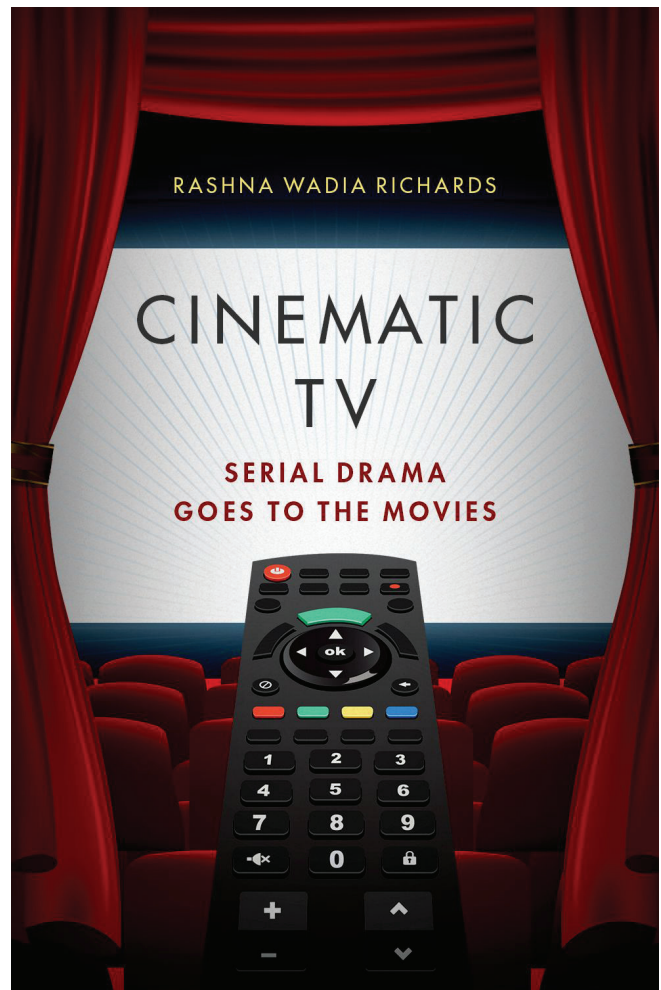


CINEMATIC TV: A CONVERSATION WITH RASHNA WADIA RICHARDS

Bruno Guaraná

Much has been said about serial dramas such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–15), and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–13) bringing about a new golden age of television. A lot of these discussions, however, have centered on the idea that quality television has become more cinematic than ever—a modifier that implies a superiority of cinema and a teleological linearity toward a particular aesthetic. Notwithstanding the overuse of the term and its implications, there is no consensus about what exactly “cinematic” means in these contexts. As Rashna Richards articulates in her new book, *Cinematic TV: Serial Drama Goes to the Movies*, “[A]-djectivizing cinema remains a nebulous, often hyperbolic enterprise” (2). It is with this critique in mind, then, that one should interpret the book’s title and objective. Richards deploys “cinematic” as an intervention—a sort of bait for those too eager to adopt the term with little critical thinking—that acknowledges its instability and corrects its often misguided application to television.

For Richards, what’s unique in contemporary serial dramas is an archival impulse toward cinema: these texts simultaneously absorb and revise films. Thus, for her, the “cinematic” describes the kind of television that appropriates cinema, whether explicitly or inadvertently. As she demonstrates through compelling close readings of television series, the archival impulse exercised by cinematic television opens these texts up to a wealth of meanings and interpretations. Moreover, it’s not only the televisual text that is impacted by the cinematic archives it unearths, but also the films that are being called up in the form of an homage, an evocation, generic borrowing, or parody. With this approach, Richards highlights how television’s recalling of



film texts establishes a dialogue between the two media, inciting viewers to not only revisit them, but also reconsider them in a new light.

Throughout the book, Richards avoids referring to urtexts as “originals,” since the process of appropriation described here (often erratic, coming from many different texts, across media, and in many different directions) confounds the very idea of filiation or any presumed flow from source to simulation. Yet, to not account for the cinematic in television would mean to ignore the medium’s interaction with its broader media environment. As much as they may

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adapt, recall, or even appropriate literature and theater, television texts are also able to borrow from the world of cinema without undermining the medium's distinct nature as television.

To investigate the rhizomatic quality of television, Richards resorts to intertextuality: every text already relates to another, even when it doesn't directly refer to it or when this relationship is unintended by or even remains oblivious to its creators. This way, *Dear White People* (Netflix, 2017—) echoes not only Justin Simien's 2014 film of the same title, but also films as disparate as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Greg Mottola's *Superbad* (2007). Thinking more critically about television's engagement with cinema also demands an intermedial approach that considers not simply which texts are being poached or referred to, but what such borrowings and allusions reveal about the relationship between these media. Richards's book explores this intermedial relationship of appropriation, drawing on four key intertextual practices: homage, evocation, generic borrowing, and parody.

This ambitious pairing of an intertextual framework and an intermedial methodology is further complicated by the demands it places on memory. The relationship between certain television series and memory is common knowledge: episodes and sometimes even seasons aesthetically or narratively refer to earlier episodes, encouraging and rewarding an engaged and committed viewer. Richards goes beyond this intratextual memory of television programs to assess their relationship with an intermedial memory, recalled by way of cinematic references, be they intentional or not, direct or indirect, carefully planned or just spontaneous. Decoding these relationships at the moment of reception also requires associative structures and a memory bank ready to make these connections. While Richards's ability to recall numerous—and sometimes surprisingly conflicting—cinematic texts in single television scenes is impressive in its own right, it also points to the polyvalence of cinematic TV, made up of texts and scenes whose very meaning sometimes lies in the eye of the beholder.

Each of the book's four chapters focuses primarily on a single television series and addresses the distinct kind of archival negotiations each respectively employs. With this structure, Richards has developed an interpretive framework of analysis that reaches far beyond the evaluative and descriptive impulses often hidden in the television-as-cinematic discourse, instead developing a rigorous vocabulary and an intricate model to explore television's rather ambivalent and layered relationship with cinema. Richards's intertextual, intermedial, and multidirectional approach embraces her own subjectivity and mediatic arsenal, both

as a scholar and as a spectator, in ways that challenge the presumed autonomy or supremacy of the text and its author over the viewer. In other words, Richards's work recenters viewers as producers of meaning through their ability to recognize television's embedded cinematic references. Serving as a proxy for television (and film) spectators, Richards showcases a formidable body of visual, textual, and referential knowledge, making her the ideal agent to establish the parameters for contemplating these interactions.

The first chapter assesses homage as the operating principle of the archival impulse in *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–), a series that frequently sews together elements from different films from the 1980s. Richards's analysis shows how in its construction and address of the alternative dimension known as the Upside Down, the series summons up films such as *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), and *Firestarter* (Mark L. Lester, 1984). Yet *Stranger Things* also exceeds the texts it honors, reworking and subverting the campiness typical of the 1980s horror film. As it develops its borrowed themes (and monsters), the series dives into more serious territory than its cinematic counterparts, introducing plots about missing children and human experiments, for instance, that ramp up the tension and suspense without the mitigating kitsch factor of its 1980s predecessors.

In its production design and emphasis on teenage friendships, *Stranger Things* also recalls, more subtly, films such as *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986), lending the series an unmistakably nostalgic quality. These less obvious homages, as Richards aptly unveils, allow the series to call attention to nostalgia without properly reveling in it. Hawkins is not, after all, a place one would wish to return to. There is, in fact, no going back to the kind of childhood depicted in the series, except of course when a new season comes along. Ultimately, the series adopts a kitchen-sink approach to cinematic references, a kind of best-hits mash-up or, in the author's playful words, “a televisual Frankensteinian monster, sewn together from earlier monsters that it has lovingly devoured” (61).

The second chapter tackles the interpretive practice taken up by scholars on television's referentiality by raising the question of *who* in fact may be responsible for these intertextual associations. In so doing, Richards points out that referencing is not necessarily a textual or authorial strategy, but is also created on the level of reception by viewers with their own frameworks of knowledge. Here *Mad Men* provides Richards's critical centerpiece. Noting

that the series has been written about and analyzed to the point of exhaustion, she argues that its nearly infinite trove of cinematic references may be responsible for this unflagging interest on the part of critics and viewers.

What's unique in Richards's analysis of *Mad Men* is her focus on unprompted references, rather than on direct visual homages to specific films. Here, cinema is the archive accessed not by the text, but by viewers themselves. That is, while some viewers may miss out on *Mad Men's* direct visual reference to Bob Rafelson's *Head* (1968), the setup may evoke other, more personally familiar cinematic texts. The interesting paradox that arises out of her reading is that the more tightly meaning is controlled, the more a series opens itself up for interpretation, becoming expansively evocative to a wide number of viewers.

While the first two chapters respectively focus on explicit and implicit cinematic visual matches, genre becomes the entryway for the analyses taken up by the third chapter. Here Richards thinks of genre as both an intertextual modality and an analytical tool employed to explore how, despite being commonly considered a legal drama, *Damages* (FX, 2007–10; Audience Network, 2011–12) blends generic features of puzzle films and maternal melodramas. These genres supply Richards with a dense interpretive framework that ultimately highlights the complexity of the series. As she puts it, alternating between imitating and undermining multiple genres, *Damages* opens up a kind of reading that reveals “affinities between texts that are not overtly related” (153).

If the nonlinearity of the series approaches that of the puzzle film, *Damages* also avoids resolving its intersecting story lines, leaving some resolutions to the viewers' interpretation. Through melodrama, the series manages to denaturalize motherhood and reproductive time. Richards sees in these generic appropriations and innovations an effort on the part of *Damages* to challenge heteronormativity. The operative methodology in this chapter is aimed not at deciphering *Damages'* true meaning, whatever that may be, but at finding connections between disparate genres and assessing what these connections reveal about the aesthetic and narrative discourses at work.

Nowhere are the nuances of the term “cinematic” better illustrated than in the fourth chapter, a *pièce de résistance* that foregrounds the complicated relationship that television maintains with cinema. Here Richards investigates television's cinematic appropriation “in explicitly racial terms” through an analysis of *Dear White People*. The operating principle in the Netflix series is that of parody—a rich strategy for subverting racial norms at play in the media at

large. And by parodying a multitude of films, *Dear White People* directly confronts and challenges whiteness as a cinematic convention, dislocating the authority of its sources. As it reconfigures familiar texts and scenarios through a racial prism, the series exposes the unspoken racial norms present in mainstream films and the reluctance of popular cinema to decenter whiteness and white subjectivity.

Dear White People places its Black characters in situations and locations normally saturated with whiteness, such as the fictional Ivy League-ish Winchester University. As Richards notes, while these spaces evoke the cinematic whiteness of films like *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005), *Legally Blonde* (Robert Luketic, 2001), and even Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), the series' characters fail to replicate the racial privileges of their white cinematic counterparts. As an example, Richards compares the season-ending altercation between Winchester University student Reggie (Marque Richardson) and a campus police officer to a similar encounter between high school student Fogell (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) and two policemen in *Superbad*. While the latter concludes with the fake-ID holder getting a free ride to a party, in *Dear White People* the encounter escalates to life-threatening consequences.

Richards's wealth of examples and rich analyses demonstrate the ubiquity of these intertextual operations in contemporary serial drama and set up a serious framework for addressing television as “cinematic.” It is not that television *aspires* to be cinema (or to be viewed as cinema), but that it asserts its own televisuality by way of treating cinema as an archive—of images, themes, genres, and even ideas more generally, at times readily available, at others obscurely indexed. In a sense, cinematic television is the kind of television that has not simply gone to the movies, but also attended film school, constantly absorbing, revising, expanding, and outdoing cinema. And if cinema functions as television's archive, then Richards is the archaeologist who is not content to simply unearth and name her findings; instead, she explores the interpretive work enabled by these associations and assesses their meanings and effects, and how they impact both the televisual and the cinematic texts. Her contribution lies precisely in a valuable effort to theorize the many ways in which television may look, sound, and feel like, or even capitalize on, cinema without ever wanting to become it.

BRUNO GUARANÁ: How did your project start, and what role did *Mad Men* play in its conception and development?

RASHNA WADIA RICHARDS: In a sense, I began thinking about this project when I watched the very first episode of *Mad Men*. After a day of carousing in the city, Don Draper returns home very late, and we realize that he has a wife and two children in the suburbs. It struck me then that this dashing Roger O. Thornhill type, derived from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* [1959], was actually more similar to Manny Balestrero, from *The Wrong Man* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1956]. Indeed, the first episode expands what Manny does in that film's opening moments, wandering through the city, sort of suspiciously, until he returns home to his wife and kids.

I knew then that I wanted to write about this connection, not knowing just how deeply invested the series would become in cinema—as well as in what we might call the cinematic. So I started keeping track of moments where the series began calling up films, particularly films that weren't obvious influences, such as Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* [1960] or Arthur Hiller's *The Americanization of Emily* [1964]. That is how this project began—as a way to write about how this particular TV series was drawing on and working with cinema.

My early thinking was that I would only write on *Mad Men*. It wasn't until I emailed Norm Hirsch, my wonderful editor at Oxford University Press, that I realized what this book could be. He was the one who recommended wisely that I broaden the scope and analyze several series instead of just one. He was absolutely right, as what I was observing in *Mad Men* was happening elsewhere, too. All kinds of television dramas were overtly and covertly alluding to cinema. I decided to work with different intertextual modalities for analyzing different types of TV series, as all of these cinematic relationships were related but dissimilar. Whereas some series, like *Stranger Things*, acknowledge their appropriations openly, others, like *Dear White People*, are more subtle. And *Mad Men* does both, of course, in that showrunner Matthew Weiner concedes that they are re-creating certain films, while other references seem to flash up inadvertently.

GUARANÁ: In a gesture of simultaneous provocation and resignification, the title of your book appropriates a rather contentious term, “cinematic.” What are the instabilities of this term and the risks involved in qualifying television texts as “cinematic”?

RICHARDS: For at least a decade, we've seen this term used in popular and critical discourse as a way to connote quality. Here's how the story usually goes: *TV used to be simplistic,*

unsophisticated, and too dependent on dialogue, but extended cable and then streaming platforms have delivered a new and improved TV that resembles cinema. Many of these arguments tend to be imprecise and hyperbolic in their defense of contemporary TV, and they establish a qualitative hierarchy between the media by defining “cinematic” in terms of wide scale and a distinctive visual style. But though TV series do replicate these characteristics of their media rival, many contemporary shows are still, as Matthew Zoller Seitz points out, “mainly just people talking.” How then do we justify thinking of television as cinematic? My book tries to circumvent the discussion of “cinematic” in relation to quality. Instead, what I'm most keen on is how (and, to a smaller extent, why) television resembles cinema. What I am doing is tracing the implications of D. N. Rodowick's suggestion that the cinematic is the “predominant cultural and aesthetic model for engaging the vision and imagination of viewers.”¹ If that is the case, what kind of work is the contemporary serial drama doing in engaging with cinema?

GUARANÁ: How do television shows perform “memory work” in recalling cinematic moments?

RICHARDS: One of my points of entry into this intermedial relationship between cinema and TV was Renate Lachmann's tantalizing suggestion that “the memory of a text is its intertextuality.”² But very little scholarship exists on combining the two fields of inquiry. This book fills that gap by bringing together intertextuality and memory studies. Intertextuality shows how every iteration is actually a product of earlier iterations, and memory studies demonstrate that remembering is not just a matter of recalling previous events. Memory relies on invoking past feelings, desires, fears, and frustrations and making them come alive; it depends on making the past intersect with the present moment.

Jason Mittell and Amy Holdsworth have shown how recall is a core feature of serial dramas; indeed, television complexity relies on viewers' ability to remember (or rewatch) what has come earlier.³ They have also successfully refuted Fredric Jameson's harsh critique that “memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise. . . : nothing here haunts the mind or leaves its afterimages.”⁴ In serial dramas especially, earlier episodes and seasons certainly cast a long shadow on, even haunt, later episodes and seasons. But this book goes beyond intratextual or series memory to show how the intertextual memory of serial dramas is far more critically promising. Taking intertextual memory as its point of departure,

Cinematic TV demonstrates how serial dramas' direct and indirect evocations of American cinema can be deployed to analyze the complex negotiations between cinema and television.

GUARANÁ: Each of your chapters focuses on a different mode of intertextuality employed by television series. How did you decide to mimic these modalities in your analysis?

RICHARDS: What intrigued me most was that contemporary TV shows do far more than imitate cinema; they reproduce and rework, undermine and idolize, and, in some cases, compete with and outdo cinema. In order to attend to the varied ways in which television appropriates cinema, the book draws upon four different intertextual modalities: homage, evocation, genre, and parody. These modes demonstrate the particular types of associations between TV and cinema. For instance, the ways in which *Stranger Things* revises the Spielbergian universe is quite different from how *The Wire* evokes a moment from *The Conversation* [Francis Ford Coppola, 1974] or how *Master of None* [Netflix, 2015–] sardonically alludes to Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* [1990]. Each mode reveals how TV shows copy, quote, borrow from, and reject cinema. These intertextual modes also help undermine the privileging of cinema—a privileging that some inadvertently engage in when making the argument in terms of quality—by avoiding a kind of linear move from (cinematic) original to (televsual) derivation.

GUARANÁ: How is the kind of homage performed by *Stranger Things* “devouring,” as you put it?

RICHARDS: Homage, in many ways, is the most straightforward intertextual relationship. The allusion or reference is usually overt and easily traceable. Moreover, most homages function as a kind of declaration of love for the source text. This is true in *Stranger Things*, which borrows both widely and voraciously: the Mind Flayer recalls monstrosities from every single era of American horror, from big bugs and alien invasions to velociraptors and zombies to tendrils and blobs. In a sense, there is nothing all that strange about *Stranger Things*, for its terrors are familiar. What is unfamiliar is how many of them are simultaneously invoked, as though *Stranger Things* is emulating movies in order to outdo all earlier versions.

GUARANÁ: How are some genres so uniquely cinematic to the point that, when television recalls or appropriates them, that allusion becomes intertextual and intermedial?

RICHARDS: Genres are not often thought of as intertextual. Generic texts allude to earlier texts, but critics tend to think of genre as formulaic and therefore not entirely aligned with the wide-ranging associations that intertextuality implies. What I've tried to do is theorize how genre can be seen as a form of intersection and entanglement—specifically through *Damages*, which is a legal drama that overlaps with the puzzle film and the maternal melodrama. Analyzing how the legal, the temporal, and the maternal intermingle in the series demonstrates how generic hybridity works in contemporary television. This chapter also facilitates a new way of seeing the kinship between genre and intertextuality.

GUARANÁ: One of the many interesting implications of your analysis is that the “cinematic” in television has a lot less to do with auteurs than with intertextual allusions, evocations, parodies, and generic borrowings. Could you elaborate on this?

RICHARDS: When I started working with the term “cinematic,” I specifically wanted to contest the idea that television is just becoming more like cinema. That is to say, there is no preexisting cinematic essence that serial dramas simply borrow from the big screen. What I found most fascinating about long-form TV series is how immersed they were in reworking and even undermining cinematic moments. This is not to say that there are no auteurs in television, or even that there are no “original” TV series. But one of the most compelling features of serial dramas for me is that they serve as a kind of critical archive of cinema. Some of these archival borrowings are of familiar sources that are estranged. Others excavate obscure hypotexts, as though bringing them back from the dead. It's as if cinematic moments, motifs, and contours hover around the televisual frame, constantly breaking through. How serial dramas handle such cinematic hauntings is the story that this book tells.

GUARANÁ: Your analysis of *Dear White People* highlights how provocative that television series is, but, conspicuously, it is not interested in the eponymous film that precedes it. Is that because the critique and mediatic intervention taken up by the series by way of parody are particularly suited for television?

RICHARDS: *Dear White People* is certainly not a televisual adaptation or remake of the film. The series constructs—in a way that the film does not—a critique of the cinematic tradition. It negates what we typically encounter in an homage, which tends to look favorably upon its source text. With a palimpsestic mix of multiple modes, genres, styles,

and auteurs, *Dear White People* transforms what could have been an homage into a parody and halfway back again. It is this mix of love and hate for the cinematic tradition—represented here as a historically white tradition—that is the show's signature methodology. At the same time, it tries to redefine what television itself can become when it seeks to challenge film history.

GUARANÁ: What is your next project about?

RICHARDS: I have begun preliminary work on two projects: a collection on re-viewing and a monograph on women and madness. I am drafting an essay that examines my many viewings of *The Wizard of Oz* [Victor Fleming, 1939]: as a child yearning for elsewhere, as a young woman immigrating to a new land, as a college professor teaching her students about cultural history, and as a mother delighting in how her daughter's world is being shaped by moving images. I hope that this piece will help me launch an edited collection on re-viewing films, videos, or TV shows. There are many studies on the critical practice of rereading, but this will be the first to take on a transtextual understanding of why we engage with visual media again and again. I'm

also starting to think about a monograph on women's madness, in terms of rage, passion, folly, and hysteria in visual media.

BOOK DATA. Rashna Wadia Richards, *Cinematic TV: Serial Drama Goes to the Movies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. \$125.00 cloth; \$39.95 paper. 246 pages.

Notes

1. D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 97.
2. Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 15.
3. See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 19; and Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory, Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 34.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 70-71.