
There have been significant and rapid changes occurring within the medium of television in recent years. Of this sentiment, many writers are in agreement. The difficulty lies in finding a clear and authoritative way to describe the transformations taking place. One must contend with the vast diversity of television programming, the many technologies it now interacts with (and the impact they have on form and content), as well as the ideological debate surrounding taste that makes it problematic to forward any easy judgements on the question of value. These complicating factors have led to some awkward developments in critical discourse. For example, when Robert J Thompson influentially coined the phrase ‘Quality Television’ in the mid-1990s to categorize an emerging group of high calibre shows via a set of criteria, he later questioned the applicability of his own list. Thompson realized he could identify many programs whose characteristics satisfy his criteria, but in the end, ‘aren’t really all that good’.

Alan Sepinwall’s 2013 publication, *The Revolution Was Televised*, is the latest contribution to the literature on the often fraught and elusive subject of ‘change’ in television culture. For this effort, Sepinwall has received highly favourable reviews, not least from Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*, a critic who has frequently, quite famously, been perceived as difficult to please. ‘A spirited and insightful cultural history’ enthuses Kakutani. However, while Sepinwall’s writing is often spirited and insightful, I would argue that it is precisely the area of history in which the text is most significantly lacking.

Sepinwall is a television critic, and not a historian. This is a crucial distinction that informs the way in which the book approaches its chosen topic. The title of the text promises an account of ‘revolution’, but precisely what has been revolutionised is not clearly or extensively demarcated. Sepinwall is keen to identify antecedents of his favourite programs, (arguing, for example, that the serialized narrative structure of *Cheers* facilitated later works such as *Seinfeld* and *The Office*). Yet, for the most part, the reader’s knowledge of the state of television prior to the new, ‘golden age’ of the medium (which he sees as beginning in earnest with the release of *The Sopranos* in 1999) is to be assumed. Moreover, the fact that there was ever a first ‘golden age’ of television – occurring in the 1950s with the filming of New York stage plays – is not explored in great detail. Such omissions make it clear that Sepinwall’s project is not to provide an exhaustive history of the medium.

More accurately, Sepinwall’s text canonizes what he considers to be the ‘best’ and ‘most important’ shows of the era. His focus is on ‘television drama’, and he selects twelve series that are, he argues, especially responsible for elevating its quality. ‘We’d been going home with television every night for years, but suddenly we had reason to respect it in the morning’, he writes (p.5). Whimsical sexual
analogy aside, this statement reveals at least two important assumptions. First, Sepinwall sees ‘respectability’ as synonymous with ‘value’, ignoring the possibilities of other aesthetic sensibilities, such as camp or kitsch. Second, Sepinwall, from the vantage point of critic, believes he can speak for a collective ‘We’. The prerogative Sepinwall assumes in this respect recalls Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that taste, which might be mistaken for a biologically innate appreciation of ‘beauty’, is actually conditioned by cultures of evaluation (including academia and popular criticism) that teach us how to regard artistic works through ‘legitimate classifications’. If Bourdieu was correct, by listing and describing his favourite programs, Sepinwall is not merely reflecting a ‘change’ in television culture, but is actively participating in it. Sepinwall’s influence as critic might only have been further compounded when this work was in turn included in annual ‘Best Books of the Year’ lists, such as Kakutani’s.

At the forefront of the aesthetic values espoused by Sepinwall’s selection is a celebration of auteur filmmaking within television; the artistic vision pursued by various showrunners (and the creative freedom they have been granted, or fought for, in different industrial settings) is a recurring theme. This crucial feature seems to enable other traits in television programming of which Sepinwall also approves, including morally ambiguous protagonists (among whom are Tony Soprano, Don Draper and Walter White), a willingness to explore ‘serious’ socio/political subject matter (as in The Wire), and a tendency to challenge genre conventions that have grown tired (as in Battlestar Galactica).

If the above developments constitute a ‘revolution’, it is evidently only a revolution for some. The television shows chosen by Sepinwall are almost all fronted by a male heterosexual lead character. The show-runners who created them also overwhelmingly fall into this category. And so, deficits in cultural diversity appear not only in literary and cinematic canons, but also in the proposed ‘classics’ of this relatively modern medium.

Despite the historical and cultural gaps I have mentioned, The Revolution Was Televised will prove a useful resource for postgraduates and academics writing on the individual texts contained in its selection. The interview material included with various showrunners and executives is filled with insights that are likely to intrigue English scholars. For example, Oz creator Tom Fontana reveals that he took inspiration from the Greek chorus in his decision to include a narrator for the series. From The Wire, writer David Simon claims that his ‘rhythms are prose rhythms’ (p.75). Such remarks lend themselves to further scrutiny from scholars interested in the intersections between different media. Golden as this era may be, one might question how secure and self-assured television culture really is, when often it still announces its artistic legitimacy by comparing itself to, or claiming influence from, other forms. To some extent, even the word ‘television’ seems to hold pejorative connotations, as presupposed by HBO’s famous advertising slogan: ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’ (no longer in circulation, but heavily applied during the runs of the network’s ‘groundbreaking’ shows like The Sopranos).

The Revolution Was Televised is written for a general audience, and will be both entertaining and educative for scholars and non-academics alike. Sepinwall’s writing style is engaging. And while readers such as myself may take issue with Sepinwall’s
unselfconscious pronouncements of taste, and look elsewhere for a comprehensive historical account of television, it is difficult to deny that his analyses of the shows in this selection are detailed and informative.

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