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RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, as redes de TV a cabo norte-americanas produziram dramas de qualidade excepcional, às vezes descrita como a “terceira idade de ouro” da televisão. Os Sopranos (1997-2007) é geralmente considerado como o primeiro exemplo, seguido de The Wire (2002-2008), com as mais recentes séries sendo Mad Men (2007 -presente) e Breaking Bad (2008-2013). Todas centraram-se em personagens que foram descritos por um crítico como “homens difíceis”. Exteriormente homens respeitáveis, eles levam uma vida dupla de um modo ou outro, levando a explosões periódicas de comportamento estranho ou violento. Todas essas séries têm sido moralmente ambíguas, e - como muitos críticos notaram - eles tornaram comportamentos moralmente duvidosos, ilegais, e às vezes altamente

perigosas altamente atraentes. A atração das audiências por estes dramas é, em grande parte, a maneira como eles fazem estes “maus” comportamentos disponíveis.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Prazeres proibidos. Mau comportamento. Dramas televisivos.

ABSTRACT

In recent years American cable TV networks have produced some exceptionally high quality drama, sometimes described as the ‘third golden age’ of television. The Sopranos (1997-2007) is generally regarded as the first example, followed by The Wire (2002-8), with more recent series being Mad Men (2007-present) and Breaking Bad (2008-13). All have focused on characters who have been described by one critic as ‘difficult men’. Outwardly respectable men, they lead double lives of one kind or another, leading to periodic outbursts of strange or violent behaviour. All these series have been morally ambiguous, and - as many critics have noted - they have made morally dubious, illegal, and sometimes downright dangerous behaviours highly attractive. The attraction of these dramas for audiences is in large part the way they make these ‘bad’ behaviours available.

KEYWORDS

Forbidden pleasures. Bad Behaviour. TV drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

I mainly work on architecture and the experience of architecture. Increasingly I have been interested in the way fantasy architecture – the architecture of film and TV – has started to condition the way we think about and experience *real* buildings. So this talk is about the representation of architecture in two recent American TV series, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* – both have attracted a huge amount of interest from architects and designers in the English-speaking world, and in some ways, they represent

some of the most imaginative architecture built in the last ten years or so – although they do not, as I say represent real buildings, but rather fantasies. I talk about these things very much from the point of view of the consumer. I got interested in them as a result of a book I wrote on architecture and sexuality called *Sex and Buildings* and I watched these dramas as well as following the critical literature on them. I was interested primarily in what people *said* about these dramas, and what they experienced. For the inside story on them from the point of view of who made them, I can recommend a recent book by an American journalist, Brent Martin, called *Difficult Men* (the title refers to the fact that these series tend to focus on awkward white men who find themselves in a state of crisis).¹

2. SOURCES

Let me say a bit more about my sources by way of an introduction. The book *Sex and Buildings* which was published earlier this year was an attempt to discuss the way architecture has dealt with sexuality. My starting point was a contradiction: why was it that during the twentieth century when the public discourse about sex was ever more open thanks to Freud and others – why was it that architecture was so coy? Why did it continue to build buildings that imagined sex in such conventional terms? Why – more generally – was architecture so uncomfortable with the human body?

I was interested therefore in architecture that did have some explicit interest in the body. I already knew about Brazil and Niemeyer, and had written about it in a book called *Brazil: Modern Architectures in History* in 2009.² But I wanted to explore further. So I spent of time in California, and I looked at the work of early modernist architects like Richard Neutra and Rudolf Schindler, both of whom were certainly interested in sex. I looked at the so-called Case Study houses, built from the 1940s to the 1970s, and photographed very beautifully by Julius Shulman – see this one for example, the Stahl House, built by Pierre Koenig in 1959 – a glass box in the Hollywood hills, overlooking LA. And I got very interested in architectural typologies that seemed to be especially related to sex: the extensive use of glass, for example; open plan; the incorporation of swimming pools or other areas designed to show off the body; bedrooms; walls and boundaries in general. I thought about all of these things in relation to buildings, but also buildings

in films (Hitchcock especially) and buildings in TV. And I looked at things on the fringes of architecture such as Wilhelm Reich's theories of sexual energy, and his Orgone Accumulator, a device made to concentrate it in the body.

I also looked at a lot of popular psychology as it was here that a lot of the issues I was interested in seemed to be explored on a non-professional level. I particularly liked Esther Perel, a New York based, Belgian-Israeli psychotherapist with an interest in sexuality in long-term relationships I liked her book *Mating in Captivity* partly because it linked sexuality and space brilliantly.³ Perel's book was very popular, and it is deceptively simple. Her argument is a radical one, however: she thinks sex and 'captivity' or domesticity are at some fundamental level, incompatible, and that societies in the developed world need to rethink what they mean by sexuality. In terms of this talk, two ideas are really compelling: that 'forbidden' pleasures are really perfectly normal; and that societies, like middle-class America, that are too keen to 'forbid' pleasure, or whatever kind, are impossible. Modern American sexual ethics, she thinks, makes impossible demands.

3. SO LET'S TALK ABOUT THOSE TV DRAMAS.

I was as surprised as anyone to find myself talking about them at all, but as soon as I had discovered *Mad Men* (directed by Matthew Weiner, 2008 to present) I realised that they did things that could not be expressed anywhere else. They seemed to be able to express in more detail, and with more subtlety, the complexities of modern family life – in short the awkward questions that Esther Perel asked in the context of psychotherapy. This was an important discovery, because the normal conversations one might have about architecture seemed to avoid the family at all. Let me elaborate: it seemed to me that architecture largely avoided having a conversation about the real complexities of family life, while also being the means of housing it, physically. Or – and I am generalising here – it *did* have a conversation about sex, but in relation to queer theory, emphasising modes of behaviour that apply to perhaps 10% of the population at best. TV drama seemed to have something to say about more general modes of living – traditional or 'normative' family life in all its complexity and difficulty.

The TV I refer to is sometimes known as the 'third golden age'. It is different from previous 'ages' in that it is exclusively produced by and for

cable networks. So it is not subject to the usual forms of censorship, or self-censorship that apply on mainstream TV (and American TV is, as you probably know, unusually censorious). What else? It is extremely well funded. It is technically of a very high quality, certainly as good as mainstream Hollywood. With on average 60 hours of programming per series, it allows long-term character development of a kind only known previously in (say) the nineteenth century novel – over a long period. It indulges writers – so much so, it has become the desired form, much more attractive for writers than even Hollywood. It has produced a new form of director-producer known as a ‘showrunner’, someone with the creative abilities of a writer, but an entrepreneur and team-builder. They have something of the character of the Hollywood *auteur* and may inspire the same kinds of fear (Matthew Wiener) and loyalty (Vince Gilligan). It’s been around as a form since the late 1990s. Key series have been *The Sopranos* (about a New Jersey mafia family), *Six Feet Under* (a family of LA undertakers), *The Wire* (Baltimore police, based on true stories), *Mad Men* (a New York advertising agency in the 1960s) and *Breaking Bad* (a high school chemistry teacher turns to crime).

Besides the basic form, these dramas share a focus on what Brent Martin termed ‘difficult men’. ‘Difficult Men’ are by definition straight men, caught in a web of social and family responsibilities. They take those responsibilities extremely seriously for the most part, and they carry them out with dedication, attention to detail and selflessness. But their responsibilities, and the accompanying expectation that they will be fulfilled, creates huge tensions. The narratives of each of these dramas revolves around the tension between the public role and the private desire, order and chaos, between civilisation and sex. There are invariably secrets; those secrets invariably threaten to reveal themselves at any moment. Just as Alfred Hitchcock’s classic movies of the 50s and 60s played out themes from Freudian psychoanalysis, so these long-form TV dramas revisit psychoanalytical themes: eros and civilisation, the death drive, the return of the repressed – they are all there, just as they were in Hitchcock.

I will concentrate on two of these dramas, both produced by the company AMC, and whose success in effect has made the reputation of that company (AMC was previously known for showing movies that had failed on general release). Both also are notable for the extent to which they use architecture as a way to set a scene, or advance a narrative – *Breaking Bad*

scripts famously have long passages – pages – without any dialogue at all, just instructions to the photographers.

4. MAD MEN

Let's start with *Mad Men* which was begun in 2008, and is still running at the time of writing, although it is unclear for how long. It concerns the changing fortunes of a New York advertising agency, starting in the early 1960s. It draws a great deal from a *Life* magazine article on the daily life of an agency on Madison Avenue, as well as contemporary literature on cities and suburbs – Betty Friedan, for example.⁴ The main point I would want to emphasise here is the way it allows viewers to experience – albeit vicariously – a whole range of pleasures that are now forbidden, or more or less forbidden. These include smoking (the US has some of the toughest anti-smoking legislation in the developed world); drinking (the US is strikingly puritanical when it comes to alcohol, certainly compared with western Europe); extra-marital sex (the US has a high divorce rate, usually interpreted as indicative of lax morality. But I am certain it indicates impossibly high standards of behaviour, which once transgressed, cannot be repaired). *Mad Men* allows viewers to experience all of these things safely from the comfort of the home. What interests me most is the way architecture frames these things, and in so doing provides us with a different reading of the modernist city.

The city is undoubtedly that of Mies van der Rohe, the German-born architect, who once settled in the US remade American downtowns in his image. He didn't build that much. But what he did build was enormously influential. So Madison Avenue where *Mad Men* is set does not have a Mies building, but it does have lots of buildings with Miesian elements – which include curtain walling, floor-to ceiling glass, exposed structural elements, such as steel columns, dark glass (typically brown). Inside there would be an exceptional level of control over the fixtures. At the Seagram building on Park Avenue (1958) Mies specified roller blinds that could be displayed in one of only three positions: fully open, fully closed or half-open. No other position was possible, in order to protect the clean lines of the design.

That is the point: Mies's architecture communicates restraint and good taste, characteristics of civilisation, you might say, not eros. It tolerates well-

behaved humans, but only just. The story of the semi-transparent Fansworth house Mies built for a wealthy female client is a case in point. The house controls its inhabitant. That is the story at an official level, but it is also what was understood as correct. *Mad Men* subverts all that, introducing bodies to a modernist environment, bodies with all kinds of desires, bodies which are frankly incapable of behaving. Where Mies demands restraint, *Mad Men* goes for excess. So, smoking, that activity now so powerfully discouraged in the US: smoking punctuates absolutely every activity. Everyone smokes, all of the time (one of the ironies of the production is that the cigarettes used on set are in fact free of tobacco – union regulations forbid the use of tobacco in the workplace, even for theatrical purposes). Smoking is like breathing. Drinking also punctuates almost every activity, although it is used for emphasis. So the conclusion of a deal, or a difficult conversation call for a drink; as does any conversation with a client, and almost any conversation with a colleague. Drinks open and close discussions, open and close the day. It doesn't seem to matter what time of day it is. It's always time for a drink, and the partners at Sterling Cooper (as the agency calls itself in the early days) all have splendidly equipped drinks cabinets. Drinking goes with the territory – as does occasional drunkenness.

The ability to hold one's drink is prized (amongst men and women) but equally, the occasional loss of integrity – such as Roger Sterling's spectacular projectile vomiting in the office reception following a particularly heavy lunch. Although this takes place in front of a party of clients the agency is hoping to win over, in the *Mad Men* universe, it constitutes an unfortunate, not a catastrophic, event: indeed it's the source of much amusement later on. The scene is immaculately framed – the act is spectacular because of the formality and restraint of the surroundings. There could be no greater contrast.

Mad Men's achievement as architecture is precisely that framing of excess. It happens so often, we come to associate the International Style interior with transgression of one kind or another. After a while, its restraint seems positively to invite transgression. So when we see the office Diva, the remarkably-endowed Joan Harris (played by Christina Hendricks) set against the regular grid of the open-plan desks, we know there is going to be trouble. By the end of series one, we know that the open plan is a kind of catwalk, or arena, a space largely occupied by women (secretaries, receptionists, PA's)

who parade there for the entertainment of the largely male partners who occupy the translucent, but private, offices surrounding the centre. And we know that the parading is not just for show. Quite frequently – perhaps once per episode – something happens in the open plan office that leads to *something else* happening in the private offices.

So towards the end of season 1, Pete Campbell has sex on his office couch early one morning with a colleague, Peggy Olson, an act that – to great comic effect – is clearly visible in silhouette through the glass. The janitor's blasé attitude says it all. He's seen it plenty of times before: it's simply what goes on in this place. In summary, *Mad Men* turns a place of restraint, order and efficiency into its opposite; the Miesian office becomes a machine for the free expression of the libido. We can never look at it in the same way again.

5. BREAKING BAD

My other key example is *Breaking Bad* (AMC, dir. Vince Gilligan, 5 seasons, 2008-13). Like *Mad Men* this series also uses architecture to frame, an advance a narrative, and is if anything an even more completely realised world in visual terms. Like *Mad Men*, it specialises in overturning our expectations of a particular environment. So in *Breaking Bad's* case, it is the largely suburban city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, a place popularly understood as having fine characteristics: plentiful, cheap housing, fine weather, outstanding natural beauty. In *Breaking Bad*, however, nothing is as it seems. Those fine suburban homes house illegal drug factories; that astounding natural landscape is the site of the most appalling violence. The narrative, for those of you who have not seen it, concerns a mild-mannered gifted high school chemistry teacher, Walter White, played by Bryan Cranston. Walt is faced with not only an unexpected child (his wife) but also his own diagnosis of terminal cancer. Unable to bear leaving his family with debt, he turns to the manufacture of the highly addictive and dangerous drug methamphetamine. He turns out to be extremely good at this. He also turns out to be good at killing – rivals, enemies, sometimes simply people who get in the way, 'collateral damage' in the military parlance. It is one of the strengths of the series that it is sufficiently complex to allow our sympathies to remain with Walt far longer than they should; even after the bodies start to pile up, we still want Walt to

'win'. The reason for this is, in a way, simple. Walt's descent into criminality is also a (to use a Freudian expression) a libidinal awakening. In other words, as he becomes a criminal, he also becomes a *man*. This dual trajectory is beautifully represented by the series use of architecture as we shall see, as well as a range of peripheral details, often in startling combinations.

Breaking Bad parades a whole range of transgressions, but all of them can be defined in terms of the libido. In the first episode of the first season, Walt is depicted in bed with his wife, Skyler at the end of a day celebrating Walt's 50th birthday. It is a dismal scene: an overdecorated, dark bedroom, Skyler distracted with a laptop (she is bidding for items on e-Bay) while she gives Walt a desultory handjob; she's far more interested in what's going on onscreen than she is in Walt's pleasure – he loses whatever interest he had. He is both figuratively and literally emasculated. But later in that episode, through a series of extraordinary turns, Walt has started to construct a new, and libidinally charged identity.

Here he is, then, in a composite image used for publicity purposes, but which beautifully summarises the early stages of his transition. The location is the New Mexico desert on the outskirts of Albuquerque, a place (we learn quickly) where Bad Things Happen – a lawless zone, where civilisation literally and figuratively does not exist. In the background to the left is his 1986 Fleetwood Bounder, a large RV ('Recreational Vehicle') that serves for the first half of the series as a mobile laboratory; red smoke, a consequence of the meth manufacturing process pours from the ventilator on the roof. To Walt's right lies a discarded breathing mask, necessary attire for cooking meth, but also (in terms of the symbolism of the series) an important uniform. Walt himself stands half-transformed. His residual clothing (the green shirt and the desert boots) is that of his old identity of chemistry schoolteacher – but he has lost his pants, he stands legs apart, glaring at the camera, and he holds a pistol, with intent. He looks absurd – but also menacing. What is certain in this image is that he is decisively more in control in this by all accounts crazy environment than he is in the relative security of home

Even the lunacy of the previous five minutes of the episode has something to commend it. At this precise moment when we find Walt at the wheel of the RV, he is driving crazily, choking from fumes, and half-blind: in the back of the RV along with a huge quantity of high quality methamphetamine is the body of one drug dealer he has intentionally killed,

and another who he has wounded. He fully expects to die, or failing that, spend the rest of his life in jail. At this moment he is, however, paradoxically more alive than he has been in perhaps all of his life. Now some of this is communicated by narrative, but a great deal more is the result of the presentation of visual elements and settings in new ways. *Breaking Bad* is extremely good at this kind of remix, which is undoubtedly cinematically literate, but invokes visual references that are very widely understood. The desert and the gun carry instant connotations of westerns – and in fact the entire series can be understood as kind of updated western. Likewise The Hat, a vital element from season 1 that Walt superficially uses to cover his post-chemotherapy skull, but also signifies the beginning of his descent into crime (it first appears when Walt scores a particularly unexpected victory over a vicious opponent). That breathing mask is much more than chemical apparatus; in that shot in the RV, it recalls any number of war movies in which a pilot wrestles with a stricken plane, struggling to bring it safely to earth.

The silver overalls and breathing gear Walt and his sidekick Jesse are wearing here at (I think) the start of season 2 makes them look like astronauts: the gear is hard to identify, but there is something otherworldly about it. Then there is Walt's full transformation at the start of season 5 when he is – albeit briefly – king of the methamphetamine business. He is fully *man* with that expression, the beard, the yellow suit, the bald head glistening: he is completely secure in his own body, and that is reinforced by the (organised) stacks of meth in the background, and the piles of money. And the setting, that disused factory cannot go without comment: it is an unmistakable signifier of cool. Almost, but not quite, cliché, it is the urban equivalent of the desert: a space of violence, but also of possibilities. To truly succeed in Walt's line of business, you have to succeed in a space like that. It's a brilliant image.

It's worth comparing, finally, Walt's developing rationale for his behaviour: in the first instance he explains to a doctor why he unaccountably vanishes for two days – he explains, in fact lies his way out of it by recalling his family responsibilities. In the second rationale, right at the end of season 5, he says simply that his motivation was selfish – he is at this stage fully himself, although the consequences for both himself and his family are catastrophic. He nevertheless finds peace in that realisation.

Now Walt's solution is an almost perfect realisation of the Freudian death drive ('thanatos'), a will to (self-) destruction that we all to greater, or

lesser degrees, have. Enacting that drive is not an option for most of us, so the function of dramas like *Breaking Bad* is to stage it so we can, vicariously, consume it. As we do here, with these sweets (candy) in the exact form of the methamphetamine used in the series. That is only a substitute for the real thing. But these dramas have explored what seems to me to be set of real crises in the family life of the world's rich countries. Walt is a fictional character, as are the characters in *Mad Men*, but there are many Walts out there, angry white men, harbouring the same fantasies of destruction. American TV drama may not have any answers, but it is certainly asking the right questions.

NOTES

[1] MARTIN, B., **Difficult Men**: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad. New York: Martin Penguin Press, 2013.

[2] WILLIAMS, R. J. **Brazil**: Modern Architectures in History. London: Reaktion Books, 2009.

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[4] FRIEDAN, B. **The Feminine Mystique**. New York: Norton, 1963.

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