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Critical Viewing Journal Assignment: Atlanta Season 1

Episode 1: The Big Bang

Atlanta the much-anticipated series from Donald Glover premiered on September 6th, 2016.

After a successful YouTube channel, an Emmy winning run as writer of NBC's 30 Rock, starring on one of the most underrated sitcoms of the last 20 years; Community and an extremely successful hip-hop career as Childish Gambino, Donald Glover has finally gotten his own show; Atlanta.

The show takes place in the same city as its title: Atlanta and focuses on the hip-hop scene in the area. The show begins with in media res, dropping you right into an altercation in a parking lot involving guns. The scene is absolutely gripping, and an intense way to start the show. The scene ends with a gunshot but we're not sure who shot it, and who was hit. After this we transition into a title sequence with rap music playing over drone shots of the city Atlanta, it's a really efficient way to drop you into the world of the show. Right away we're introduced to Earn (Donald Glover) and Van (Zazie Beetz). They wake up in bed together and have a daughter, but Van tells Earn she has a date tonight. Van also reminds Earn that if he's staying with her, he's going to need to pay rent. After this we see Earn at his job, harassing random people to sign up for a credit card, he's very bad at it. He finds out from a co-worker about a rapper named Paperboi and when Earn watches his music video he learns it's his cousin Alfred. He goes to his parents' house to ask about Alfred, but they won't let him in because they assume, he's there to borrow money. They tell him where Alfred is staying, he goes to Alfred's apartment. There we meet Alfred (Bryan Tyree Henry) and his friend Darius (Lakeith Stanfield). He makes his case

to Alfred to let him be his manager. They walk outside as Earn pitches himself to Alfred leading to this incredible shot.



They sit in the foreground with an open field and large trees ahead of them, they just have to get there. It's really clever and smart visual storytelling that you don't normally get from a 30-minute show. About two minutes after that Earn is walking behind Alfred and Darius as he pitches himself, he's trying to catch up to them, again really smart visual storytelling. Ultimately Alfred turns him down because he hasn't seen Earn in so long and now that he's making some noise, he wants in. Here we see how Earn leeches off of everyone, Van, his parents and now Alfred. After that he goes to a radio station where this white DJ who he knows uses the N-word extremely casually around him. It's a really low moment for Earn. He sees here how little respect he garners and it's time to stop talking and start doing. He sneaks into the station and uses the last of his money to pay the main radio producer to play Paperboi's song on the radio. After hearing his song on the radio as a result of Earn's efforts, Alfred decides to hire Earn as his

manager. We end with the scene from the beginning of the episode except now we learn the altercation started because Alfred was harassing this guy's girlfriend. We see Van getting home from her date and she looks at the news to see Earn and Alfred were arrested. Overall 'The Big Bang' is a really interesting first episode. They dive right into the gritty world of Atlanta in a realistic and humorous way. My main complaint with the episode is there is a lot of verbal exposition dumps about Earn's character that were already established through his actions, and his persona. Other than that, the episode is a mostly breezy and entertaining watch. Really good cinematography and a good use of Mise en scene. Everything in each frame goes into telling the story of what's happening, usually done through surroundings that are the opposite of glamorous. Very aware and intelligent camera work all around. Solid realistic performances especially from Earn's parents. This pilot sets up the main characters, conflicts, and premise in a mostly entertaining way. As far as pilots go it does a very good job in establishing itself but doesn't do much as an individual episode and piece of art to justify itself in the A range.

B+

Episode 2: Streets on Lock

'Streets on Lock' begins where 'The Big Bang' left off. Right off the bat this episode shows you one of its main themes: a broken police system. The main plot of the episode is broken into two stories. I wouldn't consider it to be an A story and a B story because both are given equal weight. The two situations are Earn waiting to get put into the system and bailed out at jail, and Alfred dealing with the city after news of his arrest went viral. Right off the bat the show alludes to the social media culture of the world we live in. This was addressed in episode 1 as well with multiple people videotaping things to put online. In this episode its people wanting pictures with Alfred. First with an officer in the jail and secondly with a woman who was just scolding her kids for playing with toy guns and imitating Paperboi. It's interesting because the two people who want pictures have a connection, the officer is obviously against gin violence given his job, and the woman was literally scolding her kids about it seconds before but all that goes out the window once they can take a picture with a celebrity, even a low tier one. Earn's story is used to shed light on a lot of important issues such as justice, police brutality, mental illness, and sexuality. It's a lot to unpack in such a short time and while all of the situations and themes are extremely relevant to society and many people's lives it wasn't exactly relevant to the specific episode. The way the show kind of quickly moved from one topic to another felt a bit cheap, these are all issues that you could make entire seasons out of.

Overall however the themes of a broken justice system were by far the most resonant for me in this episode, and this shot was my favorite representation of it.



It's a click and clever way to tell you and show you what the system is like. People in there every week, people getting arrested for marijuana possession, or phony public intoxication and officers arresting a severely mentally ill man and laughing at him for their own entertainment. The cinematography and mise en scene are overall are once again really solid, and do a great job showing the world of the show, be it Alfred's neighborhood feeling like a poor area or the prison just feeling like the absolute worst place to be. Overall, 'Streets on Lock' is an interesting episode that presents and discusses ideas on mental health, sexuality, broken police system, and celebrity culture all within 22 mins. It's a bit all over the place but moves at a decent pace even if it's not the most enjoyable episode of a show. There also isn't much character stuff

going on. I respect them talking about important issues, but they all seemed too glossed over to really resonate.

B-

Episode 3: Go for Broke

'Go for Broke' begins with an excellent cold open. Earn approaches the counter at a fast food restaurant and mumbles that he wants a Kid's Meal. The server can't hear him, so he says it louder and she won't give it to him because he's not a kid. It's a really humorous and entertaining scene but it also does a lot for the character just continuing to show Earn's financial state and how he'll do anything to get by even if it means embarrassing himself because he can't afford a more expensive meal. This is also a good way to juxtapose the Earn's main story of the episode. He wants to take Van out to a nice dinner to show his appreciation and love for. On the advice of a friend he takes her to a fancy restaurant that has a happy hour menu that's cheaper than the regular one. Of course, because this is Earn, we are following it does not go smoothly. He gets to the restaurant and finds out that they don't do that anymore. All throughout the dinner the annoying and very realistic waitress is trying to upsell Earn on everything as the bill continues to grow, and ultimately, he tells the waiter off, doesn't tip her and then reports his card as stolen. The acting from the waitress is really good and this is a common theme throughout the show, random supporting characters turn in really authentic and humorous performance. My favorite example of that would be a presumably homeless man who had a plastic bag and a lightsaber and was collecting money to park people's cars. He was one of the funniest characters in the show thus far. These performances are entertaining but the fact that they're so realistic really ground the show as well. The other storyline in this episode is Alfred and Darius going to complete a drug deal. The drug deal is out in the middle of the woods and the drug dealers are played by Atlanta Trap-Rap trio Migos. This sequence is incredible and scary. As soon as Darius and Alfred arrive at the campsite a naked man crawls

out of their RV and the main drug dealer played by Quavo shoots him, this immediately ups the stakes and puts Alfred and Darius in real danger. This is a nice juxtaposition to earlier in the episode where they were very casual to Earn about the drug deal and how they weren't scared at all. Atlanta continues to prove how smart of a show it is from both a writing perspective and a cinematography perspective. My favorite moment of the episode visually was this really neat transition.



Love the warm yellow lighting as he lays in bed with Van and the cold blue lighting as Earn wakes up in the bed empty. Just a clever way to display the message that they're better with love, together than apart. For me this was the most enjoyable episode so far. Really funny. The drug deal scenes were tense Earn and Vans dinner and their dynamic was very relatable. Love what this episode established and did for all of the main characters. Shows the life Alfred and Darius lead and how things can go wrong at any minute even though it worked out for them this time. Earn will do anything to get by he'll borrow money and he'll report his card stolen to afford a dinner. This is all set up really well with a funny and relevant cold open. Really entertaining episode with good character moments. Looking forward to seeing more of Alfred's rap career and how that will play with Earn managing.

B+

Episode 4: The Streisand Effect (Non-Review)

This episode is very upfront about social media culture and celebrity culture with a social media influencer named Zan. Earn and Darius' plot line was funny and entertaining and showed us more about Darius' character. Overall it was a mostly breezy episode that explored some ideas about social media.

B-

Episode 5: Nobody Beats the Biebs (Non-Review)

This episode has a black pop singer named Justin Bieber who Alfred despises. He learns at the end of the episode from a reporter that the pop singer plays the likeable role and the rapper plays the abrasive unlikable role. Earn gets into a room of agents/managers when he's accidentally mistaken for another agent. He learns some things and sees how competitive the business is. Darius has a short storyline at a gun range that really doesn't serve much purpose to the show. Overall a much lighter episode with some interesting points.

B+

Episode 6: Value (Non-Review)

After not being in the previous two episodes Van gets all the focus in the episode. She meets with an old friend who now dates basketball players and lives a high-end lifestyle. Her friend convinces her to smoke weed and it ultimately costs her, her job. The episode shines some light on class disparity and explores societal expectations for women, specifically black women.

B

Episode 7: B.A.N.

Atlanta's 7th episode 'B.A.N.' is the most unique episode of the series thus far. It plays out like a Charlie Rose type talk show on the Atlanta universe version of BET. Alfred is a guest on this show called Montague along with a middle-aged white woman who is a specialist in gender transitions. The episode is about trans issues and tweets that Alfred made about Caitlyn Jenner. There are really three segments of this episode of Atlanta; there are the fake commercials, the interview segments and the sequences where the show meets with a young black kid from Atlanta who identifies as a 35-year-old white man from Colorado. Starting with the commercials they are all consistently funny and make a few interesting points about consumerism and black culture. They are filmed so authentically that for a second I thought I was watching Hulu w/ads. They parody car commercials being played at every break, they parody alcohol commercials and parody children's cereal commercials in a way that actually shines a light on police brutality, imagining that the classic thief who always steals kids cereal in commercials would get beat up and arrested by the police for doing so. It's really humorous and makes some honest points about society specifically marketing. The next segment is an interview with Antoine a kid who identifies as a 35-year-old white man from Colorado. This segment is absolutely hysterical and feels like something out of Chappelle's Show. They make a couple of jokes about white people in a few minutes like how he was playing golf and going to a farmer's market. He was wearing Patagonia clothes and was talking to himself in the mirror working on his white voice.



It's really funny but at the same time makes some very interesting points about racial stereotypes. Playing golf and going to farmers market shouldn't make this kid feel like he is white, but it does. Donald Glover is making an interesting point about stereotypes and how we let them define us in a humorous and entertaining way. The last segment and the main part of the episode is Alfred and Dr. Deborah Holt appearing on the Montague show. I love how the interviewer is completely exaggerating Alfred's tweets and makes him seem like he's saying he hates trans people. It's so realistic of these "journalists" and it's done in a humorous way. It's hysterical but makes a good point about racial stereotypes. Overall the episode boils down to Alfred making the point that why should he care about other people's issues especially from white people, when he's a black man who's discriminated against especially when he's not outwardly homophobic or transphobic. The most realistic and funny part of the episode was how the interviewer was trying to create controversy when Alfred and the white women are actually agreeing on stuff. The episode wraps up with them bringing back Antoine to do a live

video chat, he's now blonde and Alfred starts laughing at him and making fun of him. Antoine then reveals himself to be outwardly homophobic and transphobic to Alfred's delight as he finds this incredibly hilarious. Apart from the humor and dialogue of the episode it's also impressive aesthetically as it does a great job to create an atmosphere that makes you feel like you're watching real commercials and a real talk show. Once again Atlanta is a very smart visual show. This was definitely the best episode of the show so far. Absolutely hysterical from start to finish, made some amazing points on racism, homophobia, and transphobia and happened to be fantastically enjoyable from the commercials to the interviews to Antoine's trans racial identity. It was an experimental and different way to make an episode. Chappelle's Show and The Eric Andre Show were clearly big influences on this episode.

A

Episode 8: The Club (Non-Review)

This episode is another new setting as the episode takes place in a club that Alfred is being paid to promote at. We follow the two of them separately as Earn tries to get paid from a sketchy club owner and Alfred tries to get more respect from people in the club. Earn confronts the owner but the only gives him \$750 of the promised \$5000. An aggravated Alfred who is getting tired of fake people and celebrity culture goes to the club owner and beats him up for the \$5000. At the end of the episode they're sitting in a diner as things finally went their way but of course there's a hiccup as a shooting outside the club is being blamed on Paperboi. The episode sheds more light on Earn and Alfred's characters and what they're willing to do for respect. It isn't enjoyable as some others but is solidly from a written, filmed and edited.

B

Episode 9: Juneteenth

'Juneteenth' is one of the most interesting and important episodes to Atlanta thus far.

Juneteenth deals with themes of virtue-signaling and white guilt, black on black racism and the appropriation and modernization of slave culture. In 'Juneteenth' we start with Van picking up Earn from some girl's apartment as they go to a celebration of Juneteenth. Juneteenth is a holiday celebrating the liberation of black slaves in the United States. The party is being thrown in an extravagant mansion by Craig a white man and his wife Monique a black woman. Van wants to attend because the rich connections may be good for them and for their daughter. When they first walk in the house something is off, it resembles a plantation house with its lavish design and all of the employees in the house being black. Earn and Van have some weird interactions with a playwright and a reverend that seem to be perpetuating this idea that black people need help. The oddest interaction however is Earn and the host Craig. Craig is a white man who's obsessed with MLK and Malcolm X, Jim Crow, slavery, Africa and anything regarding black people. In his office he has many black artifacts and pictures as well as a vinyl of Childish Gambino's Awaken, My Love a subtle reference to the show's creator Donald Glover. This character Craig is virtue-signaling, and white guilt personified and really claims to understand what it means to be black when he clearly doesn't. At the end he gives a slam poetry performance that really makes Earn feel uncomfortable about the whole ordeal. Earlier in the episode he described the party as "Eyes Wide Shut directed by Spike Lee."



This shot with the camera zooming in on Earn as the poetry echoes behind him is really telling and impressive for a show of this genre. Once again Atlanta is an incredible visual show. After this Monique finds out Earn is Paperboi's manager and condemns rap music and culture, as well as asking him if he plans to shoot up their party. This leads to Earn telling both Craig and Monique off, and it is so earned (*no pun intended*). Earn is finally standing up for himself and his principles. Immediately after this the show creates my favorite moment of visual storytelling so far. The moment after he tells them off, he's driving the car home. He's in the driver's seat. It's a great way to show the shift in Earn's character juxtaposed to Van driving him earlier in the episode. Overall, 'Juneteenth' is an episode that makes some interesting points about racism and the different forms it comes in as well as doing a great job in developing Earn's character in advance of the season finale.

A-

Episode 10: The Jacket

Season 1 of Atlanta ends with 'The Jacket.' This season finale follows Earn hungover the night after a party trying to find his jacket. He goes to a strip club but it's not there. He goes to Alfred to see if he knows where it is, but he doesn't know leading to this recreation of the amazing shot from the first episode.



This time they're a little bit further from the frame showing that they're closer to where they want to be but not quite there yet. Atlanta continues to be an incredibly clever and intelligent visual show. Earn calls their uber driver from the night before to see if he has the jacket and he does. They go to the uber driver's house to pick it up and they get a call that a rapper wants Paperboi to go on tour with him. This good news doesn't really resonate as Alfred feels weird about the area they're sitting in. He goes to drive away, but police sirens go off and the cops are arresting the uber driver for drug dealing. He runs off in Earn's jacket, but the cops shoot him dead. Earn asks him to check the jacket pockets but nothing is there. They return to Alfred's

apartment and Alfred gives Earn a decent amount of money, but it's not specified how much. Alfred tells Earn it's his 5% from managing him. He then goes to Van and Lottie and things are going really well between them. They're eating together and getting along and Earn even gives her almost all the money Alfred gave him for rent. His friend from work drops off his key to him, turns out that is what Earn was looking for. Van tells him he can stay the night but he declines, he heads down a main street in Atlanta listening to OutKast's classic track Elevators (Me & You), a song about making money and struggling in the rap game a very fitting song for this show, especially since OutKast are an Atlanta based duo. It turns out the key is a key to a storage room that Earn sleeps at. There is some promise for Alfred and Earn's career, things are going well with Van, and he's got a little bit of money but there's still a somber tone to the episode and ending. Things are incomplete but they're on the way up.

B

Season One Recap:

Season 1 of Atlanta was a very forward thinking, clever and interesting breath of fresh air to the modern sitcom landscape. The show touches on some important societal issues including racism, sexuality, gender, class disparity and mental health. The show is often humorous, but it isn't always the most captivating watch. Its biggest strength is its authentic and grounded performances and the incredible collaboration of actor/writer/showrunner Donald Glover and director Hiro Murai. The show is consistently written in a really efficient and smart way and is put together in a really intelligent way as well. The visual storytelling that comes from the camera work, the mise en scene and the editing tell the audience so much about the setting, the characters and the ideas the show is presenting. It's a really unique and interesting show

with a great core that has set itself up to continue to explore some interesting terrain in the future. Every single episode wasn't amazing television, but it never really dragged either. It's an intelligent show that has something to say and offers something new.

Season 1 Grade: A-