

Theorizing Place and Space in Television

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We often hear the phrase “a strong sense of place” mentioned about critically acclaimed television dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *True Detective*, yet as TV scholars we have not fully theorized “place” in television studies. To be sure, televisual space has been theorized based on familiar cinematic concepts as mise-en-scene, landscapes and architectonics and as graphical and metaphorical space by such media theorists as Herbert Zettl and Margaret Morse. While theorizing the spatial dimensions of television will always be a prime concern for scholars, we should not forget that, for TV audiences, televisual space is experienced as place—an accessible, knowable place populated with familiar characters they know and care about on a regular basis. One of the main ways that television serves as a unique “place-maker” (a term coined by Chris Lukinbeal) is through its planned repetition. Through its episodic and serial story structures, audiences are regularly exposed to characters immersed within the same familiar places. Through repeated viewings, audiences produce and accumulate memories of characters and places.

To begin to understand how place functions in television, a good place to start is with Horace Newcomb’s 1990 article on the sitcom *Frank’s Place*. Newcomb asserts that every fictional TV series offers audiences an “entry not to a physical space, but to a *sense of place*.” I would argue that this is also true of nonfictional programs. Television offers audiences places or worlds that are similar, but different from their own. These worlds have their own set of rules, which are different from our own. Every TV series is constructed around a set of locations, some recurring and altering. While sitcoms usually have a limited number of locations or sets, dramatic series tend to feature a few major locations combined with numerous secondary locales.

All locations have basic meanings, most of them derived from simple associations audiences may already have based on popular readings, films, and other television programs. For example, although few people have first-hand experience with criminal gang hideouts, most people can draw several connotations from lifelong exposure to popular media.

In some cases, a few TV series transcend their locations to present a strong sense of place. The central distinction is that the locations are imbued with meaning. Meaning comes from the characters' interactions within their physical environments. Characters are defined, revealed, and altered by their behaviors within these locations, which are in turn understood and known as "places" by the audiences. Characters themselves are also a part of televisual place. As human geographers point out, space only becomes place when it becomes vested with humans and human activities. Some examples of meaningful televisual places include Archie Bunker's living room and in particular, his chair, the town of Mayberry, North Carolina in *The Andy Griffith Show*, Walton's Mountain, and the squad room in *Hill Street Blues*.

Newcomb, in his analysis of place-making on *Frank's Place*, highlights five areas that function to create a strong sense of place in the series: geographic region (the South), city (New Orleans), community/neighborhood (African-American), setting (neighborhood restaurant), stranger as guide (Frank Parrish, professor of Renaissance Art at Brown University), and self-exploration (Frank does not know himself). In acknowledging that, at its heart, televisual place serves as a space for character and dramatic action, I would like to suggest a few additional characteristics of place on television. The first is place as spectacle. In some cases, TV places can serve as sites of visual pleasures and voyeuristic interests in beautiful landscapes, congested urban spaces, palatial mansions, maximum security prisons, and intergalactic planets and starships.

The second characteristic is place as mobility. Because television place is rarely presented as a fixed, stationary position, it can be a site for mobility for TV audiences. Just as the cinema offers film spectators opportunities for dynamic mobile travels across natural and human constructed spaces, television also provides its audiences with prospects of exploring the complex spatial and tactile dimensions of places. Television offers audiences the chance to become visual and sonic tourists exploring a vast plentitude of places within its narrative worlds. Morse's metaphorical conception of televisual space as a freeway or mall serves to assist us in comprehending television's site-seeing aspects and its endless transitions between passage and segmentation.

The final characteristic of place is place as metaphor. Television place can serve as a metaphor for a character's dramatic situation and as an expression of his or her internal state of mind. Televisual places can be distinguished between small and large metaphors within the series' narrative world. For example, in *Breaking Bad*, the desert stands as a small, but recurring metaphoric place and source for both the creation and destruction of the character of Walter White. In *The Wire*, the city of Baltimore and several of its main institutions represent a modern, postindustrial city contending with the demands and tenets of an emerging neoliberal global economy.