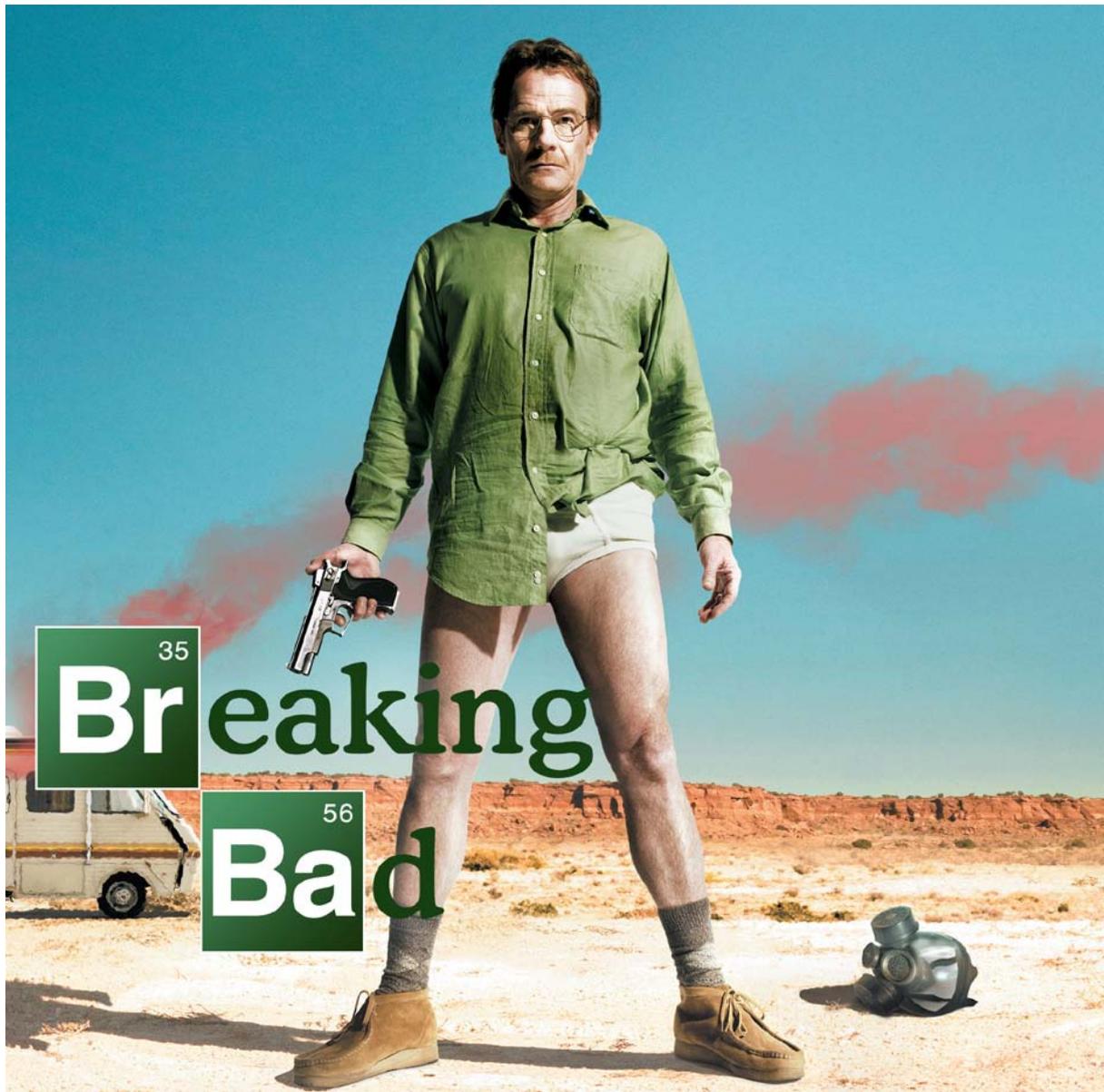


“Quality TV”: The reinvention of U.S. television

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Abstract

“Quality TV”: The reinvention of U.S. television

This thesis examines the rise to prominence of a new form of “quality television” that has appeared in the U.S. since the 1990s. There are competing and sometimes conflicting ways to define “quality television”, depending on different histories and prioritising different characteristics - sometimes production methods, sometimes viewing and distribution practices, and sometimes genre hybridity and transformation. For each, however, the 1990s is a watershed decade. The mainstreaming of cable television, the new dominance of video and then DVD collections of series, a decline in broadcast television’s audience share and the rapid expansion of the internet as an entertainment media option together created new opportunities for a more ‘cinematic’ television that hailed an active audience interested in formally and narratively challenging television.

Every account of quality television turns on claims to exceed and subvert the expectations of existing television formats and genres while also using those to attract an audience. This is famously exemplified by the 90s HBO slogan “It’s not TV. It’s HBO” (since 2011 just “it’s HBO”). This apparent difference is only partly about heightened production values. Quality television tends to foreground genre hybridity, genre self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, and its viewers have become associated with dedicated fandom and new viewing practices such as “binge viewing”, the increasing frequency of watching “off-air”, and torrent culture. The quality television viewer is appealed to by, and not in spite of, their status as a niche audience, and the cultural value accruing to their niche status has transformed investment in casting, scripting, acting directing, producing and critically evaluating television. Quality television has not only become a dominant television format but the benchmark against which “mainstream” television is measured.

To develop this argument I employ textual and discourse analysis and critical theory, and refer to a range of series produced between 1990 and 2013. These include *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (2008—), *Game of Thrones* (2011—), *Girls* (2012—) and *House of Cards* (2013—). These examples offer an historical range of U.S. television since 1990 with emphasis on developments that I argue have brought quality television to its current visibility.

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This thesis contains only original and unpublished material except where duly acknowledged in the text.

Cover image: *Breaking Bad* Season One DVD cover. Copyright HBO Productions, 2008.

Introduction

This thesis examines the rise to prominence of a new form of “quality television” that appeared in the U.S. during the 1990s. Competing and sometimes conflicting definitions of quality television are available, offering different histories and differently prioritising production methods, viewing and distribution practices, and genre transformation. For all these definitions, however, the 1990s is a watershed decade. The mainstreaming of cable television, the new dominance of video then DVD collections, a decline in broadcast television’s audience share and the rapid expansion of the internet as an entertainment media option together created new opportunities for a more ‘cinematic’ television that hailed an active audience interested in formally and narratively challenging television.

Every account of quality television turns on claims to exceed and subvert the expectations of existing television formats and genres while also utilising these to attract its audience. This is famously exemplified by the 90s HBO marketing slogan, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” (since 2011 just “It’s HBO.”).¹ The apparent difference of HBO was only partly about heightened production values. Quality television tends to foreground genre hybridity, genre self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, and its viewers have become associated not only with dedicated fandom but also with new viewing practices such as “binge viewing”, online viewing, and torrenting.² The quality television viewer is appealed to by, and not in spite of, their status as niche audience, and the cultural value accruing to their niche status has transformed investment in casting, scripting, acting, directing, producing and critically evaluating television. Quality television has not only become a dominant television format but the benchmark against which “mainstream” television is measured.

In recent years there has been a great deal written about the type of television and even the specific series I discuss here. In fact, its capacity to sustain close critical attention is part of what signals a series as “quality”. But because the change quality television represents

¹ "HBO 2002 Bumper: It's Not TV, It's HBO," *YouTube* 2012, no. 10 May (2008), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEjnkPkPFzY>.

² The technical term is BitTorrent, which is a peer-to-peer file sharing protocol designed to handle sharing large files by breaking them up into a “swarm” of tiny files that can be downloaded simultaneously from a large number of users. In addition to improving speed and efficiency, this has the side-effect of making anti-piracy activity far more difficult as no individual user or site is responsible for “sending” the file. “Torrent” is the common parlance and torrent culture, torrent sites, and torrenting are the terms I will use here.

involves more than the popularity of particular series it is not explicable by textual analysis alone. I want to focus on quality television's implications for the place of television in a broader media landscape. Quality television demands increased focus on aesthetic questions and on the star power of its actors and "creators". It invites and is even propelled by the formation of critically appreciative audiences that distinguish themselves from people just watching television. Finally, quality television reinvigorates and interrogates existing narrative genres as an integral part of claiming quality for both television and its audience.

To develop this argument I refer to a range of series produced between 1990 and 2013. These include, with different degrees of emphasis, *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-08), *Breaking Bad* (2008–), *Game of Thrones* (2011–), *Girls* (2012–), and *House of Cards* (2013–). This offers an historical range of U.S. television since 1990 with emphasis on developments that I argue have brought quality television to its current visibility. They are all standard reference points for scholarship on this type of television and clarify some of its tendencies. They are primarily "drama" series, rather than comedy, reality television, or any other genre. The list nevertheless includes variations on "genre" standards – the cop show, the mystery, period drama, gangland drama, westerns, political thriller, and high fantasy – as well as programs that fit less neatly into familiar categories. With the exception of *Girls*, as I will discuss in chapter three, they are also primarily focused on male characters and often on masculinity itself. This orientation hasn't escaped television scholars. Gary Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones argue that, "In a medium that is often characterised as being overwhelmingly feminine in orientation, HBO has carefully carved out a niche for itself that is strongly masculine".³ I will argue that all these tendencies speak to the way contemporary quality television simultaneously uses and critiques dominant popular mythologies.

The structure of this thesis is conceptual rather than case-based. Chapter one focuses on defining quality television and on the concepts of cultural value or "capital" involved. Chapter two discusses the production, distribution, and consumption (or what I will call "content acquisition") associated with quality television. And chapter three considers quality television's use and critique of popular narrative genres. Outlining some parameters for the

³ Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, "HBO's Ongoing Legacy," in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 322.

thesis as a whole, the remainder of this introduction considers key concepts that underpin scholarly discourse on “quality television”. Scholars have widely argued that television today is radically different than it was 25 years ago, explaining that transformation using terms like “post-broadcast”, “post-network”, and even “post-television”. Together these terms map a transformation that began to be highly visible in the U.S. in the 1990s.

A key text on this subject is Amanda Lotz’s *The Television Will be Revolutionized*. Lotz emphasises changes to U.S. broadcasting legislation that reduced restrictions on cable television and also technological changes in how television was made available for consumption. She uses the term post-network to refer less to the arrival of cable TV than a transformation in the uses of television:

“post-network” acknowledges the break from a dominant network-era experience in which viewers lacked much control over when and where to view and chose among a limited selection of externally determined linear viewing options – in other words, programs available at a certain time on a certain channel. Such constraints are not part of the post-network television experience in which viewers now increasingly select what, when, and where to view from abundant options.⁴

While stressing that networks (broadcast and cable) remain relevant as “sites of program aggregation”,⁵ Lotz argues that television has moved beyond its original broadcast form.

According to Raymond Williams’ influential model of television, “planned flow” is “perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, both as a technology and as a cultural form”.⁶ *Broadcasting* and *television* are different from other artistic mediums, Williams argues, because “the real programme that is offered is a sequence or set of alternative sequences of these and other similar events”.⁷ The flow model presumes that viewers cannot watch a television program without watching a network and that network television thus controls much more than program content. Roger Silverstone highlights this in a new preface to Williams’ *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, noting that for the flow model “one programme blended into another”, with advertising “seamlessly threaded through” the shows,

⁴ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 15-16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 86.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

providing the financial basis for continued content production and directing viewers to other programs.⁸ In its incorporation of advertising and the scheduling of viewing, the economic foundations of television are part of its flow.

Clearly much television no longer works as a flow. Network broadcasting has changed and new off-air viewing practices have emerged that profoundly impact both revenue streams for television and viewer relations to television. Nevertheless, while television series can now be removed from televisual flow, at least for the right kind of viewer, most television is still consumed with reference to its broad- or narrowcast flow (see chapter two). Despite often being viewed off-air, *Game of Thrones*, for example, is still a HBO series, and this matters to its form as well as its distribution and reception. The flow model describes this integration of television texts and the channels that distribute them, however much else has changed.

Many scholars have recognised this continuity by replacing the term post-network with “post-broadcast”. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay’s collection, *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, emphasises ties between broadcast television and the state and represents post-broadcast television as more open to global and multicultural flows that multiply its possible meanings.⁹ This argument ties the industrial formations of television to international trade and sees them as transformed by texts and practices that cross various cultural borders. This concept thus captures important arguments for my thesis but, as Turner and Tay’s title indicates, “post-broadcast” is often used to mark a dramatic change in television itself, as if these new flows have displaced those described by Williams. The term “post-television” has emerged to name this sense of a break that amounts to a sense that television now is not television at all. Of course the modern media landscape has never been stable. As Joshua Green argues, there is no “prior moment of surety about television as a singular or coherent object” from which contemporary television departs.¹⁰ But if scholarly concepts like post-television and post-network can exaggerate the changes

⁸ Silverstone in *ibid.*, vii.

⁹ Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay, eds., *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰ Joshua Green, “Why Do They Call It TV When It’s Not on the Box?: ‘New’ Television Services and Old Television Functions,” *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, no. 126 (2008): 96. Citing Hills.

they describe understanding exactly “how the term ‘television’ succeeds or fails to describe [new television] services helps to contextualise the object of television itself”.¹¹

For my argument, post-network and post-broadcast mean different things. Post-network refers to television coming after the advent of cable while post-broadcast refers to television for which “broadcasting” is only one of many possible modes of delivery. Cable television aimed at a niche audience, supported by subscription, is a post-network but still broadcast system, while torrenting *Game of Thrones* in Australia just minutes after the HBO broadcast concludes on the east coast of the USA is post-broadcast content acquisition. I see a problem in restricting the term “broadcast” to terrestrial network stations because supposedly “narrowcast” cable or satellite channels are also broadcast. Torrent site thepiratebay, however, is not broadcast and, arguably, neither is online streaming site Netflix, which is the first point of access for *House of Cards*.

Whether articulated as post-network, -broadcast or -television, television studies criticism working on this topic has proliferated since the mid to late 2000s. In edited scholarly collections and new journals this field collectively foreground television’s transformed “relationship with what Toby Miller refers to here as ‘the Q-word,’ and how the televisual landscape looks awfully good in the post-network, post-television, post-HBO era.”¹² They also indicate a scholarly consensus that everything changed for television in the 1990s. As Roberta Pearson argues, the post-television label is *about* quality, describing an “era in which the medium may be perceived as not only equalling but perhaps even surpassing cinema’s cultural status”.¹³

The relationship between these changes and the apparently related concept of “post-cinema” should thus also be considered. What is meant by “post-cinema” varies between critics. It may focus on changing emphases in cinema distribution that mean merchandising and “transmedia” promotion takes on new prominence. Or it may focus on changing forms of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Marc Leverette, "Introduction: The Not TV Industry," in *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 7. See also Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds., *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I B Tauris, 2007); Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds., *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹³ Roberta Pearson, "Lost in Transition: From Post-Network to Post-Television," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 248.

distribution, emphasising that DVD sales, online downloads, or television are as important to the success of a film as theatre release sales. Anne Friedberg argues for the entwinement of these approaches. As new modes of distributing film, she claims, they dilute the unique significance of cinema. As the VCR, the DVD, and the computer screen become viewing situations for film, “both the content and the form of television” compete with the film industry for viewers.¹⁴ For Friedberg, cinema thus had to become more DVD-like in order to compete, offering viewers more of the interactivity and control they had come to expect from recording devices and from computers. This increases the degree to which cinema is restricted to a space for only the newest or most inaccessible films, and only for short periods. Friedberg represents television as one of the beneficiaries of “the end of cinema”, and the changes she describes interweave with changes that increased the visibility of quality television. But a difference between post-cinema and post-television becomes apparent here. Despite historical, technological and economic overlaps, while post-cinema is thought to have dispersed the cultural authority of cinema, post-television enables a mode of television with increased cultural authority. The quality television moment further blurs distinctions between television and film and marks a fresh transfer to television of values previously ascribed to cinema.

Finally, this thesis focuses on the context of U.S. television because it continues to play a leading economic, creative and industrial role internationally: far larger television audiences in countries like China and India consume significant amounts of U.S. television than the reverse. Having said this, it would be possible to write this thesis with other reference points. A longer consideration of this topic would question whether quality television can be discussed as an international phenomenon and what kinds of cultural specificity it maintains in different places. It might also focus more particularly on whether the modes of post-broadcast viewing widely associated with quality television are themselves transnational. For example, the legal and economic history of television is different in the U.K., which thus produced a different television culture, within which public broadcasting and especially the BBC miniseries still maintain a kind of imprimatur over quality television. Jonathan Bignell is one critic who insists that national differences remain significant, claiming that U.K. television is comparatively a “writer’s medium” with specific implications for its “quality”

¹⁴ Anne Friedberg, “The End of Cinema: Multimedia and Technological Change,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 448.

forms.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the criteria that have become critical standards for defining quality television as a field are those appropriate to the U.S., and it is these criteria that I address.

¹⁵ Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 179. Bignell's comment in fact aims to distinguish "mainstream" U.K. television from U.S. equivalents.

1. Television and Cultural Value

In the first extended critical discussion of quality television, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi stress the importance of “the quality audience,” defining it as

permitted to enjoy a form of television which is seen as more literate, more stylistically complex, and more psychologically “deep” than ordinary TV fare. The quality audience gets to separate itself from the mass audience and can watch TV without guilt, and without realising that the double-edged discourse they are getting is also ordinary TV.¹⁶

While the concept of quality television has increasingly emphasised other dimensions, this image of the more critical audience has remained important. Feuer et al. offer a starting point for three trajectories organising this chapter: competing attempts to define quality television; arguments that television cannot match the quality attributed to “high culture”; and theoretical attempts to understand what the quality audience gets from quality television. Along all three trajectories this chapter overviews what has been said about quality television in terms of the apparently problematic relationship between television and “art”.

Defining Quality Television

Several shared premises structure definitions of quality television since the 1990s. Sarah Cardwell defines it by “high production values, weighty themes and careful characterisation and performances”; by the deployment of an “author-function”, “which adds prestige and a sense of artistic integrity”;¹⁷ and by the expectation of a “higher level of engagement from the audience”.¹⁸ Catherine Johnson emphasises the artistic claims inherent in each of these elements in her definition: television with “sophisticated scripts, complex multi-layered narratives, and visually expressive cinematography, combined with its exploration of contemporary anxieties”.¹⁹ Among the most useful definitions is Feuer’s essay revisiting the concept of quality television in the post-network era. She stresses that, as for post-network television, quality television is defined by what it is not: as self-reflexively manifest in the “It’s not TV” HBO slogan. With reference to Stanley Fish and Tony Bennett, Feuer insists

¹⁶ Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, *MTM: "Quality Television"* (London: BFI, 1984), 56.

¹⁷ Cardwell, p. 26.

¹⁸ Cardwell, p. 27-28. I discuss the Foucaultian term “author-function” further below.

¹⁹ Catherine Johnson, “Quality/cult television: The X-Files and television history”, in *The Contemporary Television Series*, eds. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005): 61.

that this negative sense of quality depends on judgements derived from an “interpretative community” or a “reading formation”.²⁰ Her key example is HBO’s endeavour to simultaneously associate itself with the creative cachet of cinema and dissociate itself from network television, even as those networks endeavoured to distinguish their own quality brands by establishing the “auteur” status of creative figures.²¹

Former HBO flagship series *The Sopranos* is a standard reference point for such definitions. It is often singled out for its high production values as well as its success as a HBO branding exercise. *The Sopranos* commanded a large audience for a cable drama series, received significant media attention, and was widely singled out as television with artistic credibility.²² That a series could win 21 Emmy Awards and still be discussed as art was far more surprising when *The Sopranos* appeared than it would be today, a change which itself reflects the impact of quality television (see chapter two). Both marketing of and commentary on *The Sopranos* indicate that its “edginess” partly depends on including content that would have been deemed unsuitable for network television. Such content is key to the commercial success of cable programming and to how cable shifted ideas about what television could do. Many critics have discussed this complex relation between artistic and commercial values in quality television.²³ Jason Jacobs argues that

The continued sense that the television text is mostly inferior to the film text and cannot withstand concentrated critical pressure because it lacks “symbolic density”, rich mise-en-scene, and the promotion of identification as a means of securing audience proximity, has to be revised in the light of contemporary television.²⁴

²⁰ Jane Feuer, “HBO and the Concept of Quality TV,” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 145.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 150, 55, 56.

²² *The Sopranos* is regularly listed among the best television series by mainstream as well as “highbrow” media, by critics from different countries, and by groups oriented around film as well as television. Examples follow from *The New York Post* (http://www.nypost.com/p/entertainment/tv/item_m6hroaqhhjwVUS6iC32eZL), *The Huffington Post* (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bill-mann/tv-critics-call-here-are_b_391101.html), *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2010/jan/12/guardian-50-television-dramas>), and the Writer’s Guild of America (<http://www.deadline.com/2013/06/wgas-101-best-written-tv-series-of-all-time-complete-list/>).

²³ As well as Jacobs and Cardwell, discussed here, see: Charlotte Brunson, *Screen Tastes* (London: Routledge, 1997); John Caldwell, “Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration,” in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Jason Jacobs, “Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2001): 433-34. Jacobs quotes a 1999 article in the “quality broadsheet” *The Independent* claiming that “Television, of course, is merely a medium of communication rather than an art form, a pale substitute for the power of cinema when it tries to be cinematic”. *Ibid.*, 429.

Both Cardwell and Jacobs argue that television theorists in this context should thus pay more attention to aesthetics.²⁵

None of the elements used to define quality television are original to *The Sopranos*, but as a set they are frequently associated with this series. First, it had a “creator” (or “showrunner”) with extensive “artistic” control, and the series is often discussed in terms of David Chase’s decisions. The series ending is one example: against the usual conventions of television drama an ambiguous fade to black closes a lengthy plotline in which it seems the central protagonist, Tony Soprano, might not survive. If unclosed plots are common in many genres, quality television often expresses narrative integrity that supersedes commercial expectations by the “intended run” or voluntary end of a program. HBO in fact represents its audience as more likely to be interested than frustrated by unresolved narrative tensions.

Since *The Sopranos*, distinctions between broadcast networks and the quality orientation of elite original programming channels like HBO have become more visible. HBO in particular has gained a reputation for producing challenging television that would be less welcome elsewhere.²⁶ *The Sopranos*’ reputedly high production values are established by this image of creative integrity more than by its budget. In a move also seen in later series like *The Wire* and *Treme* (2010—), *The Sopranos* was shot where it was set and often used local actors, or actors that shared the same background as their characters. This sense of authentic place and culture is often credited to Chase, who refused to shoot the series in Toronto, Canada, a then common, cheaper shooting location for television.²⁷ The series also uses complex storytelling techniques now widely associated with quality television, including flashback/flashforward sequences, understated narrative tensions, and intertextual use of literary and cinematic

²⁵ Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?: Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 72.

²⁶ A telling current example is the success of *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), a Hollywood romance/biopic centred on the television and Vegas star, Liberace. Director Stephen Soderbergh claims his film was rejected by every major Hollywood producer because it was “too gay” before being accepted by HBO. While it premiered at Cannes and garnered critical acclaim for its Hollywood stars, Michael Douglas and Matt Damon, it never received a U.S. cinema release and was instead broadcast on HBO. See Jon Frosch, "Steven Soderbergh's 'Too-Gay' Liberace Movie Has Arrived at Cannes," *The Atlantic*(2013), <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/05/steven-soderberghs-too-gay-liberace-movie-has-arrived-at-cannes/276095/>.

²⁷ In Maurice Yacowar, *The Sopranos on the Couch: Analyzing Television’s Greatest Series* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 15.

citations. Using these strategies, *The Sopranos* makes a business of saying very little on the surface and a great deal underneath.

“College” (s01e05), one of the most widely praised episodes, exemplifies this narrative depth. Escorting his daughter Meadow around the campuses of potential colleges, Tony spots someone he suspects is a former mob associate who entered a witness protection program. Over the course of the episode, Tony successfully identifies and kills him while keeping these activities from Meadow. Perhaps most famously, this is also the episode where Meadow asks Tony if he is “in the mafia”. Tony feigns offence at the assumption that an Italian American in the waste management business must be “mobbed up”, and asserts that “there is no mafia”, before eventually admitting that some of his income comes from illegal sources. The episode’s emphasis on Tony’s challenging double life culminates in a glossing literary citation. As Tony waits outside an admissions office for Meadow to complete an interview, the camera freezes on a plaque for an extended shot while Tony reads the quotation from Nathaniel Hawthorne inscribed there: “No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which one may be true.”

The Sopranos repeatedly foregrounds clashes between the domestic and professional sides of Tony’s life. Its central narrative trajectory translates the recognisable but often simplistic trope of the ruthless gangster boss into a more relatable, but also problematised, man. I’ll return to *The Sopranos* in this respect when discussing representations of gender in quality television in chapter three but, as Maurice Yacowar suggests, when Tony conforms to the standards of gangster brutality it “is all the more disturbing because it erupts from within a social framework of apparent normalcy”.²⁸ This normalcy is brutal in its own way, with the dominant masculinity of gangland drama set against a sensitising femininised domestic world without making the latter a space of virtue rather than threat. Indicating the importance of this contrast to the series as a whole, the tagline on the DVD box set of the first season was “Meet Tony Soprano. If one family doesn’t kill him... the other family will.”

This invokes widespread representation of the mafia as “the Family”. Following Tony’s reserved admission to Meadow he asks, with forced earnestness:

²⁸ Ibid., 39.

“How does that make you feel?”

Meadow: “At least you don’t keep denying it like Mom. Kids in school think it’s actually kinda neat.”

Tony: [derisively] “They’ve seen *The Godfather* right?”

Meadow: “Not really. *Casino*, we like. Sharon Stone, 70s’ clothes, pills...”

Characters in *The Sopranos* regularly reference mobster films such as *The Godfather* (1972), *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995), and the cast often includes actors from these films.²⁹

A different kind of intertextual layering appears in “The Second Coming” (s06e19). This title is taken from W.B. Yeats’ poem, which Tony’s son AJ is studying at college. The citation is loaded with multiplying significance. It inspires AJ’s suicide attempt, and also illuminates Tony’s relationship with both his son and his own father. During a family meeting with AJ’s therapist, Tony notices and surreptitiously removes a bloody tooth from the cuff of his pants leg, left from a brutal beating he gave another mobster. Woven into a conversation about the causes of AJ’s depression, this shot suggests Tony might consider the impact of his own violence on his son. Even the poem itself is a second coming, having been previously quoted to Tony by Dr Melfi (“Cold Cuts”, s05e10). Finally, in the last shot of the episode, Tony is shown through the glass doors of a hospital ward, walking, slouched dejectedly, down the hallway to meet AJ coming out of his room. The episode fades to black on the turned backs of both characters, with Tony’s hand on AJ’s shoulder. This echo of the final lines of the poem – “And what rough beast, it’s hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” – takes additional weight from Bethlehem being a name for the world’s first mental hospital and from the generational cycle implied in this episode.

These literary citations function in part to stress *The Sopranos*’ association with “high art”, but they also belong to the narrative frame provided by Tony’s therapy sessions. The therapeutic scenario models how narrative tension in *The Sopranos* relies on viewers unpacking what remains unsaid in a scene.³⁰ As Ellen Willis puts it, “Self-consciousness . . . is a conspicuous feature of Tony Soprano’s world even aside from therapy”.³¹ This allows the

²⁹ Willis also discusses “College” along these lines and argues that this strategy carefully blurs any “line between reality and media image.” Ellen Willis, “Our Mobsters, Ourselves,” in *This Thing of Ours: Investigating the Sopranos*, ed. David Lavery (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4ff.

³⁰ See Glen O. Gabbard, *The Psychology of the Sopranos: Love, Death, Desire and Betrayal in America’s Favourite Gangster Family* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 8, xii.

³¹ Willis, “Our Mobsters, Ourselves,” 4.

credible revelation of an emotional life that would not be verbally expressed by such a stoic character and invests the characters with a psychological complexity which is not peripheral to the gangland drama. A similar complexity characterises the visual style of the series. Yacowar argues for the cinematographic depth of the show, noticing, for example, the parallel shot established between Tony's looking up anxiously at a classical sculpture of a woman in the first shot of the series and the first shot inside his club, Bada Bing, where the statue is replaced by a stripper.³²

Cardwell notes that many scholars working on quality television employ analysis "that moves from close textual analysis outwards".³³ But she also notes objections to the increasing role of "evaluation" within television studies, particularly concerns that "it will lead to a narrow 'canon' of 'good television'", eliminating other programs as "unworthy of study".³⁴ Considering responses to the suspected dangers of evaluation, Cardwell lists a range of ways that theorists negotiate the non-quality/quality distinction, among which she prefers Jacobs' commitment to recognising the "different aspirations of different kinds of television."³⁵ For Cardwell, nevertheless, some television elicits "strong engagement, intense viewer proximity and concentrated attention," and this might "be able to withstand the kinds of critical pressure that we normally apply to other artworks".³⁶ As my discussion of *The Sopranos* demonstrates, I agree that endeavouring to define quality television as anything more than personal preference requires close textual attention. And the conventions of textual analysis clearly favour complex narrative forms. But this remains contentious because it seems to sacrifice attention to television as a field irreducible to texts.

TV Taste

In the 2012 third edition of his textbook, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, Jonathan Bignell first included a section on "Television and Quality", replacing a previous chapter on "Postmodern Television."³⁷ His definition of quality television there exemplifies the expansion of critical attention to a form of television that manifests "good taste". According to Bignell, quality television is:

³² Yacowar, *Sopranos on the Couch*, 17-18.

³³ Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?," 73. See Jacobs, "Issues of Judgement."

³⁴ Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?," 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75-76; Jacobs, "Issues of Judgement," 431.

³⁶ Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?," 75-76; Jacobs, "Issues of Judgement," 431.

³⁷ Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 165ff.

- an aesthetically ambitious programme with the literary values of creative imagination, authenticity and relevance, by comparison with what are seen as generic, conventional television productions
- production processes that prioritise strong writing and innovative mise-en-scene
- economically valuable television, which valuable viewers (relatively wealthy and educated social groups) enjoy and are willing to pay for.³⁸

These criteria need to be considered together, for which “taste” offers a critical tool.

Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological account of taste and distinction is useful for understanding how some cultural forms accrue more value than others. For Bourdieu, all cultural objects and practices, regardless of their formal singularity, are distinguished by social meanings:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.³⁹

We can connect this argument about the social work done by expressions of taste with Louis Althusser’s argument about “interpellation”, which has often been adapted to media studies to suggest that audiences are “hailed” by a text and defined by their acknowledgement that they are being addressed.⁴⁰

These theories are usually discussed together under the umbrella of ideology theory. A key example for television studies is Stuart Hall’s essay, “Encoding/Decoding”, where he describes the audience as both “source” and “receiver” of the television message because viewers must take up a discursive position from which to decode it.⁴¹ Using television to discuss how ideologies are sustained, Hall maps three different viewing/listening positions.⁴² In the “dominant-hegemonic position”, a viewer “takes the connotated meaning . . . full and

³⁸ *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 179.

³⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 6.

⁴⁰ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

⁴¹ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 132, 36.

straight,” and “operat[es] inside the dominant code”.⁴³ In the case of “negotiated code”, the viewer recognizes hegemonic definitions as “in dominance” but mixes hegemonic and oppositional elements and adaptively makes their own “ground rules”.⁴⁴ Finally, in the case of “oppositional code”, a viewer can perfectly “understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse” but “retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference”.⁴⁵ Television viewers are certainly not themselves so neatly categorised, but television production clearly operates with such ideas about viewers.

Althusser, a central influence on Hall’s argument, posits as a Marxist truism that every social formation helps reproduce the conditions that produced it.⁴⁶ But the “point of view of production” can be difficult to discern because of its “tenacious obviousness” and integration “into our everyday ‘consciousness’“. Television and other forms of “communication” would be more purely ideological “apparatuses” than institutions like education that, for Althusser, overtly train and discipline subjects, but it must belong to this integrated system. And this system grounds Althusser’s influential theory of interpellation, by which individuals recognized themselves as subjects addressed by a representation and become part of the “category of subject” defined by it.⁴⁷

These are important reference points for Raymond Williams’ account of television mentioned earlier.⁴⁸ Regardless of whether the flow-model proposed by Williams has become outdated, his argument also emphasises that programming is tied to its industrial production. But it rejects the kind of ideological analysis proposed by Hall. Williams insists that television cannot be homogenised into a singular apparatus – not as a coherent field of texts, genres and networks, and still less as an industry. If meanings are multiplied at the level of the televisual text and its reception, as Hall acknowledges, then for Williams we must ask how they are collapsed back into a single meaning at the level of social reproduction. He notes that “Since television became a popular social form there has been widespread discussion of its effects” in which critics sought “cause and effect identifications of its agency in social and cultural

⁴³ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 137-38.

⁴⁶ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses".

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Television*.

change”.⁴⁹ Highly selective issues focus such interrogations, like “sex” and “violence” on the one hand and “political manipulation” and “cultural degradation” on the other, issues that are “so general . . . that it ought to be obvious that they cannot be specialized to an isolated medium”.⁵⁰ In fact, Williams argues, the fear that television might be especially ideological, should itself “be seen as an ideology: a way of interpreting general change through a displaced and abstracted cause”.⁵¹

Bourdieu insists that what people like, and what they consume, must be understood relative to a field in which people do not have equal capacity to generate value from culture. Such value is not ornamental.⁵² Differences between people’s tastes, for Bourdieu, are products of their social circumstances. To explain how culture naturalizes certain distinctions Bourdieu introduces the idea of “cultural capital”. His biggest claim for this concept is that, “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools and periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of consumers”.⁵³ However simplistic, the challenge this offers for aesthetic readings of cultural forms is important. The link between Bourdieu and Hall here is clear. The most aesthetic appreciation “presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code”.⁵⁴ But cultural capital underpins very different arguments than those made by Hall. It works to distinguish people by embodied cultural capital, describing individual and group disposition including habits like television-watching; by objectified cultural capital, which takes the form of valuable goods, like DVDs; and by institutionalized cultural capital, apparent in educational qualifications but also awards for cultural excellence.⁵⁵

Hall, Althusser and Bourdieu are often brought together by cultural studies, but it seems important that Williams thought Bourdieu’s *Distinction* an insightful critique of established Marxist cultural theory. In an essay with Nicholas Garnham, Williams argues that Bourdieu offers a fresh theory of symbolic power, including a critique of “structuralist Marxism and its associated formalist tendencies” and “a frontal assault upon all essentialist theories of cultural

⁴⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121-22.

⁵¹ Ibid., 122.

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1983), 48.

⁵³ *Distinction*, 1.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47; “The Forms of Capital.”

appropriation (taste) and cultural production (creativity), upon all notions of absolute, universal cultural values”.⁵⁶ While class and wealth limit or afford cultural resources of many kinds, Bourdieu emphasizes that “the ways in which these objective class distinctions are internalized within the habitus as differing dispositions . . . are more important”.⁵⁷

What might be called, however imprecisely, “mainstream TV” is certainly one version of the mass to which Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” is opposed. But no form specifically, ahistorically, conveys or does not convey capital for Bourdieu, or establishes its social meaning independently of a whole social field. Quality television is not an elite taste requiring extensive training to appreciate – as its successes attest. Yet it distinguishes its audience as tasteful in something like Bourdieu’s terms. The most acclaimed quality television will never be entirely equal to “the sacred sphere of culture” described by Bourdieu, but it does invest a “superiority” in those who appreciate it.⁵⁸ Quality television attempts to generate that value available to niche audiences which John Fiske calls “popular cultural capital”,⁵⁹ but it also attempts to elevate television to a status where it too can generate cultural capital.

The Quality Audience

Some definitions of quality television suggest that programs from any genre could become quality television by being produced with sufficient budgets and sufficient artistic intent. However, in the light of the framework above, I would agree with Feuer et al. that the hailing of a particular audience is also required. As Johnson suggests, definitions of quality television need to recognise industrial changes by which the “economic profitability” of television is not necessarily based on “total number of viewers” but on assessments of “the type of viewer watching”.⁶⁰ Indeed, for subscription channels, their imagined viewer is a core marketing device. Bourdieu is again relevant here, because cultural capital emphasises that status is associated with knowledge of aesthetics rather than specific aesthetic content.⁶¹ Tony Bennett applies this to television consumption in a useful way, suggesting that “arts programmes,

⁵⁶ Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture," *Media, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1980): 210.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁸ See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 7.

⁵⁹ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen & Co, 1987).

⁶⁰ Catherine Johnson, "Quality/Cult Television: The X-Files and Television History," in *The Contemporary Television Series*, ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 58.

⁶¹ See, for example, Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 381.

films and drama” occupy a cultural “legitimacy” position distinctly opposed to other television.⁶² Quality television is differentiated in just this way from watching television just to watch it.⁶³

Fiske’s concept of “popular cultural capital” attempts to counter Bourdieu’s model of cultural capital by proposing that television generates “capital” within smaller “fan” cohorts.⁶⁴ “Cult TV” exemplifies this type of consumption and is the first form in which critics discussed the quality audience.⁶⁵ Many scholars suggest that cult and quality television overlap and, in historical terms, the earliest series that seem recognisably “quality” today are also cult programs. Important examples here are *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, both of which had definitively cult audiences but hailed them in very different ways. While a program can become cult without being deemed quality, and *The X-Files* may well be a borderline case in this respect, all quality television attempts to generate that viewer engagement typical of the cult audience. But quality and cult television do not only overlap because producers have learned how to harness the power of cult attachment for quality programs.

Twin Peaks is the series that begins the period I’m focusing on, incorporating many of the conventions of contemporary quality television. While these conventions were (again) not original to the series, or even unique to it in its own time, they appeared in *Twin Peaks* so distinctly that it quickly came to represent tensions between broadcast network television’s need for reliable ratings, the artistic freedom of the television “auteur”, and the transforming field of challenging television drama. Marking the 20 year anniversary of the series, the *LA Times* named *Twin Peaks* as the “harbinger of numerous trends” important to television today, including “top film directors who now work in television regularly”, “complex, even enigmatic storylines”, “fan obsession taken to a new level via the internet”, “cinematic production values”, and “creative risk-taking”.⁶⁶

⁶² Tony Bennett, “Distinction on the Box: Cultural Capital and the Social Space of Broadcasting,” *Cultural Trends* 15, no. 2-3 (2006): 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8. Analysing data from his survey of television consumers, Bennett recognises that their genre selections represent ideas about cultural legitimacy more than actual viewing habits. Only 20% of respondents selected a “low legitimacy” genre as their most preferred and 53% selected one as their least preferred, even though viewing numbers do not support these claims about the audience of these program types. *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁴ See Fiske, *Television Culture*, 266, 25-26.

⁶⁵ On the history of defining cult television relative to both niche audiences and aesthetic innovation see Johnson, “Quality/Cult Television; Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶⁶ Michael Glitz, “‘Twin Peaks’ Revisited: ‘Maybe We Shouldn’t Have Solved the Mystery,’” *Los Angeles Times* (2010), <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/tv/return-to-twin-peaks-a-tv-landmark-20-years-later/>.

Twin Peaks was particularly notable for its demanding narrative that eschewed most expected forms of characterisation and narrative exposition, and for its auteur creator(s). It was co-created and produced by David Lynch and Mark Frost, and consistently written and sometimes directed by Lynch. Frost had been a writer on *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87), an 80s version of the “quality” cop show.⁶⁷ Lynch, however, came to *Twin Peaks* as a director of Hollywood “art” films, including *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Blue Velvet* (1986). The latter and Lynch’s *Dune* (1984) also starred Kyle MacLachlan, who played protagonist Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*. Lynch’s reputation, alongside these other connections, invested the series with artistic credibility and a reputation for creative integrity. For television of this period, *Twin Peaks*’ cinematic style is distinctive. The first season is marked by unusual stylistic continuity between episodes, including in its soundtrack, originally composed by the same artist (Angelo Badalamenti) featuring (Wagnerian) motifs for particular characters, such as Audrey’s dance theme.

The apparent novelty of *Twin Peaks* is now easy to overstate. Both Feuer et al. and Robert Thompson discuss quality television before 1990, focusing on series that transformed the genres in which they operated but the faded into narrative television’s generic background: series like *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-77), *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice* (1984-1990). Feuer describes quality television as an evolving form always relative to “trash TV” (a rhetorical claim she criticises), at the same time recognising its increasing visibility. “By the 1990s,” she notes, “Thompson was able to argue that ‘quality [drama] has become a genre in itself, complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics’”.⁶⁸ As Thompson points out, *Twin Peaks*’ appearance on ABC was in part a response to the success of more experimental kinds of television on other networks, like NBC’s *Miami Vice*, and in part an effort on the part of all major networks to “fend off the onslaught of cable competition by giving the audience something different and unexpected”.⁶⁹ Lynch’s own involvement also isn’t all that

⁶⁷ Thompson discusses the quality claims of *Hill Street Blues* in detail. Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

⁶⁸ Feuer, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV," 148.

⁶⁹ Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 152. See also Marc Dolan, "The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to/on *Twin Peaks*," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1995), 35. Like Feuer et al., Dolan emphasises the influence of MTM, the production company established by Mary Tyler Moore and her husband Grant Tinker in 1969 (see chapter three). In the 1980s MTM was responsible for producing *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*, *Newhart*, and the final

novel: “By 1990, it had become positively fashionable for big directors to create for the little screen.”⁷⁰ But Lynch was nevertheless a more “artsy director” than usually worked on television.⁷¹ Although stressing the continual obsolescence of the televisual “stamp of quality” in the decades up to and including *Twin Peaks*, Thompson argues that *Twin Peaks* “changed the face of television”.⁷² Marc Dolan agrees that although television had been through a “quality” transformation in the 80s, *Twin Peaks* fit none of its older or newer formats.⁷³

The narrative setting of *Twin Peaks* has some of the risqué edge of later quality series, initially focused on the murder of a highly sexually active, underage, drug-taking high-school girl. But this is less what makes *Twin Peaks* feel different to television around it than the surreal atmosphere of the town in which the murder investigation is set, the gradual revelation that almost every character is untrustworthy, or at least not as they seem, the often non-linear narrative, the insertion of the shockingly supernatural in an otherwise realist narrative of crime investigation, and the lack of a central point of audience identification. Kathryn Kalinak notes that a contemporary *Rolling Stone* review described *Twin Peaks* as “A savage subversion of TV’s codes”, and suggests that this was “a characterization repeated by dozens of reviewers and echoed in the perceptions of multitudes of viewers.”⁷⁴ Despite a timeslot competitor with top-rating *Cheers* (1982-1993), *Twin Peaks* was initially a ratings success, and was seen as marking a new sophistication for television. “‘Thanks to *Twin Peaks*,’ *Newsweek* reported in May, 1990, ‘trendiness’ had become ‘as simple as turning on the TV each Thursday evening – and then, at work the next day, pretending you understood what the hell was going on’.”⁷⁵ But the strong ratings dropped quickly and pressure to improve them forced changes to the intended narrative, including the revelation of Laura Palmer’s murderer early in the second season, designed to be its key secret. The series was

seasons of *Lou Grant*, among other then “quality” series. Ibid., 34; Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi, *Quality Television*, passim.

⁷⁰ Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 151. As Thompson records, while Michael Mann was working on *Miami Vice*, and prior to Lynch’s *Twin Peaks*, Steven Spielberg had a lucrative NBC contract to produce *Amazing Stories* (1985-1987), a series in which he directed several episodes and into which he brought Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, and other major directors. Robert Altman also made several films for television and a mini-series, *Tanner ‘88* (1988).

⁷¹ Ibid., 150, 52.

⁷² Ibid., 157.

⁷³ Dolan, “Peaks and Valleys,” 35.

⁷⁴ Kathryn Kalinak, “‘Disturbing the Guests with This Racket’: Music and *Twin Peaks*,” *ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁵ Quoted in David Lavery, “Introduction - the Semiotics of Cobbler: *Twin Peaks*’ Interpretive Community,” *ibid.*, 4.

shuffled between various timeslots before being cancelled at the end of season two, ending on an (unintentionally) unresolved cliff-hanger and followed only by a prequel film, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992).

The differences between *Twin Peaks* and the later series I discuss arise largely from its distribution. Its cult television impact did not necessarily serve the interests of network television. Today, a series like *Twin Peaks* would likely air on a cable network that gave significant freedom to someone like Lynch, perhaps even encouraging him to include more difficult and shocking content. It would be broadcast repeatedly at different timeslots throughout the week, widely recorded for repeat viewings, watched on the internet, and released season-by-season on DVD. Its timeslot, a significant problem for *Twin Peaks*, wouldn't be a major obstacle to its popularity and its difference would be seen as a positive feature rather than a problem as long as it could catch the attention of a niche audience.

Cult texts offer additional opportunities for profit through ancillary sales and distribution across different media through what Marsha Kinder calls "transmedia" storytelling.⁷⁶ In a post-television marketplace, what appears on screen is not all that generates value. Matt Hills stresses the importance of an "author function" in this respect.⁷⁷ Hills, among others, draws this concept from Michel Foucault's "What is An Author?" Foucault's idea is generally useful here, linking technology, law, and economy in defining authorship beyond any claims about "auteur" creators. Foucault argues that the author is a function of the text that helps distinguish it from others in a legal and economic field, which is helpful in understanding the increased importance of "creative" names to quality television.⁷⁸ As Hills argues, they work as brand names,⁷⁹ offering more compelling origins for series and setting them apart in a promotional field. Networks like HBO can establish histories of challenging television conventions, but the quality television author-function – its creators, showrunners, and array of other named creatives – more overtly draws quality television into line with auteur cinema.

⁷⁶ Marsha Kinder, "Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games," in *From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also Lynn Spigel, "Introduction," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷⁷ Matt Hills, "Cult TV, Quality and the Role of the Episode/Programme Guide," in *The Contemporary Television Series*, ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 201.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁷⁹ See Pearson, "Lost in Transition," 244-45.

Their symbolic guarantee of creative intent validates the kind of “detailed hyper-diegesis” that attracts and entertains cult fans.⁸⁰ This is as true for the quality audience, framed as something more than fans by accreditation of their good (quality) taste. In the post-network environment that has transformed quality television we thus need to pay careful attention to the ways in which this audience acquires both its television and its accreditation of quality.

⁸⁰ Hills, "Cult TV," 190-91.

2. Transforming Television Production

In a 2013 keynote address given to the Edinburgh Television Festival, actor Kevin Spacey discussed the success and importance of *House of Cards*, an original series in which he stars and helped co-produce, released by digital streaming company Netflix.⁸¹ Spacey insists that Netflix was a better outlet for *House of Cards* than more traditional television networks because it didn't require them to make a pilot. "We wanted to tell a story that would take a long time to tell", Spacey said, and making a pilot obstructs this with the requirement to establish characters, "create arbitrary cliffhangers, and basically prove that what you're setting out to do is going to work". He also praised the Netflix model of releasing a whole season at once for download. In the contemporary media environment, Spacey claimed, "the audience wants control" and Netflix has learned the lesson "that the music industry didn't learn" regarding "piracy": "Give people what they want, when they want it, in the form they want it in, at a reasonable price, and they'll more likely pay for it rather than steal it."⁸²

Spacey also asks whether "13 hours watched as one cinematic whole" is "really different from a film?": "If you're watching a film on your television is it no longer a film?"; "If you watch a TV show on your iPad is it no longer a TV show?" He suggests such categories are now "useless... except perhaps to agents and managers and lawyers who use these labels to conduct business deals." Spacey's questions return me to the increasingly problematic distinction between cinema and television and, considering the success of *House of Cards*, to a context where it is increasingly viable for award-winning movie names to engage not just in television production but in the outer online reaches of television.

Quality Television Viewing

When Jonathan Bignell added a chapter on quality television to his television studies textbook (see chapter one), he also revised a chapter on "Shaping Audiences" into a less "culture industry"-oriented chapter re-titled "Television Audiences" and replaced "Television

⁸¹ Kevin Spacey, "James Mactaggart Memorial Lecture at the Edinburgh Television Festival," Youtube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0ukYf_xvgc. See also <http://allthingsd.com/20130826/kevin-spacey-goes-all-house-of-cards-on-hollywood-video/>.

⁸² *House of Cards*' co-producer and sometime director David Fincher takes a similar tone. When it comes to "small screen episodic storytelling, or, as it has mostly been known, TV-viewing", "the world of 7:30 on Tuesday nights, that's dead... the captive audience is gone." Fincher quoted in Robert Abele, "Playing with a New Deck," *DGA Quarterly* 1301, <http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1301-Winter-2013/House-of-Cards.aspx>.

and Everyday Life” with “Beyond Television”.⁸³ These changes together indicate an historical intimacy between quality television and new ways of watching television. In the present context, I argue, the television audience should generally be thought of as *acquiring* televisual content rather than simply having television *distributed* to them. Through recording, DVD collection, torrenting, online streaming and other forms of access, the television viewer, and particularly the quality television viewer, can seek out and arrange television for themselves rather than relying on airtimes and cross promotion within network flow. The quality marker is important here because these modes of acquisition require individuals to commit time and other resources to television recognising that, in return, it offers cultural capital.

Ease of access is crucial to the model of televisual flow devised by Raymond Williams and centring textbooks like Bignell’s earlier editions. According to this model, television cannot be viewed as a set of discrete products because of its continuous singular presence in the home.⁸⁴ Amanda Lotz stresses the technological dimensions of the post-network revolution by which cable channels and video players, supplemented by video/DVD box sets, online viewing, and DVR devices, decentred this television experience.⁸⁵ For Lotz, the network era is characterised by “a domestic, nonportable medium used to bring the outside world into the home”, within which “shows were available only at appointed times in a routinized daily sequence of programming”.⁸⁶ For this form of television, viewing “was largely a home-based, shared experience”.⁸⁷ But the expansion of television recording and player devices “transformed television from a ‘flow’ of content that was available only at a particular moment to individual programs that could be reordered, saved and re-viewed at will”.⁸⁸ Post-broadcast sales became crucial and the possibility of selling television for domestic re-viewing and display enabled series that offered return on production investment long after they were first screened.

⁸³ Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies; An Introduction to Television Studies*.

⁸⁴ Williams, *Television*, 87.

⁸⁵ Lotz, *Television Will Be Revolutionized*. Green explains that “The medium” of broadcast television responded to the VCR and the cable revolution” by wrapping cable into its operating definition, balancing niche broadcasting strategies and rolling, off-season series premieres, making use of the DVD as a viable platform for post-broadcast sales and (slowly) extending the site of narrative construction and television branding beyond the television set” Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 96.

⁸⁶ Amanda D. Lotz, “What Is U.S. Television Now?,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625, no. 1 (2009): 50.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

A core difference of television since the 1990s is this increasing prevalence of watching “off-air”. But new conceptions of television viewers and viewing practices have continued to appear since. Dedicated and community-oriented fandom is a long-standing TV-viewer practice which scholars like Joshua Green describe as “a model for the sorts of behaviours and modes of engagement new television supports”.⁸⁹ Once “alternative” viewing, this is now continuous with “binge viewing”, online streaming, and torrent culture. A history of television technology is beyond my scope, but this chapter focuses on relations between audience, technology and text that characterise this post-broadcast form of quality television.

Television studies scholars have often discussed fan practices, from chat channels and online bulletin boards through to official discussion forums.⁹⁰ But they have not yet extensively considered new mediated relations to television like torrenting. For example, there is little material on collective contiguous online viewing, for which release times do matter but might involve ripped-and-uploaded-times rather than air-times. An exception is Green’s discussion of how “new television services” relate to the expectations of flow. For Green, the “rise of video-sharing as one of the ‘killer apps’ of the second internet boom, alongside the emergence of the BitTorrent file protocol” questioned “the viability of” broadcast television.⁹¹ These developments throw “into sharp relief the transnational communities in which content circulates outside of the narrowly ‘global’ distribution systems managed by international licensing, release windows and DVD region coding”.⁹² In short, an increasingly large number of television viewers do not watch their preferred shows on a television, or if they do it’s as a screen to view content downloaded or streamed from the internet or purchased from a store.

Thanks to torrenting and other online practices, a significant percentage of quality series viewing is technically illegal and clearly in conflict with standard profit systems for broadcasters. Thinking back to Bignell’s definition of quality television and Spacey’s account

⁸⁹ Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 103.

⁹⁰ See for example, Nina Baym’s work on early soap opera fan communities and Henry Jenkins’s discussion of the influence of online TV communities. Nina Baym, *Tune in, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (London: Sage, 2000); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁹¹ Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 95. See also Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes, “The Audience Is Dead; Long Live the Audience!,” *Critical Studies in Television* 1, no. 1 (2006): 49.

⁹² Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 96.

of post-television viewers, it must be conceded that the quality audience is not necessarily willing to pay for its television, at least not in the usual way. Many of the most widely torrented series are those labelled “quality”, and quality fans widely engage in online circulation and discussion of television texts. Such practices are now too widespread to be convincingly sectioned off as cult fandom and thus distinguished from the ordinary television audience.⁹³ Quality television not only crosses many borders between popular and high culture, it also bypasses many of the international borders around which television has traditionally been organised.⁹⁴ What is often called television “piracy” may thus be as important as any other aspect of quality television today.

Game of Thrones has been cited as the most torrented television program in the world.⁹⁵ When Australia has been singled out as a torrenting centre and discussed in relation to problems of delayed international access to television, *Game of Thrones* has been a central example.⁹⁶ Torrenting, however, is first of all about participation in networks of communication, and the torrenting/piracy “problem” is not just a matter of avoiding international barriers to quickly acquire content, because it is also widely practiced where network access *is* available. At present, DVR machines, mobile and other online access channels like “HBO Go”, and online streaming clients like Netflix and Hulu are the legal equivalents of torrenting, although some conform more closely to the network model than others.

⁹³ Ibid., 103. If it is still possible to discuss *Game of Thrones* as “cult” television and as a “cult” hit (see, for example, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2316246/Why-Game-Of-Thrones-latest-American-cult-classic-see.html>), this discourse seems far less appropriate to most other series I discuss.

⁹⁴ For relevant discussion beyond my scope here see Graeme Turner, “Television and the Nation: Does It Matter Any More?,” in *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (New York: Routledge, 2009), 103.

⁹⁵ See, for example, <http://screenrant.com/most-pirated-tv-shows-game-of-thrones-2012/>. *Game of Thrones* is estimated at millions of torrent downloads per episode, comparable to its total television viewers in the U.S., albeit spread over a longer period, and more than 80% of those downloads are from non-U.S. residents. Torrentfreak in June 2013 still ranked *Game of Thrones* as the #1 torrented series, at over 5 million downloads per episode (<http://torrentfreak.com/top-10-most-pirated-tv-shows-of-the-season-130622/>) and claimed that the season three finale (s03e12 “Mhysa”) was downloaded over 1 million times in a single day and shared by over 170,000 people at once, both of which it claims as records (<http://torrentfreak.com/games-of-thrones-season-finale-sets-new-piracy-record-130610/>).

⁹⁶ This was extensively discussed in the Australian media during the first release screening of *Game of Thrones*. See <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/downloads-dont-matter-20130226-2f36r.html> and <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/stop-stealing-game-of-thrones-says-us-ambassador-to-australians-20130427-2ilam.html>. Important figures in the production of *Game of Thrones* have commented on the role torrenting plays in creating a “cultural buzz” around the series and on the need for networks to meet viewer demand for more uniform broadcast times to reduce “piracy”.

New broadcast networks dedicated to quality television are still appearing, including Foxtel's channels for "premium drama" in Australia, "SoHo" and "Showcase", which screen more or less exclusively quality series. Showcase screens current series at special times, when available, as part of Foxtel's "Express from the US" campaign designed to help counter the high rate of television piracy in Australia. Executive Brian Walsh states:

we have always said watch what you want when you want and now, more than ever before, we can say watch with the world. Ignoring the audience demand for shortening the delivery windows is only serving to stimulate piracy, which as an industry we are compelled to quash.⁹⁷

The result is that American quality series are broadcast on Australian pay-TV within hours of U.S. broadcasts. In Australia, a premiere episode of *Game of Thrones* screens in the early afternoon, something that would never happen in the traditional television delivery mode that scheduled top series in "prime time". According to Lotz, this is TV content breaking free of the "schedule".⁹⁸ Such fast-track screenings in Australia have extended in recent months to other Foxtel channels and also to other networks and less quality-oriented series.

This new context gives added force to Spacey's questions with which I began. If only a limited portion of its audience watches *Game of Thrones* on a television, if many download it onto a computer, and if it's not available on a meaningfully restricted schedule, what makes *Game of Thrones* a television series apart from the fact that HBO owns the rights to distribute it? It's then also worth asking, as Anne Friedberg does, what element of the film format makes movies on television "movies".⁹⁹ If it is the long-form single "cinematic" narrative alone then we must ask what makes the thirteen-hour single-release first season of *House of Cards* "television"?

The means by which a television series is consumed affects whether or not it will be conceived as quality. Bignell concludes his new section on "Quality and Television" with a discussion of *The Wire*, noting that it took a long time to appear in the U.K and then appeared on the satellite channel FX rather than a terrestrial network. The end result was that relatively few British viewers saw it on "television" rather than as a DVD box set or as a repeat on a

⁹⁷ See <http://www.foxtel.com.au/whats-on/foxtel-insider/express-from-the-us-be-part-of-the-revolution-on-foxtel-197994.htm>.

⁹⁸ Lotz, "U.S. Television Now," 56.

⁹⁹ Friedberg, "The End of Cinema." See my introduction.

narrowcast channel. The availability of these forms is a condition for quality television, facilitating its packaging as collectible art. However, Bignell doesn't mention that *The Wire* was also widely downloaded rather than purchased, or that much of the cultural capital attached to this series resulted from internet fan communities, internet criticism, and other online contexts.

The word-of-mouth, or "viral", popularity of *The Wire* also modifies the kind of example it can provide for discussing quality television as high culture. Another HBO series, *The Wire* is also routinely listed among the best television shows ever, although unlike *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* struggled to maintain ratings that justified its season-to-season renewal, even at the peak of its critical acclaim. A recent *Vulture* article by Josef Adalian indicates how complicated assessing the success of a television series has become. Networks like HBO that assess their ratings as all unique viewers of broadcasts during a week (including DVR recordings, portable device viewers, and re-runs after the initial broadcast) rather than using old air-time standards.¹⁰⁰ By their own ratings metrics, less than half of HBO's recorded viewers watch *Game of Thrones* at its official air-time of 9pm on Sunday nights.

When *The Wire*'s ratings were being debated, however, the measurement system hadn't shifted in this way, and even today they would not count "pirated" viewing, clips and links disseminated through social media, or the future impact of off-air sales.¹⁰¹ In fact, *The Wire*'s status as underappreciated work of genius has become part of its significance as a series. Gary Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones note that praise frequently situated *The Wire* outside mainstream television, with one critic claiming it existed "in a world that broadcast networks can't even find on the map, much less afford to visit".¹⁰² This marginality was partly about its content – each season centred on investigating crime and corruption in Baltimore, but focused on poor black urban protagonists who couldn't avoid getting caught up in the drama as much as on the investigators and the criminals. "Like *Twin Peaks*, *The Wire* is represented as feeling different from other television because it demands so much work of its audience. One

¹⁰⁰ Josef Adalian, "For HBO, Game of Thrones Ratings Second Only to the Sopranos," *Vulture.com*(2013), <http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/game-of-thrones-huge-ratings-chart.html>.

¹⁰¹ In addition to Adalian's discussion of changed ratings systems, Green also notes that changing practices in measuring viewership, like the adoption of the "Live-plus-three-day" model rather than the traditional viewer counting process, leads to a situation where "the audience starts to be imagined as those who view television programming, rather than necessarily constituted by those drawn together at the initial moment of broadcast". Green, "Why Do They Call It TV?," 104.

¹⁰² Ellen Gray quoted in Edgerton and Jones, "HBO's Ongoing Legacy," 319.

Emmy voter, asked why *The Wire* had never won an award, claimed it was “so multilayered, so dense... that it is practically impenetrable to new viewers”.¹⁰³ The unfamiliar language and the sheer weight of characters quickly introduced are possibly obstacles, but others are more clearly deliberate production decisions. For example, *The Wire* almost entirely avoids “previously on...” episode introductions, expecting audiences to remember important details. This slow moving, dense and demanding narrative structure has been discussed as “novelistic”,¹⁰⁴ referencing creator David Simon’s comparison of *The Wire* to serialised Victorian novels.¹⁰⁵ This claim has been rejected by others. Ted Nannicelli argues that “the show’s narrative complexity, its depth of character development, and its astute sociological insight... do not belong solely to the province of literature” and that *The Wire* actually “shows the possibility of television used as an art”.¹⁰⁶

This artfulness is inseparable from opportunities for hailing a niche audience enabled by cable television. Todd Michael Sodano quotes Simon as claiming “fragmentation” of the television audience in the post-network era is “glorious” to him, because “One of the things that makes the mass media kinda suck, as a means of really discussing anything intelligent, is that it’s a mass media. It ruins, it prevents most television entertainment from approaching the realm of literature.”¹⁰⁷ Installing television among those forms of art which can generate cultural capital does not necessarily intervene in hierarchical oppositions between the popular and art (see chapter three), and *The Wire* reinforces an opposition between art and popularity by which difficulty is integral to quality.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Todd Michael Sodano, "All the Pieces Matter: A Critical Analysis of HBO's *the Wire*" (Syracuse University, 2008), 226. It is worth remembering the generic transformation to which *The Wire* is indebted here. Haggins describes Simon’s earlier series *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-1999) as “the ‘missing link’ between the quality dramas of the 1980s, such as *Hill Street Blues*, and groundbreaking cable series unencumbered by network limitations, like *The Wire*. Bambi L. Haggins, "Homicide: Realism," in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 13.

¹⁰⁴ C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter, "I Am the American Dream: Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and America Television*, ed. T. Potter and C.W. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2009), 10.

¹⁰⁵ Klein suggests that *The Wire* is Dickensian insofar as it uses melodramatic techniques to discuss significant social issues and expose injustices in “a time of interlinked social crises” (178) while also subverting those melodramatic standards in many ways. For example, in the first season, D’Angelo’s decision to take a twenty-year prison sentence rather than become a police informant gives a morally ambiguous ending to his individual story and undermines any chance of “justice” for the major “bad guys”. Even this resolution is kept at a distance from the viewer, revealed through secondary sources without any cathartic scene ending D’Angelo’s story (s01e13 “Sentencing”, s02e02 “Collateral Damage”). To press the point, even the central detective McNulty is frustrated by these events. When D’Angelo’s later dies in prison (s02e06, “All Prologue”) McNulty discovers he was murdered, but finds no one powerful is interested in this fact.

¹⁰⁶ Ted Nannicelli, "It's All Connected: Televisual Narrative Complexity," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and America Television*, ed. T. Potter and C.W. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2009), 192.

¹⁰⁷ Simon cited as “personal communication” in Sodano, "All the Pieces Matter," 4.

Discussion of *The Wire*'s "quality" is routinely joined to discussion of the poor ratings which fed constant rumours of its cancellation.¹⁰⁸ Every season was marked by debates about its renewal. Reasons offered for its relative failure include all the listed obstacles to its easy consumption and, according to Simon, even its predominantly black cast.¹⁰⁹ Although the obvious comparison for *The Wire*'s ratings was *The Sopranos*, Simon chooses instead to compare it to a network timeslot competitor: "'Desperate Housewives' is pretty. I'm not about pretty." This opposition to mainstream television combined with its critical acclaim has helped *The Wire* become one of the iconic texts representing HBO's rise to dominance in the field of quality television. As Sodano suggests, "*The Wire* was not bringing in many new subscribers to HBO but was contributing to the 'buzz' the channel thrives on".¹¹⁰ *The Wire*'s current status, dependent on sustained DVD sales and critical reputation, exemplifies on-going renegotiation of how television is accessed and how the success of a quality series is assessed.

Quality Networks

It is not enough to say that the rise to prominence of cable television made niche programming possible. The history of such channels is one of constant adaptation. Many of the earliest cable channels and those with the clearest brand dominance – including MTV and the Cartoon Network – have been subject to what is sometimes called "channel drift" or, when it marks a struggle to maintain an audience, "network decay". 'Quality' networks like HBO and AMC are also prominent examples. As Edgerton and Jones note, before *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) transformed the profile of HBO it had been characterised by unspecialised programming from *Real Sex* (1990-2009) to boxing. In 2008, Jay Black defined "channel drift" in discussing the shift of cable channel A&E away from "the arts" niche to more general programming. But his closing example is more telling. He

¹⁰⁸ The Vulture.com (<http://www.vulture.com/2012/03/drama-derby-finals-the-wire-vs-the-sopranos.html>) and *Entertainment Weekly* (<http://insidetv.ew.com/2013/07/01/the-wire-lawrence-gilliard-chad-coleman/>) assessments reflect a general mainstream media evaluation, supported by *Time* and *Newsweek*.

¹⁰⁹ Marisa Guthrie, "'The Wire' Fears HBO May Snip It," *New York Daily News*(2004), <http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/entertainment/wire-fears-hbo-snip-article-1.608149>.

¹¹⁰ Sodano, "All the Pieces Matter," 4.

signs off: “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go set my TiVo to record *Breaking Bad* on the American Movie Classics channel.”¹¹¹

If HBO’s conversion to a brand synonymous with quality original programming is a structured marketing move, the re-invention of “American Movie Classics” as “AMC” is more like channel drift. Operating from 1984 as a channel dedicated to classic black and white movies with no commercials, the name AMC emerged in 2002 as a re-branding exercise could encompass colourised and more recent films and thus aid the addition of advertising. The success of the channel’s subsequent original series, including *Mad Men* (2007—), *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead* (2010—) have made AMC a staple quality channel. In his account of AMC taking up *Mad Men*, Edgerton stresses creator Matt Weiner’s individual commitment to selling the series from a pilot script but also indicates that the success of *The Sopranos* encouraged Weiner to think *Mad Men* was possible.¹¹² When no channel seemed willing to produce it Weiner sent the script to David Chase, who hired him to work on *The Sopranos*. But HBO wouldn’t sign *Mad Men* on without an authorising star creative like Chase himself.¹¹³ In the end, *Mad Men* was backed on AMC by a Canadian company specialising in “the cable-and-satellite sector’s renaissance in original programming”,¹¹⁴ and it enabled AMC’s conversion into a quality narrowcaster that now rivals HBO.

HBO’s most successful drama series at present are *True Blood* (2008—), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010—), *Game of Thrones*, *The Newsroom* (2012—), and *Girls*, competing on AMC with *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men* and *The Walking Dead*.¹¹⁵ These series’ availability across multiple formats, including fast-release DVD box-sets and fast-track international distribution, is key to their success. *The Wire* was too early for the forms of torrent culture that might have elevated its cultural buzz to the pitch of enthusiasm now circulating around such series. In the

¹¹¹ Jay Black, “TV 101: Channel Drift (or, What the Hell Happened to a&E?),” *The Huffington Post* (2008), <http://www.aoltv.com/2008/01/21/tv-101-channel-drift-or-what-the-hell-happened-to-aande/>.

¹¹² Gary R. Edgerton, “The Selling of *Mad Men*: A Production History,” in *Mad Men*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton (London: I B Tauris, 2011), 4.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁵ The key production difference between them is that AMC is presently “basic cable”, while HBO is “premium cable”. This means AMC, part of general cable packages rather than requiring special selection, has stricter programming restrictions on violent and sexual content. This led to fan concerns, when *The Walking Dead* was announced as an AMC production, that the series wouldn’t be able to include the violence and gore of the comics. It also enables what is often seen as gratuitous nudity and sexual content on *Game of Thrones*.

middle of its on-air release, Clive Thompson wrote an article on “The BitTorrent Effect” which is now a much-cited source for defining the technology. Speculating on the consequences torrenting would have for television, he quotes the founder of *Entertainment Weekly*: “Blogs reduced the newspaper to the post. In TV, it’ll go from the network to the show.”¹¹⁶ Thompson suggests torrenting could transform, “The whole concept of must-see TV . . . from being something you stop and watch every Thursday to something you gotta check out right now, dude. Just click here.” His prediction that “the network of the future will resemble Yahoo! Or Amazon.com – an aggregator that finds shows, distributes them in P2P video torrents, and sells ads or subscriptions to its portal” proved fairly accurate, but may not have been ambitious enough.¹¹⁷ Netflix, which in 2005 was primarily an online DVD-hire company, uses streaming rather than peer-to-peer file-sharing, but it clearly works as a content aggregator. But it is now also responsible for producing original series like *House of Cards*, and its success has inspired new rivals like Amazon Studios.

Discourse on quality television consistently emphasises fan viewing practices and the transmedia and cross-platform circulation of texts generating new value for television.¹¹⁸ Henry Jenkins’ analysis of an early online (UseNet) community that formed around *Twin Peaks* describes how “those who missed episodes scrambled to find other local fans who would make them copies” and others “sought to translate PAL tape copies of the European release (with its alternative ending) into American Beta and VHS formats”.¹¹⁹ Jenkins quotes a fan asking what it would be like if *Twin Peaks* had appeared “before VCRs or without the net? It would have been Hell!” For Jenkins, “Lynch’s cryptic and idiosyncratic” narrative invited a “close scrutiny and intense speculation enabled by the fans’ access to these technological resources”.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Clive Thompson, “The Bittorrent Effect,” *Wired*, no. 13.01 (2005), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.01/bittorrent.html>. Green agrees that the “quintessential object traded across new television sites” is the “unbundled” or “dis-embedded” television program, “disconnected from larger organising structures or content flows” Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 97.

¹¹⁷ Thompson, “The Bittorrent Effect”. 3.

¹¹⁸ See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture; Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Media Consumers in a Digital Age* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹¹⁹ “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?: Alt.TV.Twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery,” in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1995), 54.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

I think “binge viewing” needs to be put in this context, whether it involves viewing through DVD collections, through recording clients that accumulate episodes, or within torrent culture. As television has become less dependent on advertising revenue to be financially viable, nightly viewership has become less important to budgets or measurements of success. Even if the highest rating broadcast series are not presently quality television, those that are most successful on DVD, as downloads, or on Netflix, often are. These forms of access to television line up *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *House of Cards* as series representing different kinds of content acquisition unified by the transformation called “quality television”. *The Wire* represents the survival of quality series despite low ratings through a critical buzz that imbued its network with cultural status and fed post-broadcast sales. Presently, at the end of its final season, *Breaking Bad* exemplifies both torrent culture’s coming of age and a new emphasis on the artistic potential of television.

Like most quality series, *Breaking Bad* prominently names its creator (Vince Gilligan, who also wrote for *The X-Files*). It utilises challenging story-telling methods, edgy content, and a focus on quality cinematography, acting and writing, offering what would be restricted material on a broadcast network in, at turns, a grittily realistic or a highly stylised manner. Like *Twin Peaks*, it requires active interpretative engagement from the audience by leaving significant plot developments unexplained, or at least rewarding the properly dedicated viewer with a more fulfilling viewing experience. Central protagonist Walter White’s transformation from responsible but largely unimpressive family man to successful and eventually terrifying gangster is slow and understated for most of the series. I’ll discuss Walt more fully in chapter three, but this form of character development not only provides an example of narrative layering like *The Sopranos*, and seems to pose a barrier to casual consumption as in *The Wire*, but also works to hail dedicated fan communities. Watching the final episodes being screened as I write this thesis, *Breaking Bad* fans are frequently detecting and discussing early signs of Walt’s sociopathic behaviour, such as his tendency to “take” something as subtle as a preference for sandwiches without crusts or whiskey “neat” instead of on the rocks from everyone he kills. Recalling Jenkins’ and Green’s arguments, this pattern was impossible to detect when the early episodes first aired and remain obscure without access to communities of discussion and speculation that share detailed exegesis.¹²¹

¹²¹ See, among many examples, this thread from the dedicated fan-wiki for *Breaking Bad*: <http://breakingbad.wikia.com/wiki/Thread:8285>.

Such slow storytelling is characteristic of quality television, but it is also important that the careful viewing needed to collate such suggestions into character development is aided by binge-viewing practices and collective fan discussion.

Another significant aspect of *Breaking Bad* as a quality series is the increasing star power of Bryan Cranston. Largely a television actor, Cranston worked on *Hill Street Blues*, had a recurring role on *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), and had his first lead role as a hapless father in the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006). But his lead role in *Breaking Bad* made Cranston a star – and not just a TV star. Since *Breaking Bad* began, he has been cast in significant dramatic films, including *Drive* (2011) and *Argo* (2012), and accrued a previously unusual degree of acclaim for a television actor. Television acting has generally been seen as inferior to film acting, but the fact that Cranston has now won the Emmy for “Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series” three times has very different resonance in the era of quality television than it did even in the days of *Hill Street Blues*. The attentive and repeated viewing required to piece together Walt’s story also requires close attention to Cranston’s delivery.

Popular narrative television has shifted from an air-time experience to something acquired by viewers according to the preferences of their own social networks. Series are produced with release-for-convenience in mind at the same time as premiere screenings and on-air repeats are considered. Binge viewing is now a standard viewing mode.¹²² Quality television’s present visibility is partly due to discussion of this new emphasis in TV consumption, within which the same series are always mentioned. Austin Carr’s criticism of Netflix’s decision to release *House of Cards* as an entire season celebrates binge-viewing as a celebratory “campfire moment” which sustains interest in a series.¹²³ His examples are all quality standards: *Breaking Bad*, *Friday Night Lights* (2006—), *Game of Thrones*, and *Mad Men*. Conspicuously absent are higher airtime-rating, and often more tormented, network series like

¹²² Caldwell and Green claim that “programming strategies have shifted from notions of network program ‘flows’ to tactics of audience/user ‘flows’” promoted as offering greater user control. Green, “Why Do They Call It TV?,” 102. In 2013, Harris Interactive produced a survey of television viewing habits that claims 62% of Americans are “binge” television viewers, with this tendency being more common the younger the demographic surveyed (<http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/television/half-of-americans-binge-view-tv-shows-28647/>).

¹²³ Austin Carr, “Why You Won’t Be Having a Binge-Viewing Party for Netflix’s “House of Cards,”” *Fast Company* (2013), <http://www.fastcompany.com/3005273/why-you-wont-be-having-binge-viewing-party-netflixs-house-cards>.

The Big Bang Theory (2007—) that are not considered “quality”.¹²⁴ These series may be distributed using the same technologies. They may be extensively discussed in online communities, although possibly not in the same ones. But regardless of which shows are watched this way, binge-viewing and torrenting are perceived, within the television industry and without, as part of the quality television transformation.

Spacey’s speech looks back at these changes and predicts more transformation to come. *House of Cards* is designed to be shown on computer screens, although technically able to be transported to television screens if viewers choose that. Not straightforwardly television, it is also not straightforwardly a “series”, released in episodic sections of a form longer than cinema. Given this, *House of Cards* could be said to have televisual chapters rather than episodes. But like the new commissioned seasons of the cult cable comedy hit *Arrested Development* (2003-2013) also on Netflix, *House of Cards* is consistently discussed as television, reviewed as television and nominated for television awards.¹²⁵ Its clear similarities to other quality series and its placement as potential binge-viewing material seem, more than anything else, to make *House of Cards* “television”. Its packaging into episodes distinguishes it from film. Unlike film, “television” encourages flexibility concerning how much of a narrative is viewed at once. Binge viewing may be encouraged but it is not required. Viewers are welcome to dedicate just one episode’s worth of time to *House of Cards* rather than thirteen,¹²⁶ and such partial viewing would be far more unorthodox for film.

I want to conclude this chapter by turning to Williams’ and his account of the relation between technology and society. Williams distinguishes between claims that “Television was invented as a result of scientific and technical research” because “Its power as a medium of

¹²⁴ The “torrent-freak” torrent tracker list of the most torrented television shows includes *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Fringe*, and *House*. Only the latter conforms in any significant way to the conventions of contemporary U.S. quality television I’ve been outlining here, and then only in part.

¹²⁵ *House of Cards* is billed as a “remake” of a British network television series, screened on the BBC in 1990. Substantial changes were made to this narrative to adapt it to the U.S., and these changes also locate it within the conventions for contemporary U.S. quality television.

¹²⁶ As Roettgers points out, Netflix does not release viewership data, claiming that “the absolute number of people who tune into a single episode doesn’t matter all that much”. Roettgers explains that “Netflix is looking to cultivate dedicated niche audiences, and is paying very close attention to the ways its subscribers are interacting with each piece of content. If they watch an episode of a show, are they opting to watch the second one as well? If they go from watching a movie to a TV show episode, does it fit into a pattern that lets you predict about what they’re going to watch next?” Janko Roettgers, “Netflix’s Decision to Renew Hemlock Grove Shows Its Algorithms Are Working,” *PaidContent*(2013), <http://paidcontent.org/2013/06/20/netflixs-decision-to-renew-hemlock-grove-shows-its-algorithms-are-working/>.

news and entertainment” “altered all preceding media of news and entertainment”, and opposing claims that

Television, discovered as a possibility by scientific and technical research, was selected for investment and development to meet the needs of a new kind of society, especially in the provision of centralised entertainment and in the centralised formation of opinions and styles of behaviour.¹²⁷

For Williams, both these views are mistaken because they “depend on the isolation of technology” as a “self-acting force”.¹²⁸ He argues instead that technology is never simply discovered or found to be possible but rather developed to suit existing social conditions that it affects by coming into existence. For Williams, technology is a process with “intention” and its influence on social practices is also “direct”.¹²⁹

This seems to me a promising way of understanding the impact of changing technologies on television, and one that has not been made redundant in the post-network era. I agree with Williams that “we really do not know, in any particular case, whether, for example, we are talking about a technology or about the uses of a technology”,¹³⁰ and that this ambiguity doesn’t need to be resolved because the “very complex interaction between new needs and new inventions” needs to be maintained.¹³¹ The way television can be broadcast changes audience expectations and thus the types of television produced change, but the methods for creating and distributing television also change as audiences demand an evolution of the form to meet new social situations. Technological changes and viewing cultures are equally integral to this situation and what seem to be distinctly aesthetic and industrial attributes of the quality television field are equally involved.

Finally, flow also needs to be kept in mind. We shouldn’t forget that Spacey’s provocations are only addressing some kinds of television. It is still entirely possible to watch television within a televisual flow. Despite the influence of DVR devices, much television is still

¹²⁷ Williams, *Television*, 3-4. Television approached in the former, technologically determinist way, presumes that “the steam engine, the automobile, television, the atomic bomb, have made modern man and the modern condition”. Ibid., 5. The other argument suggests that technology is symptomatic of society, “a by-product of a social process that is otherwise determined. It only acquires effective status when it is used for purposes which are already contained in this known social process”. Ibid., 6.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹³¹ Ibid., 8.

watched live and “in flow”. And many aspects of post-broadcast television are used to reinforce the importance of flow, including the use of online social media and specialised websites to aid fan discussion and viewer engagement. Many network strategies aim to reinforce the importance of broadcast air-time against other tendencies of the post-broadcast environment. Post-television options for viewing have transformed what television means but also remain a fairly exclusive practice. Viewer-driven content acquisition outside of any televisual flow appears to be more prevalent with reference to quality television, but such practices have not (or not yet) transformed the way most viewers view most television.

3. Serious Television and Genre Hybridity

The label “quality television” sounds like a value judgement rather than a genre *per se*. Nevertheless, as indicated in chapter one, many television studies scholars treat quality television as a genre in its own right. In the end, this is only possible if quality television is grouped by particular conventions rather than by simply being “better”. In this final chapter I want to consider two connected aspects of contemporary U.S. quality television which differently approach this question: its hybridisation of existing genres, and its perhaps paradoxical reliance on sustaining genre hierarchies.

First, however, I need to return Robert Thompson’s argument that the “quality” marker in television is constantly disappearing in the historical evolution of TV genres. Thus, what Jane Feuer sees as criteria for quality television in the 1970s are displaced by new criteria as the innovation of series like *Mary Tyler Moore* disappears into new standards for sitcoms and drama. These too were displaced as “the revolutionary shows of the early-and-mid-1980s” became “the prototypes for . . . yet another set of predictable formulas”.¹³² According to Thompson, “quality” is an ever-changing marker of difference, but one that is ultimately fleeting. Series that once had the stamp of quality because they renovated recognisable genres, such as *Hill Street Blues*’ new take on the cop show, soon become the mainstream television from which quality television must differentiate itself. As Feuer argues, quality television “always claims to be original in relation to the regular TV norms of its era”.¹³³ Quality in this sense is a way of discussing how some television series inspire genre transformation. But the quality television that I’ve described emerging since the early 1990s is different. Standing out as a new interpretation of a genre is no longer enough for a show to qualify as quality. While this is partly about the ways in which quality television is now acquired and used (see chapter two), it is also about how it is *symbolically* invested in meeting the criteria of television “art” and *formally* concerned with drawing attention to the limits of television.

¹³² Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 149.

¹³³ Feuer, “HBO and the Concept of Quality TV,” 147.

Genre Hybridity

As Jason Mittell explains, no television text is assigned to a genre without cross-referencing other texts: “Audiences link programs together all the time – ‘*Family Guy* ... is just a rip-off of *The Simpsons*’ – as do industrial personnel – ‘*Roswell* ... is *Dawson’s Creek* ... meets *The X-Files*.’”¹³⁴ John Frow suggests that the relations between genres always resemble the “varying and unstable division of functions between shops”, which only work because, despite changes and wide variations, “we already know where to go to buy what we need”.¹³⁵ Certainly, genre communicates by recognition, ensuring that not everything has to be explained in every communication. But at some point in the history of any genre (and perhaps not of any shop) it becomes so recognisable as to be cliché, and the audience must be credited with an advanced knowledge that can be as tiresome as pleasurable.

Along with distinguishing itself as edgy television through risqué and violent content, what was perhaps most striking about *The Sopranos* given its generic position as gangland drama was the relative lack of violent action. Individual episodes are more likely to include long therapy sequences or family dinner scenes focused on subtle character development than any thrilling action, and violence is rarely the central focus of an episode. This clearly aligns *The Sopranos* with the new canon of gangster films it constantly references, but differentiates it from other television crime series. On the other hand, violence and profanity are more central to quality series where they can be generically disruptive, like HBO’s Western series *Deadwood* (2004-06).

Deadwood exemplifies how, as Marc Leverette argues, artistic value manifests on television in ways that defy any opposition between art and commerce, and a seemingly cosmetic or marketing-oriented distinction can mark a fundamental qualitative difference.¹³⁶ Such strategies clearly work to sell the series but are not limited, as Janet McCabe and Kim Akass suggest, to effective marketing campaigns.¹³⁷ *Deadwood* also reinvigorates the television Western, as Gary Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones point out:

¹³⁴ Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

¹³⁵ John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 127.

¹³⁶ Leverette, "Cocksucker, Motherfucker, Tits."

¹³⁷ Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Profiling Quality TV," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 89.

Profanity, nudity, and graphic violence are more than simple forms of titillation, shock, or brand differentiation for HBO. They are important by-products in its ongoing reformation of standardized television genres from the gangster to the situation comedy to the western and the documentary.¹³⁸

The examples of *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* speak less to manipulations of marketing than to quality television's dependence on genre hybridity. *The Sopranos* edgy violence and cable-only language allow it to belong to the gangland genre while its emphasis on writing, cinematography, and character development operate at the expense of that genre's expectations and hail viewers invested in cinematic quality. I would argue that this is how genre functions for all quality television, but my central example here will not be *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood* but the "high fantasy" series *Game of Thrones*.

Game of Thrones works with and against the generic expectations of high fantasy. Both HBO itself and the series' various fan communities generate cultural capital from the idea of high fantasy and reference to the author of the novels on which the series is based, George R. R. Martin. Attributing such an author-function singles out and justifies approaching the series as art and, for fantasy fans, as a coherent speculative world.¹³⁹ But one of the most notable aspects of *Game of Thrones* is that its subversion of generic fantasy television standards draws in a "quality" audience that would never usually watch that genre. This new audience was ostensibly given permission to enjoy fantasy by *Game of Thrones*' use of quality conventions, which mark it as in "good taste" no matter what other conventions it uses.

That quality television can use some of the most predictable generic conventions in series like *Game of Thrones* makes obvious something also evident in more realist series. Generic manipulation is in fact a criterion for quality television. To be visibly quality, a series beyond all else cannot be reducible to generic convention. Thompson and Catherine Johnson both argue, for example, that *The X-Files* signalled "its distinctiveness in part through its generic hybridity," which is "is particularly indicative of quality television".¹⁴⁰ Robin Nelson insists

¹³⁸ Edgerton and Jones, "HBO's Ongoing Legacy," 325.

¹³⁹ See Hills, p. 201. See also Hills p. 190-91 and Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt, "The mainstream, distinction, and cult TV", in *Cult Television*, eds. Sarah Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 27-44.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, "Quality/Cult Television," 61; Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 15.

that in *The Sopranos*, as a “mix of gangster movie, soap opera and psychological drama”,¹⁴¹ “Generic hybridity has gone beyond a device” that names target audiences to become a creative practice, “with one genre consciously played against another”.¹⁴² These hybridisations involve something more subtle than Thompson’s account of constant renovation.

Game of Thrones’ aspirations are explicit in co-creator David Benioff’s description of the series, in an interview during early production, as “*The Sopranos* in Middle Earth”.¹⁴³ Benioff doesn’t even name the series here but merely identifies its generic blend. This reference to *The Sopranos* functions as reassurance that although this series is “fantasy,” it is also “HBO”, meaning quality. Even as *Game of Thrones* claims to match the anti-genre, aesthetic standards of quality television in its writing, acting, cinematography and production (*The Sopranos*), it doesn’t stop addressing fans of transmedia fantasy hits like *Lord of the Rings* (set in “Middle Earth”).¹⁴⁴ The map of television genres reflected in Benioff’s comic contrast is even more pervasive. Actor Liam Cunningham claimed in one interview that “fantasy show” is “the last” way he would describe *Game of Thrones* by emphasising its realism:

It’s a fantasy backdrop – a very expensive backdrop – but essentially it’s a show about people in an extreme situation. It’s about betrayal, jealousy, hatred, love, family, legacy: all these wonderful things that are like the bone marrow of incredibly good drama... for any of those people who are shying away and saying, “I don’t get that *Lord Of The Rings* thing”: it’s *nothing* to do with that. Keep in mind that it’s the people who brought you *The Sopranos*, it’s the people who brought you *The Wire*.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Robin Nelson, "Quality TV Drama: Estimations and Influences through Time and Space," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 46.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Boris Kachka, "Dungeon Master: David Benioff," *New York Magazine*(2008), <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/47040/>.

¹⁴⁴ Benioff offered this description humorously, but its frequent repetition in reviews of the pilot episode and first season indicates how well it describes the series. An early article in *The Guardian*, subtitled “HBO’s epic new Sean Bean-starring series marks one of those rare points when fantasy grows up”, is also layered with versions of the claim that there’s a difference between fantasy and *Game of Thrones*. Steve Rose, "Game of Thrones: The Sopranos with Swords or Dynasty in Chainmail," *The Guardian*(2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2011/apr/15/game-of-thrones-hbo-sean-bean>.

¹⁴⁵ Jamie Millar, "Liam Cunningham Explains Why You Really Should Be Watching Game of Thrones by Now," *British GQ.com* (2012), <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2012-04/23/liam-cunningham-game-of-thrones-davos-seaworth-interview>.

Game of Thrones nevertheless is generic fantasy, depicting an imagined pseudo-medieval world that incorporates the supernatural as well as the historical. More than twenty minutes of screen-time in the penultimate episode of season two is taken up with a single battle scene. This is compatible with both “epic” fantasy and quality drama and that it was written by Martin himself heightens its author-function credibility. In general, *Game of Thrones* remains faithful to the original texts even where they breach conventions for television drama. For example, the series mirrors Martin’s decision to kill off the central point of narrative identification late in the first book/season by casting its one well-known film star (Sean Bean) in this role and following through on his execution.

Game of Thrones claims to both be and not be fantasy. Like Martin’s novels it avoids some of fantasy’s core conventions while still operating clearly within the genre. This commitment also embraces the hallmarks of quality television and its high production values are also pointedly not confined to (fantasy) special effects. The juggling of “genre” and quality addresses complex audience expectations – on the one hand for something more refined than the broad symbolic shapes and stark moral types of high fantasy and on the other for excellence in that genre. A non-quality adaptation of Martin would have paid less attention to the political and social world of the books and avoided killing off major points of narrative identification. It also would not have so spectacularly foregrounded explicit violence and sex. While often accused of gratuitousness, this focus anchors *Game of Thrones* to HBO’s rubric of pushing boundaries for televisual representation.

Rick Altman’s influential account of film genre suggests that “genres arise in one of two fundamental ways: either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements.”¹⁴⁶ Quality television seems to have few if any semantic elements specific to it, but there may be a case for its constituting a new syntactic arrangement. Setting aside production and distribution factors, the most definitive element of “quality television” is this play with genre categories. For Jonathan Bignell, a “reflexive” cinematographic and narrative style is crucial to quality television,¹⁴⁷ and I’d extend this to

¹⁴⁶ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 34.

¹⁴⁷ A “reflexive awareness that these programmes are television is crucial to their play with contrasts between excessive or unconventional *mise-en-scene* and generic narrative, characterisation and dialogue”. Jonathan

reflexive generic placement. In Altman's sense this is expressed semantically by the inclusion of multiple "lexical choices" that foreground generic contradictions. The impact of such contradictions explains why apparently conventional genres are often included in the hybridisations of quality television.

This hybridity helps to produce the cross-over marketing that Feuer et al. explain as central to quality television – inviting a double market that is both sophisticated or knowing and popular or mainstream.¹⁴⁸ That *Game of Thrones* has two audiences seems clear in fan discussion as well as in the marketing of the show. But does this mean *Game of Thrones* belongs to more than one genre or is this generic hybridity a distinct "quality" credential? It might be impossible to finally determine if quality television is a genre – whether its difference, significance and effects are generic – but it might still be useful to ask what is involved in this question. Terms like "blockbuster" or "arthouse" manage to describe clear types of film without being genres any more clearly than quality television. To say these are merely marketing categories, rather than genres, disregards the conventions by which they are identifiable to an audience. However much these are categories of taste that name an audience, they also function as genres.

Genres use a shared language to communicate with the viewer. In Stuart Hall's terms they offer codes for the translation of texts (see chapter one). While television must use genre to engage viewers with recognizable forms it often leaves room for a knowing viewer to not only recognise but also critique those forms (that is, Hall's oppositional and negotiated viewing positions).¹⁴⁹ Understanding how familiar stories and generic formations appeal, and why critiquing them also often appeals, can be clarified by Hall's argument about encoding/decoding as well as by Bourdieu's discussion of code/cipher and capital. But if both encoding and decoding disrupt the "exchange" model of communication, not all codes are equal. Some are stronger and more inflexible for being less visible. Some of the difference of quality television resides in the way it makes conventionality so visible.

Bignell, "Seeing and Knowing: Reflexivity and Quality," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I B Tauris, 2007), 170.

¹⁴⁸ Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi, *Quality Television*.

¹⁴⁹ Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 129.

Genre Hierarchy

Quality television actively reinforces an established genre hierarchy in several respects. The aesthetic claims of quality television are, as Bourdieu would insist, *relative* claims. They are relative to a definition of television as banal and everyday,¹⁵⁰ and the positioning of TV genres as “low” popular culture. Quality television is particularly difficult to describe as a genre because it depends on a series being recognized as such, rather than laying a claim by setting (as with genres like western or fantasy) or content (as with musicals or cop shows). At the edge of its field there are many border texts, which may have in some sense high production values or transgress expected conventions for television drama or generate the active audience communities expected of quality television. It remains questionable, for example, whether series like *True Blood* and *The Walking Dead* are quality television or cult TV given that they do not claim aesthetic excellence in the same way. But such series do demonstrate that the genre hierarchy reinforced by quality television is more complicated than simply favouring quality “” over cult over mainstream. The markers of quality television are more easily combined with some genres than others. It is hard to imagine even a lower-budget broadcast version of gangland drama avoiding the controversial content and morally ambiguous characterisation that have become hallmarks of quality television. On the other hand, situation comedy, with its necessary play on expected scenarios and predictable character types, must become highly specialised in order to be convincingly “quality”.

The centrality of some *ideas* to quality television might be considered through Roland Barthes’ “mythological” analysis of images.¹⁵¹ A myth, for Barthes, is a second-order signification – something that approaches ideology. Myth and genre can both be used to discuss how some expectations become more culturally ingrained than others. Quality television in its present form sets out to denaturalise a range of ideas associated with popular genres, to “shock” its audience into new expectations for the medium. While this is a recognisable structure for modern art it is a relatively new one for television. It also clearly involves the interplay of taste and distinction. My earlier discussion suggested that the shared premise of Hall, Louis Althusser, and Bourdieu is that people have tastes that feel like

¹⁵⁰ Meaghan Morris discusses the importance of this image of television to cultural studies but she also suggests how some versions of televisual banality are construed as “feminine” and others are not. Meaghan Morris, “Banality in Cultural Studies,” in *The Logics of Television*, ed. P. Mellancamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

¹⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers, 1973 ed. (London: Granada, 1957).

personal choices but are actually externally arranged. While this seems compelling at one level, and is as true of quality television as any other type, it says nothing about the differing content between which people choose and doesn't make those choices insignificant.

Barthes' conception of myth helps me discuss the not at all arbitrary *content* of quality television. Having accounted for myth as "a second-order semiological system", Barthes suggests its operation through connotated meaning enables myth to "escape" the "dilemma" of being either too obvious (full) or vague (empty) and, as a result, when "driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will naturalize it".¹⁵² The ubiquity of certain representations makes them feel natural. This mythical terrain is constantly changing but brings certain formations into view at particular times (like black French soldiers on Parisian magazine covers).¹⁵³ Contemporary quality television takes on some genres more than others, prioritising only some for its manipulation; it foregrounds the most telling myths of its moment. In my conclusion I want to explore this by discussing how post-1990 U.S. quality television is invested in interrogating masculinity.

The quality series I've mentioned in this thesis are overwhelmingly interested in unpacking conventions for representing masculinity, and in using this interrogation to undo some smooth assumptions of past television genres. In lining up myth, technology, and gender as critical tools here it is worth recalling Teresa DeLauretis's discussion of how gender works as a technology. Gender, she argues, "as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life."¹⁵⁴ Quoting Michel Foucault, DeLauretis argues that gender is "'the set of effects produced . . . ' by the deployment of 'a complex political technology'".¹⁵⁵ I want to recall her four-part insistence that gender is representational; that its representation "*is* its construction"; that this construction "goes on as busily today" as ever; and that "the construction of gender is also

¹⁵² Ibid., 128.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵⁴ Teresa DeLauretis, "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 3; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 127.

effected by its deconstruction”.¹⁵⁶ In just these ways the gender of quality television is part of its broad cultural significance.

Series like *Dexter* (2006-2013) and *Breaking Bad*, appearing in the wake of *The Sopranos*, focus on negotiating the meaning of masculinity through morally ambiguous and otherwise problematic male protagonists. Both series’ male protagonists walk a line between normative masculine behaviour and dangerous, criminal, or even sociopathic behaviour. *Dexter* presents a cartoonish exploration of what it means to be a normal human rather than a murderous psychopath, turning on literal attempts, including flashback lesson scenes, to discover how humanity, and masculinity more specifically, should be performed. *Breaking Bad* is a more realistic but still melodramatic story about the transformation of one recognisable masculine type – the underachieving, hard working non-alpha male of advancing years– into another: the dangerous criminal.

In the *Breaking Bad* pilot, Walt is an underappreciated and overqualified high school chemistry teacher who, in a different context, could represent successful masculinity. Walt is not only apparently a master of chemistry, but a caring father and husband. Yet he is ridiculed for his intellect by his immediate peers and positioned as lacking manly attributes. At his 50th birthday party, Walt’s brother-in-law Hank offers a mocking toast that acknowledges Walt has a “brain the size of Wisconsin” but jokes “we won’t hold that against you”. Walt is pressured to hold Hank’s gun, remarking that it is “heavy”, to which Hank responds “that’s why they hire men” to general laughter. This heavily foreshadows Walt’s later use of guns in the drug trade that it becomes Hank’s job to stop. In this first scene together Hank completes Walt’s humiliation by taking the beer from his hand and drinking it as he directs everyone to watch a news broadcast featuring his own police investigation. Walt’s image of positive masculinity at this time is that of a man caring and providing for his family, but this is compromised by their financial struggles, with a disabled son and a second child on the way, and then Walt’s diagnosis with terminal cancer. The series traces Walt’s move into the drug trade, ostensibly in an effort to leave money for his family, but also to craft a different kind of masculine legacy.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ DeLauretis, "Technology of Gender," 3.

¹⁵⁷ Providing for his family is quickly not enough for Walt’s ambitions. When his wife Skyler suggests he is in danger and should go to the police in “Cornered” (s04e06), he turns on her angrily: “Who are you talking to

A close reading of *Breaking Bad* could stress this situation as “failed masculinity” and/or proceed through the literature on “masculinity in crisis”, which not at all incidentally began to appear around the same time as this new phase of quality television interested in unpacking genres of masculinity. For Raewyn Connell, Hank’s performance would be “hegemonic masculinity”, enacting male social dominance by subordinating some forms of masculinity – in effect concealing important negotiations between men over what masculinity means.¹⁵⁸ In contemporary quality television no form of masculinity remains stable and certain enough to be truly hegemonic. The dislocation involved in Walt’s “breaking bad” is part of this negotiation of what kind of masculinity can effectively be sustained. The pilot also introduces Jesse, a former student turned dealer whom Walt takes on as a collaborator. Jesse is initially incredulous at Walt’s plan: “Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass... all of a sudden aged what... sixty? He’s just gonna break bad? It’s weird. It doesn’t compute.” By the fourth season, however, Walt has become an important figure in a crime world unknown to most people and the dominant force in Jesse’s life.

In a telling promotional image for *Breaking Bad* reproduced on my cover, Walt stands in a desert landscape, disheveled and partly undressed, loosely holding a gun and staring down the camera with a determined expression. He is surrounded on all four sides by the logo for the series, an RV streaming red smoke, the open blue sky, and a fallen gas mask. At the centre of the image, however, horizontally or vertically, is Walt’s plain white underwear, with his plain work-or-office shirt tucked up to expose them with obvious symbolic deliberation. This image communicates a key contradiction. The scenic environment and RV complement the character’s clothes and other signifiers to represent an ordinary middle-aged American man. This is in stark contrast to the menacing connotations of the gun, gas mask, his curious state of dress, and the smoke. While some viewers may read the superimposed title as a gloss on this image, the real impact comes from communication made at the level of myth and not signified by the language-object. The viewer is called upon to fill in the blanks and compile two conflicting myths from this arrangement of signs—Ordinary Family Man

right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year?”, concluding “I am not in danger, Skyler, I AM the danger”.

¹⁵⁸ See R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 183. See also Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 5-24.

and Gangster. Equally threatened and threatening, this unresolved contrast suggests a complex story that will centre on exposing a vulnerable place where these myths might meet and tell the same story.

The number of other series I could have chosen for this closer reading of quality television masculinity makes an important point: *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Mad Men*, *Dexter*, *Boardwalk Empire*, *The Newsroom*, *House of Cards*, *Californication* (2007—), or *Game of Thrones*. The conjunction of artistic claims and interrogated masculinity suggests that contemporary U.S. quality television is not a matter of personal preference (better television), or even marketing to a (quality) audience. It has specific, although not exclusive, tendencies as to narrative content. In reply to the popular banality often attributed to television in a feminised domestic space, the quality televisual text focuses on stressing art and discomfort at once. It could be said to de-feminise television as it un-domesticates the medium. This fits existing televisual genre hierarchies very well, especially masculine forms of drama over feminised comedy.

After the rise of quality television stretching from *The Sopranos* to *Breaking Bad* it might seem time for a similarly confronting interrogation of mythic femininity. The obvious current example seems to be HBO's *Girls*, led by creator Lena Dunham, who writes, directs, and stars in most episodes. Dunham was offered this series on the back of her success in art film festivals rather than Hollywood. But the place of *Girls* in HBO's quality stable is worth closer consideration, beginning with the way the series is discussed as an update of *Sex and the City*. Dunham has specifically addressed this:

“I knew that there was a connection because it's women in New York, but it really felt like it was tackling a different subject matter,” Dunham says. “*Gossip Girl* was teens duking it out on the Upper East Side and *Sex and the City* was women who figured out work and friends and now want to nail family life. There was this whole in between space that hadn't really been addressed.”¹⁵⁹

Squarely within HBO's commitment to boundary-pushing controversy, *Girls* is most famous for its use of sex scenes and (semi)nudity. But criticism of the series is overwhelmingly interested in its intertextual relation to other television centred on women, especially *Sex and*

¹⁵⁹ Lesley Goldberg, "Tca: Lena Dunham Says HBO's 'Girls' Isn't 'Sex and the City'," *Hollywood Reporter*(2012).

the City. This is especially relevant considering the importance of *Sex and the City* to HBO's history and its absence from lists of key quality series.

Emily Nussbaum raises some of these questions in a pair of recent articles, the first praising *Girls* as women's quality television ("For Us and By Us"), and the second claiming that the quality of *Sex and the City* has been forgotten.¹⁶⁰ Nussbaum writes:

Even as "*The Sopranos*" has ascended to TV's Mt. Olympus, the reputation of "*Sex and the City*" has shrunk and faded, like some tragic dry-clean-only dress tossed into a decade-long hot cycle. By the show's fifteen-year anniversary, this year, we fans had trained ourselves to downgrade the show to a "guilty pleasure," to mock its puns, to get into self-flagellating conversations about those blinkered and blinged-out movies. Whenever a new chick-centric series débuts, there are invidious comparisons: don't worry, it's no "*Sex and the City*," they say. As if that were a good thing. ... But "*Sex and the City*," too, was once one of HBO's flagship shows.¹⁶¹

Nussbaum sees this relegation as "stemming from an unexamined hierarchy: the assumption that anything stylized (or formulaic, or pleasurable, or funny, or feminine, or explicit about sex rather than about violence, or made collaboratively) must be inferior."¹⁶² *Sex and the City* belongs to the diversification of images of women and relations between women on U.S. television in the 1990s. As Brunsdon et al. indicate, in the 1990s "much of the current entertainment output of television feature[d] strong women, single mothers, and female friends and lovers".¹⁶³ But as Thompson might argue, Nussbaum is also forgetting the impact of *Mary Tyler Moore* stressed by Feuer et al. For Nussbaum, "MTM" is just one of the "you-go-girl types—which is to say, actual role models".¹⁶⁴ That MTM also pushed boundaries for televisual representation, especially of gender, and was creatively controlled by Moore herself in significant ways, is now even more invisible in accounting for quality television.

While the girls in *Girls* also talk a lot about sex, the series courts controversy in other ways. The four central girl characters are less wealthy, younger, "edgier", and generally the anti-

¹⁶⁰ Emily Nussbaum, "It's Different for 'Girls'," *New York Magazine* (2012), <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/girls-lena-dunham-2012-4/>; "Difficult Women," *The New Yorker* (2013), http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2013/07/29/130729crte_television_nussbaum?mobify=0.

¹⁶¹ "Difficult Women". 1.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶³ Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel, "Introduction," in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

¹⁶⁴ Nussbaum, "Difficult Women". 1.

type of *Sex and the City*'s successful single professional women. It is widely accused of celebrating immaturity, instability, and directionless self-reflection – a white hipster fantasy. It's important that both series have been accused of misrepresenting contemporary U.S. femininity – too white, too privileged, too uninterested the day-to-day concerns of “real” women. The key obstacle to *Sex and the City* remaining quality television, and *Girls* being broadly acknowledged as such, seems to be this demand for realistic social representation that intervenes in the crafted discomfort and the genre-testing that characterise the field. Instead, *Girls* either succeeds or fails as a representation of women's contemporary lives rather than being held to a standard of mythic deconstruction. The central problem for quality television is avoiding absorption into the generic, and the problem for *Girls* and *Sex and the City* seems to be that its interrogation of any myth was quickly caught by that myth's transformation. It became a comfortable story.

Having mapped a trajectory from the origins of contemporary quality television (*Twin Peaks*) to its becoming mainstream (*The Sopranos*) and then a go-to format for art entertainment (*The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*), it's worth stressing the present as another potential point of change. *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* finish this year, and *Mad Men*'s seventh and final season begins screening next year. Of the examples I've discussed only *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones* and *Girls* are pointing towards new developments. Placing these series alongside other quality series now on the air, such as *Boardwalk Empire* (three seasons in) and *The Newsroom* (in its second season), suggests more diversity than the dramas of the 1990s and 2000s. But the hallmarks of this quality television coalesce around a cinematic approach to production values and edgy (controversial, challenging, and nuanced) narrative content, which together suggest barriers to casual entry for a general audience. All constantly draw on the post-network history of quality television. But together they suggest that what defines quality television today is its evasion of conformity to any genre, and its discomfiting refusal of easy watching. Television in the quality context can no longer be viewed as something to which people dedicate much time for relatively little added cultural value and the cultural authority now considered possible for television has changed the meaning of television as a leisure activity and made its generic innovations more telling and more influential.

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