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Truth, Fiction, or Something in Between? The Meaning of Television

Media critic Neal Gabler has suggested that popular entertainment is turning the nation into a giant transcontinental soap opera. Individual citizens are creating "life movies" starring themselves, and the entertainment industry has become "a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life." Today, Dr. Albert Mohler argues that television, in its attempts to portray the margins of society as (almost) normal, is fueling a moral revolution.

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Media critic Neal Gabler has suggested that popular entertainment is turning the nation into a giant transcontinental soap opera. Individual citizens are creating "life movies" starring themselves, and the entertainment industry has become "a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life."

Gabler's assessment comes immediately to mind in light of the way that Hollywood and the entertainment industry are repackaging reality—even when dealing with issues as intimate as realities of family life and the institution of marriage.

Columnist Lee Siegel considers the meaning of television in his recent review of the HBO series, *Big Love*. "Culture events such as *Big Love* are to the media what the doings of a mysterious new family are to gossip in a small town," Siegel explains. Thus, the appearance of the series—now under contract for a second season—provides a catalyst for many in the media to raise questions about marriage, polygamy, the Mormon movement, and a host of related issues. Nevertheless, sex and marriage are at the very center of the "gossip" about this series.

Siegel suggests a very interesting argument. In his view, the success of HBO's various series, including *Big Love*, *The Sopranos*, and *Six Feet Under*, can be explained by the fact that the network goes for stories from the margins of society. "Their weirdness both normalizes your own most unsettling impulses and gets your vicarious wheels turning," Siegel asserts. "But the latter effect is stronger than the former."

Looking at the history of the television medium, Siegel suggests that the older television programs "sought out the everyday and diversified it with the exceptional." Now, the situation is reversed. Television now seeks "the ordinary in the extraordinary." *The Sopranos* succeeds, he argues, because of "the simultaneity of the routine and the horrific." The characters in the HBO dramas appear quite normal in many ways—dealing with the very normal complications of marriage, work, kids, and the larger world. Yet, when it comes to *The Sopranos*, these include "normal" people who kill for a living.

Lee Siegel's central thesis is this: "Commercial society's deepest aspiration, after all, is a synthesis of total instinctual gratification with the preservation of the social order." Advertisers may have depended upon something like "subliminal seduction" in the past, but, in the current context "unconscious desire is as plainly visible on television as that iPod in your hand."

Siegel's essay appears in the May 22, 2006 edition of *The New Republic*. He is a keen observer of the culture at large, as well as an analyst of the television screen. When he looks at *Big Love*, he sees "a man ordering twenty more tablets of Viagra from the pharmacy on one phone, while on another phone, at the same time, he is exchanging pleasantries with one of his three wives, all of whom have him racing back and forth between their different beds in separate houses like a bull in June."

Thus, *Big Love* takes its viewers “one giant step closer to the fusion of conscious and unconscious planes of existence so desperately sought by television and commerce.”

Now, Siegel’s analysis appears to be rooted in economic theory and at least a soft form of Marxist criticism. At the same time, his criticism appears to be mostly on-target, pointing to issues far beyond the economic—reaching into the most intimate spheres of life.

Big Love may deal with “issues,” like plural marriage, the future of the family, patriarchy, along with many others, but the real power of the series is its presentation of the bizarre as (at least partly) normal. Siegel calls this new television form “allegorical realism.” “Its extreme situations always verge on symbolic resonance, but they are too closely tied to familiar dialogue and context to acquire much abstract meaning.” In other words, the compelling power of the story, and the familiar structure of the dialogue, conspire to hide the truly bizarre nature of polygamy from view.

Siegel isn’t really interested in polygamy as a social movement. He accepts that there are tens of thousands of Americans living in polygamous relationships, but his major concern is the human drama in more existentialist terms.

“The question that Bill’s wives keep asking themselves is: are we here by choice or are we trapped? That is to say, how much are you willing to pay for financial security, for emotional safety, for romantic and sexual fulfillment?” Siegel asks.

As most of America now knows, *Big Love* presents as polygamous husband, Bill Henrickson, living with his three wives and their children. In Siegel’s view, “The really absorbing quality of *Big Love* is that it can ask fundamental questions without constructing breaking points. The calm, ordinary course of a polygamist’s day is inherently combustible. You don’t need any splitting to see the seams.”

In one sense, Siegel agrees with Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, the creators of *Big Love*, when they claimed that their series offers an “ideal template to look at marriage and family.” To Siegel, this claim makes sense. It’s not so much about one man with three wives, as about every marriage seen in a new light.

Siegel argues that “a man with three wives magnifies into clear visibility the power dynamics—the jealousy, the subtle confusions inflicted on children, the protean relationship between sex and money—that lie invisible below the surface in most families. If the show is sometimes appalling in its spectacle of male domination and female subservience, then that is the homage it pays to truth.”

By presenting polygamy as entertainment, *Big Love* allows its creators to delve into controversial issues while humanizing their characters. The Henrickson clan is presented as wholesome and hardly exotic. Polygamy may be illegal, and the Mormon church may have banned it in 1890, but it still, in Siegel’s view, carries the aura of “a religiously sanctioned institution.” As he sees it, polygamy is “an eternal fantasy for most males between the ages of fifteen and eighty-five, from surfers and sculptors to surgeons. In other words, *Big Love*’s polygamy is a sacralized antinomianism, and institutionalized promiscuity, which may be another name for the American dream. No one wants to be curbed, but everyone wants to be right.”

Now Siegel is really onto something. The popularity of television dramas like *Big Love* must be rooted in the fact that they play into sexual fantasies while appearing to normalize the persons involved—thus allowing viewers to enjoy the dramas as entertainment, without taking responsibility to make judgments in moral terms.

Thus, Siegel’s point is in fundamental alignment with what the late Neil Postman argued in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*—that Americans are allowing themselves to be entertained into mindlessness.

While some critics complain that *Big Love* has made polygamy look boring, Siegel sees this as the very key to the success of the series. “Making polygamy look like fun would hardly calm the slightly more legitimate concern about using a despicable social practice for the purpose of entertainment,” he explains. “In fact, showing the dark side of gratification even as it allows viewers to gratify themselves vicariously is *Big Love*’s essential success. And this is the brilliant mechanism at the heart of HBO’s best shows.”

In the end, Siegel sees *Big Love* as “both the indictment of a commercialist ethos of gratification and the expression of it.” He can only wonder where this will lead: “As television grows less and less constrained in its imagination of the antinomian and the weird, you wonder where the emphasis will finally fall, on a new type of popular art or a new type of pandering to the appetites.”

Either way, Siegel’s analysis presents a frightening portrait of the future—with entertainment bringing more and more of the weird and exotic into the center of the American consciousness—fueling an antinomian revolution, accompanied by canned laughter or a sophisticated soundtrack.

A strange validation of Siegel’s thesis appears in the very same issue of *The New Republic*, when columnist Michelle Cottle suggests that *Big Love* points to an opportunity for Americans to rethink marriage. In her view, two parents are simply not enough for today’s postmodern family. In most families “there is a corrosive shortage of support—of the physical, logistical, and, perhaps most importantly, emotional kinds—once consistently provided by your garden variety housewife.”

Now that very few women are traditional housewives, perhaps there is the need, she suggests, for another committed adult in the picture. This new addition would not be “interested in procreating,” she insists, but would give himself or herself to the welfare of the family. In today’s highly stressed families, another wife and mom might help, she suggests.

“It is into this breach that an extra wife could step,” she suggests. “Better still, since the kind of multi-spouse arrangement I am envisioning isn’t about maximizing the number of offspring, one could just as easily have a household with two husbands. Indeed, the key to this brand of polygamy would be to make clear upfront that the second-spouse slot was for a woman or man specifically *not* interested in procreating. After all, how could you save labor with two families’ worth of kids but not two full families’ worth of parents?”

Cottle offers her tongue-in-cheek proposal as an angular critique of contemporary family life and marriage. Nevertheless, the very fact that *Big Love* would serve as the catalyst for her article, and polygamy as the prompt for her consideration, is significant. As Siegel, along with Gabler and Postman now warn, our entertainment threatens to become our reality.

Popular entertainment has become an ocean of antinomianism. This is perfectly suited for the temper of our times. Now that polygamy is presented as a natural theme for popular entertainment, what comes next?

