

Mediating the Real: *Treme*'s Activated Aesthetic

Katie Moylan

University of Leicester, UK

Abstract

This article explores how *Treme* (HBO 2010 – 2013) deploys reflexive aesthetic strategies to produce a critique of governmental and municipal corruption and negligence following Hurricane Katrina. Set and filmed in New Orleans, *Treme* negotiates an additional layer of complexity in that many events referenced actually took place, reframing an over-determined authenticity characterising normative representations of New Orleans in a reflexive interrogation of recent experience and historical memory. I argue *Treme* develops an 'activated aesthetic' through two textual strategies: opening credit sequences and 'televisual moments', mobilising these aesthetic devices to develop a complex, explicitly politicised representation of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Keywords

television aesthetics, televisual memory, 'quality TV', television seriality, historiography, Hurricane Katrina, *Treme* (HBO).

As a fictionalised televisual memoir of post-Katrina New Orleans, *Treme* (2010-13) is set in 2005 immediately after Hurricane Katrina and explores the myriad and multiplying effects of the storm's devastation on the city in its four-season run. Created and produced by *The Wire* (2004-8) showrunner David Simon, *Treme* combines his tendency to mine problems of social justice with a detailed aesthetic immersion into a closely re-presented New Orleans.

Originally established in 1718, New Orleans has an entrenched cultural capital that resonates deep within the US cultural imaginary, described by Diane Negra thusly.

Once primarily seen as a place where European-American cultural affinities lived on and a ‘Caribbeanized’ site of flamboyance, multiculturalism, and multiracialism, New Orleans was understood by many as a city whose economically anachronistic status was barely compensated for by tourism. (2010: 2)

Treme is an ensemble drama and follows key characters and their post-Katrina experiences through a visually rich imagined cityscape, one imbued with an additional layer of authenticity as the series was primarily filmed in New Orleans (Mayer, 2016) and takes its name from one of its more eclectic neighbourhoods. During and post-Hurricane Katrina, Negra observes, narratives in both fictional and news discourse repeatedly implied that New Orleans citizenry were somehow to blame for the city’s struggles, rather than holding governmental agencies to account (see Negra, 2010). I suggest that *Treme* offers a nuanced counter-narrative to such official discourse. In this article I identify and analyse two textual strategies in *Treme* that produce a more complex set of representations of the city: the series’ opening credit sequences and its reflexive use of ‘televisual moments’. I unpack these formal devices to explore the ways in which these aesthetic strategies function in developing a nuanced and explicitly politicised set of representations of a post-crisis New Orleans. *Treme*’s narrative negotiates an additional layer of complexity, in that many events depicted or referenced actually took place. Through these selected textual readings, I argue that *Treme* produces what I term an ‘activated aesthetic’ through deploying reflexive strategies which repurpose and re-present historical events within carefully constructed credit sequences; and within emotionally-charged and visually striking standalone televisual moments. In my analysis I seek to delve into the critical function of these reflexive strategies, deploying John Caldwell’s (1995) observation that analysis of televisual aesthetics must incorporate

identification of what that aesthetic is *in service of* and what wider meaning(s) it produces. I suggest an aesthetic is ‘activated’ beyond its narrative functionality when these strategies are deployed in an explicit socio-political critique (see Moylan, 2017).

Drawing on these textual examples I explore how *Treme* signals its ongoing critical project of identifying and mining continuous infrastructural problems experienced in the actual New Orleans, by combining iconic images and sounds alongside depictions of contemporary material struggles in key moments and sequences. Throughout its detailed representations of the city, *Treme* mostly sidesteps reductive representations of New Orleans that primarily depict the city as a tourist destination for seekers of decadence. As Negra observes, ‘Prior to Katrina, New Orleans maintained a singular status within an economy of carefully marketed lifestyle and tourism destinations,’ and characterised by its ‘Old South’ qualities enriched and particularised by Cajun and Creole influences that have been interpreted as local ‘spice’ or in reference to the supernatural (2010: 2). In both cinema and television, as Negra writes in her introduction to *Old and New Media after Katrina*, New Orleans is routinely depicted through images of French Quarter balconies, iconic jazz clubs such as Tipitina’s, street parades and parties and voodoo iconography; examples include TV series *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-14), *NCIS New Orleans* (2014-) and *The Originals* (2013-18) and films such as *Girls’ Trip* (2017), *Misconduct* (2016), *In the Electric Mist* (2009) and *Déjà Vu* (2006). In contrast, *Treme* elides the performative authenticity harnessed in such normative representations of New Orleans, producing instead an aesthetic interrogation of documented experience and historical memory represented in a series of archival and contemporary images in the opening credits. To examine *Treme*’s production of complex layers of meaning I deploy the theoretical concept of the *televisual moment* to situate a textual reading of key sequences which encapsulate central preoccupations of *Treme* and produce standalone moments of critique. Building on recognition of the televisual

moment as a central formal element for television analysis, as argued by Jason Jacobs (2006) and Matt Hills (2008), I consider the televisual moment as a self-contained unit of emotional expression and revelation. The standalone ‘televisual moment’ is produced within a given episode and reveals and reinforces a recurring thematic preoccupation for the series as a whole in the space of one or two minutes (see also Moylan, 2017). I further consider these televisual moments as shaped by the high production values characteristic of ‘quality TV’; in particular ways in which the characteristics of ‘quality TV’ enable a further capacity for complex narratives and visual spectacle (see Leverette *et al*, 2008; Wheatley, 2011). I situate my readings of key textual moments in relation to their capacity to re-produce fictionalised memories of actually occurring real events, drawing on Amy Holdsworth’s (2010) concept of televisual memory and David Harvey’s (2001) reading of the standalone ‘moment’s’ capacity for producing critique.

From a point of departure three months after the storm (as stated in the intertitle at the beginning of the Pilot) *Treme* produces increasingly complex readings of a post-Katrina New Orleans over its four season narrative arc. The first season situates the series’ thematic emphasis on citywide material damage, neglect and trauma and introduces an array of recurring visual figurations of the city. Season 2 centres thematically on corruption (individual and municipal) and exodus; Season 3 foregrounds cultural reflection and contested authenticity. The short Season 4, comprising five episodes, briefly widens the series’ scope to incorporate figurations of the 2008 Presidential election in New Orleans while consolidating character arcs towards their conclusion.

Re-presenting New Orleanian history

Treme’s opening credit sequence collates archival images from the city’s cultural past, combining archival footage with contemporary photographs documenting Hurricane

Katrina's destruction. The sequence immediately embeds the viewer in New Orleanian history and culture, situating the fictionalised narrative of *Treme* firmly in the bleakly factual context of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The sequence begins with footage of a Second Line parade, an established community-led New Orleans ritual, overlaid with a lively horn-driven jazz song. Second Line parades are organised and run by neighbourhood communities as fundraising events; the event involves community members strolling together in a parade formation along a designated route singing, dancing or playing instruments. The use of original footage produces and reinforces a profound sense of New Orleanian history, music and community in the first few seconds of the credit sequence. The Second Line footage used in the credits is taken from a 1960 documentary, *The Cradle is Rocking*, directed by Frank DeCola and produced as part of a US Information Agency initiative to support emerging filmmakers like him. The rapidly cut Second Line footage is then starkly replaced by footage depicting Hurricane Katrina: first, showing an image of hurricane's spiral as seen from space, followed by scenes from the storm, of water pouring into buildings, followed by a still of a flooded street lined with houses and half-submerged cars. This is succeeded, in turn, with a sequence of stills depicting the flooded city shown in rapid succession, including a police car immersed underwater and a resident crossing a flooded street by boat; replaced by a photograph which is lingered on, featuring scrawled signage on the side of a building stating 'possible body'. Following these images, a photograph of New Orleans residents Paola and Jose Carrada, first circulated by New Orleans newspaper the *Times-Picayune*, shows them gazing in shock at the water damage to their home. Jennifer Zdon took the photograph of the couple; an additional image, of the waterline in their bedroom, serves as the backdrop to credits featuring actors' names. The image is striking on its own terms, but it also re-inscribes the ways in which past and present coalesce in the credits, and within the series as a whole. Next, the camera moves slowly over a series of still images depicting mould-damaged walls,

scratched and water-damaged archival photographs and photographic album collages. The archival footage and photographs in the credit sequence display the material signs of age and decay, testifying to a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude of experience. Muted post-hurricane house interiors are contrasted with black and white photographs collated into an imagined album combining formal and exuberant images: a Second Line, two black women in their Sunday best, a posed wedding portrait with the couple in formal dress, and a waffle vendor posing with a pastry chef.

Yet the credit sequence eschews any straightforward nostalgia, even as the accompanying soundtrack makes the past seem to come alive and dance, as the portraits of individuals long departed are starkly contrasted with images of flood and storm damage. In their reading of the photograph as a ‘moment of “history”’, Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch observe that it has a capacity for mediation because it is *not* a hermetically sealed representation of the past; instead the image contains elements and fragments which elude the ‘photographer’s purpose’ (2002: 7). The ongoing juxtaposition of archival and contemporary images in the credit sequence is thus imbued with a further dialectical register: a layer inherent in the (mediating) photographs themselves, prior to their collation and arrangement in the sequence. Dant and Gilloch suggest the ‘work of history is to gather and connect the fullness of human experience, to recognize details that at the time seemed minor or trivial’ (2002: 9). The photographs in the sequence perform this capacity of mediation between (perceptions of) the past and the present. Their collation in the credits comprises this ‘work of history’ (keeping in mind that collation itself is not a disinterested activity), serving as a further reminder of *Treme*’s historiographical impetus. Each photograph simultaneously embodies past and present, both alongside and in collision with each other. In the collated archival photographs in the credit sequence, the present refers to the past in a reversal of chronological progression but through a linear trajectory; at the same time as the past reaches

out to the present, its historical resonance is deepened by the clear signs of age and decay of the photographs themselves. The appearance of actors' names over the photographs of actual New Orleans homes blurs the distinction between the documented past of New Orleans and *Treme's* fictional, or *fictionalised*, present. This opening credit sequence functions to establish *Treme's* narrative intention to represent a complex city through a multilayered set of images reflecting the infrastructural damage and ongoing precarity of the city.

As in showrunner David Simon's *The Wire*, each season of *Treme* is characterised by a distinct theme that is reflected and reinforced in each season's opening credit sequence. Where the credits in Season 1 juxtapose archival images signalling the city's rich and varied history with devastating images of storm damage, in Season 2 it situates the viewer firmly in a dilapidated, troubled post-Katrina New Orleans yet to recover. The Season 2 credits expand on the damage of the storm's aftermath, reflecting and reinforcing the season's narrative focus on infrastructural negligence. In the Season 2 opening credits, a haunting image of a single step leading to a house which no longer exists, the still-intact foundation now surrounded by an empty lot over which grass is growing—introduces a new set of exterior images of devastated houses and storefronts, left empty and abandoned or torn down. Images of collective anger succeed each other: sardonic graffiti about FEMA's failures and development schemes, protest banners and people marching on the streets are juxtaposed with images lit by flashing blue police lights of night-time crime scenes alongside parade footage, followed by a looming City Hall with tents erected in front of it. These scenes can be read as a critique of ongoing police negligence, alongside documentation of responses from residents. Near the end of the credit sequence, a stack of files in close-up reinforces a recurring plotline regarding the city's bureaucratic failure to adequately compensate residents for damage or prosecute fairly acts of violence. Amongst these later images are more benign photographs of local food being prepared and the Season 2 credit sequence concludes with

dancing feet. Taken as a whole, the Season 2 sequence overtly contrasts hope with despair, foregrounding community activities to counter the images of abandoned homes and empty streets. The deliberate reflexive blurring of iconic and infrastructural images in the opening credits is figured more starkly in Season 2, a tonal shift which deepens *Treme*'s critical efficacy at an aesthetic layer—not through the provision of a convincing verisimilitude but rather through an asserted attempt to keep the overlapping contradictory 'facts' (depicted in images of protest and infrastructural damage) firmly in the field of vision. These visual reminders of damage and dissent act to effectively counter populist images of New Orleanian decadence.

The images and footage employed in the credit sequence undergo further change in Seasons 3 and 4, each signposting a shift in thematic emphasis (although the Second Line footage remains throughout the series' four season run). In Season 3's credit sequence, a coat of whitewash appears over the title 'Treme', preceded by new images of dilapidated and destroyed buildings. These are followed by footage of Mardi Gras Indian costumes being prepared and new slogans painted on exterior house walls—followed finally by footage of actual court proceedings. In Season 4's credit sequence the title image retains the whitewash but 'Treme' is spelt in gold lettering. This final season's credit sequence can be read as elegiac, comprising mainly of contemporary photographs, one after another other, documenting a progress (of sorts) in New Orleans. An image of an empty, sunlit lot is succeeded by one of a new house under construction; other images include lavish Mardi Gras parade floats and costumed Mardi Gras Indians. Yet other images in the Season 4 sequence are less positive: empty classrooms followed by portraits of actual New Orleans politicians indicted for corruption, including former New Orleans City Council president Oliver Thomas, convicted for accepting bribes in 2007. (Thomas plays himself in Season 2, further blurring distinctions in *Treme* between real events and their fictionalised reworking). Later in

Season 4's credit sequence, footage from the Danziger Bridge during the hurricane is interspersed with close-ups of prepared dishes and local produce, reinforcing the city's celebrated reputation for eclectic, regionally specific cuisine.

Each credit sequence mines the complexity of an actual New Orleans where a battered infrastructure and ongoing corruption sit alongside vibrant community-led parades and street events, a diverse, deeply localised food culture and a multifaceted music scene. The nuanced representations produced in these sequences reference cultural signifiers (local cuisine, Second Line parades) and archival images alongside photographs documenting infrastructural failure and municipal corruption. Through this dialectical representation, the opening credit sequences signpost *Treme's* capacities for televisual critique by explicitly foregrounding narrative preoccupations of each season in photographs detailing material problems which form seasonal plotlines, against iconic historical images reinforcing New Orleans's cultural capital. Certainly at the time of *Treme's* air dates, HBO's cultural currency for producing long-running series combining societal critique with deeply realised world-building was firmly established with series such as *True Blood* (2008-14), *Game of Thrones* (2011-), including Simon's past offering *The Wire*. Building on the cultural capital of *The Wire's* multifaceted critique, which involved critiques of the education system, print journalism, police and union complicity and its own version of state and municipal corruption, and produced by HBO with its attendant cultural capital for 'quality TV', *Treme* is well placed to produce its aesthetically rich political critique.

Activating Televisual Moments

Following the establishing title 'New Orleans, Louisiana: Three Months After', but before the credit sequence, *Treme's* pilot episode ('Do You Know What it Means') opens with a series of initially indistinguishable images and sounds. Extreme close-ups succeed one another: a

mouth chewing on a toothpick, fingers on a trombone, brightly coloured feathers, a tattooed arm, the label on a bottle, a cigarette—against a jumble of indistinct sounds; snatches of half-heard conversation, a single note from a horn, the beginning of a melody. The close-ups gradually coalesce into distinct faces as the camera gradually pulls back: a local officer, FEMA soldiers in uniform, two women looking disparagingly at the soldiers. The sounds too come together, in the tones of horns tuning up and dialogue resolving itself into complete sentences. The pilot is directed by Agnieszka Holland, who worked primarily as a film director in western European cinema before turning to direct occasional television episodes of *The Wire* (also for David Simon) and *The Killing* (US, 2011-14), went on to direct further episodes of *Treme*, as well as *House of Cards* (2013-18) and *The First* (2018), amongst other series. The employment of Holland as a director is characteristic of HBO's commitment to 'quality' television; several HBO series (such as those listed above) habitually brought in established film directors with their attendant cinematic experience (Nelson, 2007; Leverette *et al.* 2008). This naturalistic entry to the post-Katrina New Orleans of *Treme* is echoed, albeit in a more structured, formal manner, in the opening credits, into which the pilot's opening montage of images and sounds segues. This reflexively naturalistic aesthetic approach establishes *Treme*'s uses of fragmented 'moments' as a central, recurring formal device. I suggest that this deliberately fragmented sequence at the pilot's very start produces a lens through which to view and consider *Treme*'s unfolding narrative. By emphasising both the standalone beauty of each fragment alongside their intelligibility when combined, *Treme* reflexively calls attention to its aesthetic strategies. These fleeting and ephemeral fragments once combined embody a post-Katrina totality of variegated New Orleanean experience. The montage is visually striking, beginning as a series of images and sounds without context, without backstory; instead, aural and visual fragments in places appear impressionistic. Amy Holdsworth suggests that televisual memory, particularly in the form of the montage, can

resemble poetry in televisual form, in that ‘poetry is language in which the signified or meaning is the whole process of signification itself’. She goes on to talk about the poetics of these moments of televisual memory,

In this sense these moments of televisual memory function as televisual poems—in the use of montage and the framing of the sequences, the tension between, and rhythm produced by, stillness and movement. ... they are circular and self-referential. (2010: 141)

In *Treme*, the opening montage produces its own, almost hypnotic rhythm, drawing us into these components before they coalesce to form the first scene, while also reflexively calling attention to *Treme*’s strategic uses of the televisual moment. As a formal interpretative device, a televisual moment takes place when meanings combine within a blink of the narrative, characterised by striking images or an emotional exchange of words or glances, which taken together produce a sharp emotional as well as aesthetic impact. A televisual moment functions metonymically, communicating a greater idea about a series as a whole in a few minutes. It functions as a central component in television drama’s episodic structure, its multifaceted functionality combining exposition, emotional import and thematic development in a brief leap in an episode’s narrative. Given its multifaceted functionality, I suggest the televisual moment contains a particular capacity to mobilise the aesthetic import of what is depicted, by connecting the actions represented in a given moment to their wider significance for the series as a whole. In *Treme*, the aesthetic power of such standalone televisual moments are *in service of* (to use Caldwell’s conceptualisation) a politicised critique built on images representing infrastructural negligence and institutional injustices, which, in turn, are reinforced in the stories dealing with these topics. The formal foregrounding of such textured detail in the Pilot’s opening scenes, combine a sense of authenticity and verisimilitude, immersing the viewer in this re-created New Orleans even as it reflexively draws attention to fragments of meanings as a formal device.

While *Treme*'s subsequent seasons foreground a realism less given to such standalone impressionist moments, Season 3 produces two striking instances of reflection, again deploying the televisual moment strategically, echoing and reinforcing the season's emphasis on a critical look backwards. The first moment takes place near the close of Season 3's fourth episode ('The Greatest Love') at a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In another instance in which *Treme* replicates actual cultural events, this scene re-presents Paul Chan's production of Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *Waiting for Godot*, performed in real life by the Classical Theatre of Harlem. Chan's production is staged in the devastated Gentilly and Lower Ninth Ward neighbourhoods (see Cotter, 2007). The scene begins with Toni (Melissa Leo) intently watching the play in a community theatre. Onstage, one actor explains to the other that all will be right once Godot arrives. The camera moves to Toni's face, rapt but suffused with sadness. The man sitting next to her says quietly but distinctly: 'motherfucker ain't coming'. His comment startles Toni, who says sharply, 'What? What did you say?' An expression of angry despair supersedes the sadness on Toni's face, as she absorbs the comment and continues to stare, transfixed, at the stage. The combined resignation and anger evident in her expression can be read as a sudden recognition that the corruption and infrastructural disrepair in New Orleans will likely remain unresolved, despite her own ongoing efforts as a lawyer to combat it. The original production's deliberate setting in ruined neighbourhoods of post-Katrina New Orleans steeps the play in despairing recognition that there will be no resolution—to the story, and by implication given the setting, to the problems of New Orleans. In Toni's response, the aesthetics of this moment—a small audience's rapt response in an intimate theatre—is *activated*, connecting her emotional response with its wider political recognition of an ongoing systemic neglect.

The second moment of reflection juxtaposes two locations, where the actions and character reactions in each place produce emotional responses to post-Katrina devastation in

two radically different spaces: Albert's home, housing collective costume preparations for the Mardi Gras Indian parade; and a fundraiser for New Orleans held in Washington D.C. Episode 7 ('The Promised Land') is set on the eve and day of Mardi Gras. About 30 minutes into the episode, a scene opens with Albert (Clarke Peters), Delmond (Rob Brown) and other family and friends sitting in Albert's house sewing their costumes. Delmond loads the 2008 documentary *Trouble the Water* onto his laptop and the group begins to watch as they sew. The documentary, *Trouble the Water*, was released at the Sundance festival in 2008. Drawing on interviews filmed by New Orleans resident Kimberley Roberts during the storm, the documentary depicts people speaking directly to camera during Hurricane Katrina and captures their fear and panic as the water rises around them and their homes. Roberts' eyewitness footage, shot during and after the storm, is contextualised in *Trouble the Water* with additional footage from news coverage showing New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin speaking about the damage alongside shots of the breached levees and destruction across the city. The following seven minutes move between Albert's house, where the group silently watch *Trouble the Water*, aghast, and the carnivalesque Washington D.C. benefit where Annie (Lucia Micarelli) is performing. The benefit is ostensibly to celebrate New Orleanian culture, food and music; however an excess of spectacle, typified by circus performers on podiums lit in pink and violet neon overwhelms Annie's singing, which goes mainly unheard by a largely unresponsive audience. In the second shot of Annie on stage, she sings 'This City Won't Ever Drown'; the bleak but defiant lyrics are at odds with the indifference of the milling and inattentive crowd. As the scene shifts back to Delmond watching *Trouble the Water*, his sister Davina (Edwina Findley Dickerson) joins him, and they watch the screen soberly as they continue to sew costumes for the Mardi Gras. On the laptop screen, a woman can be seen saying that she is trapped as the water continues to rise. Her words, 'So I'm going to die' appear on the screen, their impact shown on the stricken faces of those watching at

Albert's house. As the scene shifts back to Washington D.C., Annie is privately applauded by other New Orleans musicians performing at the benefit including the Neville Brothers; all note the imperviousness of the crowd, while dancers with hula-hoops continue to swirl on podiums. Returning to Albert's house, he has joined Delmond and the others now gathered around the laptop, watching in appalled silence as a man's voice describes looking for his dead family over an image of rows of individually covered corpses. As the man continues to speak, Albert stops watching. Rising and returns to his chair he takes up his unfinished costume. At the benefit, Aaron Neville has begun to sing an emotionally charged version of 'Louisiana 1927'; a few people in the largely networking crowd look up but the rest remain indifferent to his singing and Annie's plaintive violin accompaniment. At Albert's house, he resolutely continues to sew while in *Trouble the Water* Mardi Gras music begins to play and a voice is heard saying: 'I'm here to represent the people who couldn't make it.' Delmond also rises; crossing the room to return to his chair, he looks at Albert; they stare at each other in shared recognition and resolution as the Mardi Gras horns continue to play, Albert wearing the fierce gaze which typifies his character throughout the series. The stark visual contrast between the private intimacy of Albert's dimly lit, still unfinished house, with exposed beams and plastic sheeting everywhere and the garishly lit Washington D.C. public venue, complete with opulently dressed attendees, situates the intensely emotional moments which take place in each location. These moments each encapsulate the emotional impact of looking backwards at Hurricane Katrina through cultural mediations: sanitised and repurposed as a performative 'New Orleans culture' at the Washington D.C benefit, contrasted with the actual horrors of the storm itself depicted in *Trouble the Water*.

In both episodes, these sequences embody a deliberate tension between 'stillness and movement' identified by Holdsworth (2010) as inherent to moments of televisual memory. Both the emotional sequence during *Waiting for Godot* and the longer, more complex

sequence moving between Albert's house and the Washington D.C. benefit reinforce Season 3's capacity for critique within such reflective moments. Season 3's episodic breadth enables this more developed critique within such moments of character reflection, prompted in each instance by a cultural production that elicits an emotional response. The outdoor staging of *Waiting for Godot*; the shared laptop screening of *Trouble the Water* and the privately felt (if publicly performed) renditions of 'Louisiana 1927' and 'This City Won't Ever Drown', each produce and activate critical reflection for the characters experiencing them—and for viewers of the series. I suggest the combined layers of meaning produced by these standalone moments function both aesthetically and thematically, producing 'fleeting but decisive sensations' (Harvey 2001: 429). For David Harvey, these standalone moments can encapsulate 'the totality of possibilities contained in daily existence' (429), their affective impact enabling a capacity for critique through recognition of such emergent possibilities for change. It is this capacity for producing critique that I contend typifies the activated aesthetic. While the aesthetic leap of the televisual moments exemplified here—particularly the longer sequence—are certainly facilitated by the high production values and greater space for narrative expansion typical of 'quality TV', particularly as produced for HBO, the slowed-down pacing which enables such depth of character and cultural reflection reflexively calls such strategies to the viewer's attention. As argued above, these distinct moments produce meaning/s in their own right while simultaneously signalling through these fragments the fleeting, incomplete quality of memory itself.

Mobilising Televisual Memory

While Hurricane Katrina is the event that mobilises *Treme*'s narrative, most pointedly in Season 1, the catastrophic events during and immediately after the hurricane are not themselves depicted. At the time of the disaster news coverage of Hurricane Katrina was

widely and in many places erroneously reported, so that the full scale of the damage became known only gradually. On 30 August 2005, *USA Today* reported that 80 per cent of the city was estimated to be underwater, with the water 20 feet deep in places, and that flooding had destroyed homes and ravaged neighbourhoods below sea level. Many New Orleans residents were without clean drinking water and electricity for weeks. The materiality of such devastation are referenced throughout *Treme's* Season 1 (and form a core narrative for the entire series), but only the season's final episode flashes back to the day of the hurricane itself. This episode, 'I'll Fly Away', features an extended flashback sequence that depicts individual characters' memories of the storm. This is the only flashback sequence depicting the hurricane and the consequent damage and destruction in the series, producing perhaps *Treme's* most pointed moment of critique. The flashback sequence begins abruptly an hour into the episode (itself extended as the season's final episode), cued by Ladonna's (Khandi Alexander) recollection of her attempt to telephone her brother David 'Damo' (Darryl Williams) on the day of the hurricane, a memory which comes back as she attends his funeral. As she stares past the mourners, devastated but dry-eyed, we hear a phone ringing; and the image fades away, only to refocus on a cell phone ringing and introduces the flashback sequence. The camera pulls back to take in the figure of Damo, who has been missing for the duration of Season 1. He is the first person seen in the flashback sequence, taking another call as the sun shines outside before the storm hits, agreeing over the phone to run an errand. Standing in a bright, sunny room, cheerfully agreeing to help out, Damo is the antithesis to the way in which he's been depicted as a shiftless, borderline criminal by the authorities throughout Season 1, despite Ladonna and Toni's protests to the contrary. Up until this moment Damo has been a symbol of police negligence (if not outright violence) in the narrative. Seeing his character emerge in this episode complicates those reductive and

damaging discourses criminalising the primarily black and poor New Orleans residents who were not able to escape the hurricane.

Following this opening scene other central characters emerge, each negotiating the build-up to the storm, either heeding or disregarding increasingly ominous televised reports of the hurricane's progress which can be seen and heard in the background. The characters' varied responses to the storm reflect and reinforce their individual trajectories in the series as a whole. Janette (Kim Dickens) leaves the city in plenty of time, as do the Bernette family, whose home is hardly damaged by the hurricane. Separately, both Antoine (Wendell Pierce) and Ladonna leave later and get caught in traffic and petrol station lines. Albert remains, hammering boards over his windows, as do Sonny (Michiel Huisman) and Annie, who wander the empty, increasingly blustery streets holding hands. Davis (Steve Zahn) elects to stay, before fleeing at the last minute, realising—as does Creighton (John Goodman) from the relative security of his hotel room far from New Orleans—that the local maxim stating the storm will 'swerve at the last minute, it always does' won't hold up. Initially disorienting in its swerve into the past, the flashback sequence produces a deep sense of viewer satisfaction by finally delivering each character's backstory of when Hurricane Katrina hit. Paul Booth identifies ways in which 'temporal displacement can also create emotional affect' in audiences, arguing that 'nothing can elicit spectator attention and emotional attachment more so than a well-executed moment of temporal disorientation' (2011: 5). This displacement is particularly poignant in *Treme*, as the flashback not only provides important insights into how each character is equipped to cope with the imminent crisis of Katrina (related to personal and economic resources), but also brings home the impact of the storm in ways which have thus far been described by characters in the past tense.

Ladonna's memory serves an additional narrative purpose: namely, her recollection provides a delayed introduction to Damo following his (official) misrepresentation, his very

character a mystery to be solved by Toni Bernette before he can be found. Until the flashback, Damo is a cipher. He is lost in the system, his displacement embodying the worst of institutional corruption, exploitation and ineptitude following the hurricane. At the end of the flashback sequence, the camera returns to Damo, clad now in an orange prison jumpsuit, staring straight back at the camera and at the viewer in a standalone moment. In staring directly at the camera for a minute or more, Damo implicates us in the injustice of his erroneous and ultimately fatal incarceration. His look direct to camera, and thus directly at the viewer, evokes his memories of injustices experienced (and described earlier in Season 1) and invites our identification with his despair and fear of a system which seeks to contain him without cause—or subsequent accountability. As with the show's reflective televisual moments, the unusual quality of this brief moment's breaking of the fourth wall acts as a prompt for the viewer, focusing their attention on the device of the 'look' itself—all the more striking as it is the only instance of a direct-to-camera look in *Treme*'s four seasons.

In television drama a flashback provides both exposition and insight into a character's past actions and motivations, in turn enabling greater viewer identification with the character. Ladonna's flashback moment enables viewer identification with her grief and simultaneously produces and embeds a pivotal second of critique within Damo's gaze to camera and to the viewer. Thomas Elsaesser argues for the power of audio-visual media to situate memory: 'What more appropriate instrument to record and preserve memory than sight and sound?' (1999: 3), suggesting further that memory, because of an inherent authenticity of experience, supersedes historical accounts, 'As history evaporates, becoming in the process the very signifier of the inauthentic, the false and falsifiable, memory has gained in status, as the repository of genuine experience' (1999: 3). Season 1's flashback sequence provides necessary exposition to ground and deepen each character's narrative arc. I argue here that the flashback sequence—particularly Ladonna's memory—produces an essential

counterpoint to then-emerging official narratives of Hurricane Katrina by fleshing out individual experiences. This trope is recaptured in Season 3, in those moments in which Albert, Delmond and friends watch *Trouble the Water*, collectively remembering in horrified silence. Such moments reinforce the terror of being trapped by the storm and, simultaneously in their depiction of extreme precarity, function to critique governmental and municipal responses that did not go far enough. Arguing for the importance of *consciously* remembering, Raffaella Baccolini proposes that a

society that is incapable of recollection, reflection and remembrance is without hope for the future, as it shows no concern for the often silenced histories of the oppressed, the marginalised, the dispossessed... by leaving out ‘embarrassing’ memories of an unjust past, official commemorations offer a sanitised version of history and thus extend injustice into the future. (2003: 120)

Such partial histories are sanitised and depoliticised, resembling the cultural ‘celebration’ in flamboyant yet anodyne Washington D.C. benefit in Season 3, in which the music that forms the emotional soundtrack of New Orleanian everyday is dismissed by outsiders. Instead of such reductive portrayals, Baccolini insists on the important of *remembering* in a manner that is not simply nostalgic but is also productively forward looking takes on an ethical and political dimension. The invocation of memories of the hurricane reinforces *Treme*’s project of challenging ‘official’ histories of Katrina, which is all the more necessary given the legitimisation effect of the neoliberal retellings of Katrina’s aftermath, which posit that the people of New Orleans are partly to blame for crisis events in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Diane Negra has identified how, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, media coverage coalesced into a dominant reading of the hurricane as embodying a warranted retribution on the city and its citizens (Negra 2010). In *Treme*, individual memories, those ‘silenced histories’, serve as alternative and therefore necessary readings of New Orleans’s survival post-Katrina.

Conclusion: Mediating New Orleans Histories post-Katrina

Through televisual strategies which combine to produce what I term an ‘activated aesthetic’, in which aesthetic devices are put at the service of a political critique, I argue that *Treme* offers an alternative set of narratives to such official discourses and functions as a ‘public reckoning text’ (Fuqua 2010: 61). By foregrounding institutional injustices in its narrative and in standalone moments, *Treme* calls for accountability. Building on Raymond Williams’ concept of a *structure of feeling* (1977), Vicki Mayer describes the production and reception of *Treme*’s set of narratives as ‘placemaking’, produced when the ‘shared discourse of a place intersects with those surrounding heritage, ritual, and authenticity to forge a structure of feeling—a sense of common culture’ which can then be mobilised to counter ‘neoliberal restructurings’ (2016: 715) and other discursive rewritings of local experiences. *Treme* produces such a structure of feeling in part through an array of character perspectives, and through a series of visually rich and detailed moments which retrieve and mine the everyday of New Orleans. In creating and sustaining such a structure of feeling, *Treme*’s placemaking ‘energised the everyday with the politics of the multitude’ (Mayer 2016: 712). *Treme*’s reflexive representation and negotiation of the contested events in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina produces an effective critique situated across televisual fragments, via a series of character narratives in an ensemble structure, coalescing around key rituals of the city which themselves are experienced in fragmented ways. A deliberate, reflexive blurring of actual events and their fictional re-presentation enables the series to produce a critique built on both the veracity of events around Hurricane Katrina and the emotional aftermath and fallout explored—fictionally—in the series. Character memory then grounds this critique to render it emotionally resonant. An evocative opening credit sequence which draws on the city’s cultural history, and selected standalone televisual moments coalesce to enable *Treme*

to re-create a tangible post-Katrina New Orleans, offering both narrative closure and an open-ended political critique.

In a *Times-Picayune* article, David Simon noted that, ‘The story of this city since August 2005 is deserving of attention and endeavour from all points of the narrative compass. *Treme* is one voice amongst many’ (Simon 2013). In *Treme*’s fictionalised re-tellings, past events are re-presented and their significance mediated, so that ‘[f]ictional time, or media time, seeps into historical time, shaping it at every moment and administering the presence of the past within the present’ (Schwarz 2004: 105). In re-presenting and mediating real events, *Treme* joins up ongoing and multiple histories of the city to produce a complex, critical, multifaceted set of representations of New Orleans still negotiating the infrastructural, political and traumatic events and repercussions of Hurricane Katrina.

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Author bio:

Katie Moylan teaches cultural and media theory at the University of Leicester, UK and is a Marie Curie Global Research Fellow (2019-21) researching tribal radio content and production practices in urban and rural contexts in the United States. Her most recent book, *The Cultural Work of Community Radio* (2019), investigates diverse modes of community broadcasting practice in Miami, Montreal, New Orleans, Toronto and tribal stations in Arizona. Her work on television aesthetics includes 'Uncanny TV: Estranged Space and Subjectivity in *Les Revenants* and *Top of the Lake*', published in *Television and New Media* in 2017.