved in a feature film. The complexity of the issues that face the law, the horror of criminal life in the streets, and the machinations of high-level politicians facing the same problems most large American cities face needed an extensive and far-reaching drama perfectly suited to television.

Three Emmy Winners

In recent years most of the television programs that have won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series have been serial in nature rather than self-contained single programs.

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FIGURE 13-8

Downton Abbey. Mr. Carson, the butler, and Lady Mary Crawley try out their new gramophone. The introduction of new technology—electricity, the telephone, and radio—added to the appeal of the series.

By its third season, the British serial drama *Downton Abbey* (PBS, 2010–2015) (Figure 13-8) had become one of the most watched television programs in the world. Almost the diametrical opposite of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, it presents a historical period in England in which the language is formal by comparison and the manners impeccable. What we see is the upheaval of the lives of the British aristocracy in the wake of historical forces that cannot be ignored or stemmed.

The first season began with a major historical event, the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912. Down with the ship went Patrick Crawley, the young heir to Downton Abbey. The result is that, much to the dismay of the Dowager Countess Violet Crawley, the great house will now go to the Earl of Grantham's distant cousin, Matthew Crawley, a person unknown to the family. Young Matthew enters as a middle-class solicitor (lawyer) with little interest in the ways of the aristocracy. But soon he finds himself in love with his distant cousin, Lady Mary Crawley, beginning a long and complicated love interest that becomes one of the major centers of the drama for three seasons. Lord Grantham and his wife, Cora, Countess of Grantham, have three daughters, and therefore the question of marriage is as important in this drama as in any Jane Austen novel.

In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, and the resultant war in the Middle East, a number of television shows have centered their action on terrorism and the war in Iraq. *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–present) (Figure 13-9), with Claire Danes as Carrie Mathison and Mandy Patinkin as Saul Berenson, both of the CIA, has been a durable and timely excursion into the Arab world as it has

suffered war and devastation and has brought the threat of terror to Europe and the West. One of the twists in the show is that Carrie Mathison is bipolar and needs to be on lithium to function normally. As a result, she sometimes cracks up and behaves uncontrollably. Some critics have seen this as a reflection of the West's response to the threats of terrorism. The show won the Emmy for best drama in 2012.

Game of Thrones (2011–present) (Figure 13-10) won the Emmy for best drama in 2015 and 2016. The show is based on the book by George R. R. Martin. It is a fantasy historical program that seems to represent medieval society in a northern European wintry landscape featuring an immense ice wall keeping out the barbarians and whitewalkers. From the beginning, *Game of Thrones* features incredible cruelty, torture, murders, deceit, sexual depravity, and the kind of vicious world that only a cable provider like HBO could make available. The story lines are so dense and complex that there is a discussion and partial synopsis after every episode.

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FIGURE 13-9

Homeland. Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) talks with a contact in season five.

©Showtime Networks/Photofest

FIGURE 13-10

Game of Thrones. Cersei, now the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, seated on the Iron Throne at the end of season six.

Source: HBO

Yet this show has the dimensions of epic literature and production values that are, at the minimum, astonishing. "The Battle of the Bastards," episode 60, is bloody and immense in scope. Even though it

is fantasy, the effort was made to replicate the destruction of superior Roman troops at the battle of Cannae (216 BCE) by Hannibal, the Carthaginian general who enclosed the Romans and suffered them their greatest defeat in a legendary battle. *Game of Thrones* also alludes to Shakespeare's historical plays, which revealed the deception and cunning that attended the courts of kings. Unlike Shakespeare, however, the show uses dragon eggs that are a gift in episode 1 and become full-blown flying warriors in episode 60.

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FOCUS ON The Americans

The Americans (FX, 2013–present) is a sleeper of a serial drama—in several senses. For one thing, it took a while for the series to catch on to the public and build an audience. But by the second season critics were calling it the best series on television. It is a sleeper in another sense: The major characters, Elizabeth (Keri Russell) and Philip Jennings (Matthew Rhys), are a sleeper cell of Russian spies living in Washington, D.C., as ordinary Americans (Figure 13-11). Such an arrangement might seem improbable except for the fact that the series is based on actual sleeper cells discovered in Massachusetts in 2005. There may be more.

FIGURE 13-11

Keri Russell as Elizabeth Jennings and Matthew Rhys as Philip Jennings. They live in a modest home with period cars (mostly Oldsmobiles) and appear to live a normal life as owners of a travel agency. Their cover permits them to travel frequently on their operations and sometimes stay over for periods of time.

Source: FX

Both Elizabeth and Philip were trained scrupulously in Russia before being placed in suburban America. They knew American customs and

were warned never to speak anything but English, even to other Russian agents. As a result they appear totally ordinary, having dinner with friends and raising two children, Paige (Holly Taylor) and Henry (Kiedrich Sellati). They have to answer to their controls, Claudia (Margot Martindale) and Gabriel (Frank Langella) (Figure 13-12). But these controls constantly refer back to a superior power, the Center, which makes sometimes unreasonable demands on Elizabeth and Philip. In this sense, the characters have a license to kill and a demand to be improvisational, but at root they are pawns of the system.

From the first episode, Philip finds America remarkable and alluring. When he and Elizabeth arrive in their first motel room, Philip is astonished to find a working air conditioner. We think for a while that he may have his head turned, but Elizabeth is staunch and later even reports to Claudia that Philip may be unreliable. As a result, in a later episode, Philip is kidnapped and beaten to make him confess he is a spy. But his kidnappers are Russian agents testing him, and he realizes what Elizabeth has done. It shakes their relationship for an episode or two.

FIGURE 13-12

Frank Langella as Gabriel and Margot Martindale as Claudia in a late episode of *The Americans*. Just as Gabriel is concerned and sensitive, Claudia is hardnosed and determined.

Source: FX

Elizabeth and Philip have an arranged marriage that changes and develops as the series progresses. They gradually begin to love one another and they wish well for their children. However, as Paige in season five begins to realize that her parents are not just travel agents, but also spies, she becomes involved and Philip fears for her (Figure 13-13). He wants her not to be a spy like him, but Gabriel, who acts as

a grandfather figure to them, implies that he is unable to help him if the Center wishes her to be one of them (Figure 13-14). As it is, Elizabeth seems eager for Paige to be permitted to follow their path if she wishes.

Such tensions abound through the first five years of the serial. We see problems in episode one that show up in the fifth season. Allusions to Abraham Lincoln are frequent early and late, with comparisons to the current president, Ronald Reagan. The time period is that of the 1980s.

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When Ronald Reagan was shot in March 1981, the Russian handlers feared that the blame would be put on Russia. The Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, without the actual authority, took over the White House and seemed to be staging a coup. Gabriel thought he would order a nuclear strike against Russia. The tensions among the Russians led Philip and Elizabeth to unearth munitions and weapons designed to kill the Secretary of State—and they came close to being caught. In that incident Elizabeth shot a policeman who had stopped their vehicle. The killings are often done by Elizabeth and are sometimes almost wanton.

FIGURE 13-13

Holly Taylor as Paige Jennings. She is an inquisitive child, very liberal in her politics, and developing a serious interest in religion. In season five she has to cope with the knowledge that her mother killed someone as part of her life as a Russian spy. She listens closely as her parents explain why they feel they are acting for the greater good of society.

Source: FX

Another source of tension early in the series is the arrival of Stan

Beeman (Noah Emmerich), an FBI man assigned to counterterrorism who moves in next door to Elizabeth and Philip. Throughout the seasons Stan and Philip become friends and the two families interact with dinners and events. Stan's son, Will, and Paige become romantically close, making Philip and Elizabeth so concerned that they forbid her to see him (Figure 13-15). In season five they explain the risks she would be taking with all of their futures. Paige also moves slightly apart from her parents by joining a church and being baptized. This detail in season three has curious developments when Philip uses religion and prayer to dupe a young girl whom he needs in order to gain access to her father's top secret papers.

Both Elizabeth and Philip are expected to use sex to achieve their ends. Both have sex with people from whom they seek vital information. Early in the series that is not a major emotional issue, but as they grow more and more loving toward each other it begins to arouse deep feelings, even jealousy. In the process of their making sexual connections, Philip and Elizabeth usually wear disguises that include often fanciful wigs. In some cases they sustain their extra relationships over long periods of time.

The abrupt scene shifts from one sexual relationship—which constitutes, in essence, a specific spying operation—to another are often jarring and demand continuing attention from one episode to another. The effect is to keep the viewer off guard, which is a metaphor for the operatives who keep the FBI off guard.

FIGURE 13-14

Frank Langella as Gabriel, the well-meaning and sensitive control to whom Elizabeth and Philip answer. Gabriel seems to have genuine feelings for Elizabeth, whom he knew as a child, and now for Paige, Elizabeth's daughter.

The style of the show is marked by flashbacks to childhood in Russia, during very hard times. For example, Philip's father was a guard in a prison camp, and not a nice man. Elizabeth remembers a fatherless childhood with a mother who somehow avoided being the prey of a powerful government figure.

The Americans provides its audience with an introduction to the values and problems of a recent historical era, the era of the Cold War and its thawing in the 1980s. The threat of nuclear war was in the air. The changes in Russian government after the

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death of its leader, Leonid Brezhnev, in late 1982 led to changes in American policies. Russia was fighting in Afghanistan, and the United States had recently been defeated in Vietnam. *The Americans* explores problems with Russian actions and, from Philip and Elizabeth's point of view, problems with what American authorities were doing.

The Americans has developed into a kind of time capsule recording a nervous period in international affairs, told from the point of view of people who were operatives on the ground trying to shape the direction of history. *The Americans* is not just an intense spy story but also a historical analysis that is revelatory of a period in international politics that shaped the world as we know it today.

FIGURE 13-15

Elizabeth and Philip explain to Paige how she might reveal their true identity if she continues to have Will as her boyfriend. Will is the son of the FBI agent next door. Elizabeth is giving Paige a way to hold her fingers to help her keep her secret even if she is in a romantic situation with Will.

PERCEPTION KEY Focus on *The Americans*

1. To what extent does *The Americans* contribute to your education? To what extent is the appeal of the series linked to what you learn from it about the late years of the Cold War between Russia and America?
2. A great deal of attention is paid to the composition of individual frames of the drama. Comment on the quality of individual images and on the nature of the pacing of the drama. To what audience do you feel this series has the most appeal?
3. How accurate do you think the portrayal of society is in *The Americans*? What dramatic qualities lead you to think it accurate or inaccurate?
4. Some critics have complained about the sudden violence and cold-blooded killing on the part of Elizabeth. Do you agree? Do you find that the series deserves the warnings that begin each segment?
5. How would you compare *The Americans* with another historical serial drama such as *Homeland*, *Mad Men*, or *Downton Abbey*?

Video Art

Unlike commercial dramatic television, video art avoids a dramatic narrative line of the kind that involves points of tension, climax, or resolution. In this sense, most video art is the opposite of commercial dramatic television. Whereas television programming is often

formulaic, predictable in structure, and designed to please a

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mass audience, video art is more experimental and radical in structure, which often results in its pleasing its audience in a very different way.

Video art dates from the early 1950s. Its most important early artist is Nam June Paik (1932–2006), whose work opened many avenues of experimentation and inspired an entire generation of video artists. Paik's *Video Flag* (1986) is a large installation approximately six feet high by twelve feet wide, with eighty-four video monitors with two channels of information constantly changing, at a speed that makes it difficult to identify the specific images on each monitor. The effect is hypnotic and strange, but viewers are usually captured by the imagery and the dynamism of the several patterns that alternate in the monitors. Paik experimented widely with video monitors, combining them, in one case, to produce cello music, played by Charlotte Moorman, a musician and performance artist. In another installation, *Arc Double Face* (1985), he produced a large doorway composed of monitors with three separate video channels showing simultaneously.

Peter Campus (b. 1937) has been a seminal figure in video art. His *Three Transitions* (1973) at New York's Museum of Modern Art is a five-minute video of three transformations of his own image. The first shows himself projected on a paper partition. He stands dressed in a yellow sport coat facing the partition. Slowly we see a knife coming through from the other side of the partition and sticking out through his back. Slowly the knife slices down through his back, and then we see the partition sliced apart as his hand seems to reach through both the partition and his back to make room for his head and body coming

through. The effect is uncanny. The second of the transitions shows him rubbing his face, and as he rubs we see another face showing through, as if his face were layers and each time he rubs he shows another layer. In the last transition we see him holding a large photograph of himself, which he sets afire. The fire takes a long time to eat away at the photograph, eventually but slowly burning his own moving image. Campus specializes in mysterious video experiences in which his educational background, experimental psychology, comes into play.

Some of the work of the video artists mentioned here can be viewed on YouTube, Vimeo, and other video sites online. For instance, Janine Antoni's *Tear* (2008) (Figure 13-16) can be seen on YouTube. Antoni is a performance artist and sculptor who walks a tightrope in her video *Touch* (2002), also viewable online. As in most modern video art, the pacing and rhythms are very slow, especially compared to the rapid-cut commercial television programs. Antoni has said that the slow movement of video art has the purpose of engaging all the senses, but, curiously, the slow pacing sometimes becomes hypnotic so that one participates with the work on a very different level even as compared with looking at a painting.

The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist was given the entire New Museum in New York to mount her latest show, *Pixel Forest* (2016) (Figure 13-17). Rist has been involved in video art for some years. Her show *Ever Is Over All* (1997) was said by Peter Schjeldahl to blur the boundaries of art and entertainment. It was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in the atrium, where she projected sharply contrasting videos on adjacent walls. It can be seen online. In 2016 *Pixel Forest* filled the second, third, and fourth floors of the New Museum of New York. In some

rooms the museum provided second-hand (sanitized) beds for those who wished to lie down and feel surrounded by the videos. For the month of January 2017, Rist's video *Open My Glade (Flatten)* (2000–2017) was shown every evening in Times Square from 11:57

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FIGURE 13-16

Janine Antoni, *Tear*, 2008. Lead, steel 4,182-pound, 33-inch-diameter wrecking ball. 11 × 11-foot HD video projection with surround sound. ?Janine Antoni is a sculptor who works in video. She uses both in *Tear*.

©Janine Antoni; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

FIGURE 13-17

Pipilotti Rist, *Pixel Forest*. 2016. The New Museum of New York. For her second installation in New York, the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist had three floors of the New Museum for her work. She projected videos on walls, ceilings, and floors. In several rooms she had beds for viewers to lie down as they experienced the show.

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FIGURE 13-18

***The Feast of Trimalchio* (2009–2010), AES+F Group. Multichannel HD video installation (9-, 3-, and 1-channel versions), series of pictures, series of portfolios with photographs and drawings.**

©2017 AES+F/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

to midnight. For thirty years her work has been influential in forming the video aesthetic.

Video art is international and growing. The Russian group known as AES+F Group, composed of four artists, Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky, and Vladimir Fridkes, formed in 1987 and have shown in several important exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale. In 2009 they showed their video composition *The Feast of*

Trimalchio (Figure 13-18) at the Sydney Biennale in Australia. *The Feast of Trimalchio* figures in a Roman novel by Petronius Arbiter called *The Satyricon* and it became a symbol for wasteful opulence and orgiastic entertainment. The AES+F Group have used their imagery to satirize for today what Petronius satirized for ancient Rome. They set their figures in a modern luxury hotel on a fantasy island as a protest against the rampant commercialism of modern Russia.

Doug Aitken mounted a gigantic video projection on the outside walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 2007 (Figure 13-19). *Sleepwalkers* consists of five thirteen-minute narratives of people of different social classes going to work at different nighttime jobs. The evening projections were slightly altered with each presentation. He said about his work,

I wanted to create very separate characters and explore their connections almost through movement and place. The characters are as diverse as possible and, as these stories come closer and closer together, you see the shared lines, the connections.²

Aitken has been working in the medium of video for some time and won the International Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999 for *Electric Earth*.

Another remarkable installation that moved from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to the National Gallery of Art in London is *The Passions* (2000–2002), a study of the uncontrollable human emotions that Viola sees as the passions that

Doug Aitken's *Sleepwalkers*. Aitken's projections on the walls of the New York Museum of Modern Art in 2007 attracted a considerable crowd and critical responses from the media.

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EXPERIENCING Jacopo Pontormo and Bill Viola: *The Visitation*

The most celebrated video artist working today is Bill Viola (b. 1951), whose work has been exhibited internationally with great acclaim. He is steeped in the tradition of the old master painters, especially those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in northern Europe and Italy. His techniques vary, but one of the most effective is the slow-motion work that makes it possible to observe every action in great detail. He uses high-definition video where available and achieves effects that recall great paintings. His work is meditative and deeply thoughtful. *The Greeting* (1995) (Figure 13-20) is a projection in heroic size of three women standing in a cityscape reminiscent of a Renaissance painting. Indeed, the work was inspired by Jacopo Pontormo's *The Visitation* (1578) (Figure 13-21), a sixteenth-century painting on panel in an Italian Church.

FIGURE 13-20

Bill Viola, *The Greeting*. 1995. Video/sound installation projected some four times life size. The movement of the figures, which is very, very slow, is extraordinary to watch in part because we can examine every moment with the same intensity as our examination of a painting—which *The Greeting* in many ways resembles.

Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

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The Pontormo is a religious painting. The woman in violet blue in the center is Mary and the woman in green and orange is her cousin Elizabeth. They both have halos over their head. Mary tells Elizabeth she is pregnant (with Jesus) and Elizabeth tells Mary she is pregnant

(with John the Baptist). This is a major historic moment (which Pontormo often painted). Examine the Pontormo for its structure and its organization of colors. The two figures in the background are witnesses, one very young, one older. Examine how Viola selects three women and poses them in a similar position, but with the young witness in the middle, looking on.

Pontormo's moment was of great cultural importance in 1578 and Viola borrows Pontormo to make an important statement as well. We see it as a greeting of happy women, but with Pontormo's painting as an echo, this moment takes on a significant spiritual value. Our age does not see the same values that the late sixteenth century saw, but we, too, as Viola reminds us in so much of his work, have moments of spiritual insight and when one thinks about it, the greeting of any two people resonates spiritually as a meeting of minds, a connection of friends, a sense of human joy.

FIGURE 13-21

Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1556), *The Visitation* c. 1528, oil on panel, 79.5 × 61.5 inches. Carmignano, Pieve di San Michele Arcangelo.

©Remo Bardazzi/Electa/Mondadori Portfolio/Getty Images

In *The Greeting*, the wind blows softly, moving the women's draped clothing. Except for the wind, the projection is almost soundless, the action pointedly slow but ultimately fascinating. The resources of slow-motion video are greater than we would have thought before seeing these images. Viola's techniques produce a totally new means of participation with the images, and our sense of time and space seems altered in a manner that is revelatory of both the sense of the work and the human content of greeting and joy.

After examining these two works, search online for a video of Bill Viola's *The Greeting*. How do you see the relationship between Viola and Pontormo's work? What has Viola done to help echo the spiritual significance of Pontormo's painting? What is different about your experience of Pontormo's painting and Viola's video art?

great artists of the past alluded to in their work. *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000) (Figure 13-22), one of several video installations in the series *The Passions*, was projected on a flat-screen monitor, revealing the wide range of emotions that these figures were capable of. The original footage was shot at 300 frames per second but then exhibited at the standard television speed of 30 frames per second. At times, it looks as if the figures are not moving at all, but eventually the viewer sees that the expressions on the faces change slowly and the detail by which they alter is extremely observable, as it would not be at normal speed. *The Passions* consists of several different installations, all exploring varieties of emotional expression.

Fire Woman, available online, is an image of a woman standing in front of a wall of fire (Figure 13-23). Slowly, she falls forward into a deep pool of water, and the image is revealed to be a reflection. Bill Viola's work is informed by classical artists and by his own commitment to a religious sensibility. A practicing Buddhist, he is deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism. A sense of peace informs his work and his humanistic spirituality. In his comments about his work, he often observes the religious impulse as it has been expressed by the artists of the Renaissance whom he admires, and as it has informed his awareness of spirituality in his own life.

FIGURE 13-22

Bill Viola, *The Quintet of the Astonished*. 2000. Video/sound installation, rear projected on a screen mounted on a wall. The work is a study in the expression of feelings.

Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

FIGURE 13-23

Bill Viola, *Fire Woman*. 2005. Color video freestanding LCD panel. This installation is part of a series involving air, earth, fire, and water, designed for a production of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* performed at the Opéra National de Paris in 2005.

Photo: Kira Perov. Courtesy Bill Viola Studio

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PERCEPTION KEY Bill Viola and Other Video Artists

Most of us do not live near an installation by Bill Viola or other video artists, but there is a great deal of video art online, including some of Viola's. This Perception Key relies on your having the opportunity to see some of the important online sites.

1. The James Cohan Gallery website contains a good deal of information about Bill Viola and his work. It includes video excerpts of him talking about what he does, and it includes video still samples of his work. Do you find the noncommercial approach he takes to art satisfying or unsatisfying? What do you feel Viola expects of his audience?
2. You can see a still from Viola's installation called *City of Man* (1989), composed of three projections, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In this installation, the images move with speed. The three images are very different and together form a triptych. Which can you interpret best? Which seems most threatening? What seems to be the visual message of this

installation? How do you think the alternation of images on and off would affect your concentration on the imagery?

3. Sample video art by going online to the websites of the following artists: Bill Viola, David Hall, and Tine Louise Kortermant. Which work of art seems most interesting and most successful? What qualities do you find revealing in the piece you most admire? In which is the participative experience most intense? In which work is it easiest to interpret the content?
4. Video art is still in its infancy. If you have access to a video camera and a video monitor, try making a short piece of video art that avoids the techniques and clichés of commercial television. How do your friends react to it? Describe the techniques you relied upon to make your work distinct.

Summary

Television is the most widely available artistic medium in our culture. The widespread accessibility of video cameras and video monitors has brought television to a new position as a medium available to numerous artists, both professional and amateur. Television's technical limitations, those of resolution and screen size, have made it distinct from film, but new technical developments are improving the quality of its imagery and its sound. Commercial television dramas have evolved their own structures, with episodic programs following a formulaic pattern of crisis points followed by commercial interruption. The British Broadcasting Corporation helped begin a novel development that distinguishes television from the commercial film: the open-ended serial, which avoids crisis-point interruption and permits the medium to explore richer resources of narrative. Video art is, by way of

contrast, completely anticommercial. It avoids narrative structures and alters our sense of time and expectation. Because it is in its infancy, the possibilities of video art are unlike those of any other medium.

¹Quoted in Glen Creeber, *Serial Television* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), p. 6.

²Quoted in Ellen Wulfhorst, "Sleepwalks" Exhibit Projected on NY's MOMA, Reuters, January 19, 2007.