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Modernism and Cinema

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A Historical *Waste Land* Simmers Under the “Boardwalk”

"The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity." (T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 37)

The best example of Eliot’s historical sense in contemporary American culture is the HBO series “Boardwalk Empire,” created by Terence Winter, which dramatizes Prohibition-era Atlantic City in a way that is relevant and exciting to today’s audiences. It tells a traditional, engrossing story, but it uses modern filmmaking methods and the freedom of cable television to its advantage. Eliot did something similar with *The Waste Land*- he used the well-known medium of poetry to tell a new story rich with mysterious metaphors. These two bastions of culture meet through the “Boardwalk Empire” episode “Margate Sands,” directed by Tim Van Patten, which takes its title from a line of Eliot’s poem and deals with similar themes. Many images from the poem also appear in the episode, as characters on the show deal with issues similar to those raised in Eliot’s work. As this episode shows, “Boardwalk Empire” uses a historical sense to bring the past to the present, with the modernist techniques of *The Waste Land* at its center.

One of the main elements that Eliot’s poem and the HBO drama have in common is the motif of sexual violence. In the case of *The Waste Land*, this is highly metaphorical. Part three, “The Fire Sermon,” includes a woman’s reflection on her early life, told in the context of the districts in London where the episodes occurred. One section reads “Highbury bore me, Richmond and Kew Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe” (lines 294-96). According to the footnote, the structure of this section is taken from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which Dante is addressed by a spirit murdered by her husband. Eliot takes this encounter and adds implicitly seductive sexual imagery to make it his own. He uses British geography to aid him; “Highbury is the London suburb in which the victim was born, Richmond and Kew two riverside districts west of London where her virtue was ‘undone’”(15). From an ancient source, Eliot extracted a different, yet equally dark, theme which was more topical in 1922(and is still relevant today). The image of a woman “Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe” is a powerful aesthetic engine that brings Dante’s theme into the 20th century. Eliot used his historical sense here to give an ancient problem contemporary weight.

“Margate Sands” does the same thing in a more direct way, keeping Eliot’s themes in a 1920s setting but expressing them in a way that modern viewers will understand more easily.