

Liverpool Film Seminar

2013 – 2014 series

Every year, Liverpool Film Seminar invites six experts to deliver a series of talks. Topics vary greatly and the series does not focus on a specific aspect of film. Instead, a range of genres and approaches are celebrated, from historical reach to the internet's impact on cinematic material.

Professor Jane Feuer (University of Pittsburgh, USA)

Theatricality and Quality Drama: a Neglected Connection

Although HBO-style "not TV" dramas may be considered an offshoot of indie cinema, and although some HBO auteurs such as David Chase consider themselves to be filmmakers, the debt quality drama owes to a theatrical playwrighting tradition may be even greater than the influence of cinema.

A newspaper article referred to Aaron Sorkin as "the playwright, television writer and Oscar-winning screenwriter of *The Social Network*" in that order. Writers on *In Treatment* and *Six Feet Under* have been cited for their backgrounds as playwrights, not as filmmakers. Network television, picking up on the quality TV style for the 2012 drama SMASH not only set the show in the theater, but also hired playwright Theresa Rebeck as the first season showrunner. HBO has awarded grants to develop playwrights.

Writers and producers originating in theater dominated television drama in the 1950s and they dominate quality drama today to a much greater extent than has been recognized by academic TV scholars coming from cinema studies. Theater people can also be found in quality dramas of the 1980s that seem to have been eclipsed by post-HBO dramas.

Theatricality is also a sensibility and a mode of scene construction; these too can be shown to be a major influence on television drama. Theater as an origin relates to the demographics of quality drama. This audience appreciates the higher cultural capital theater has over film, and HBO has not hesitated to publicize its link to the theater. The paper will argue about the importance of playwrights in US TV and the impact of theatricality on contemporary TV dramas.

Biography:



Jane Feuer is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh where she teaches in the Film Studies Program. She has lectured internationally on Hollywood musicals and television. Her current work involves "quality drama" as it has evolved on U.S. television since the 1990s. Previously she wrote about earlier quality dramas in *Seeing through the Eighties*. She was one of the founders of Television Studies as it emerged out of film studies from the 1980s to the present.