

University of Theater and Film Arts Doctoral School

Hollywood in the Box

The Primacy of the Antihero in Quality TV from the 2000's to the Present

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THESES

I will open my dissertation with a look at the steadily growing popularity of Hollywood television series over the past two decades, and the critical acclaim that has accompanied it. Primarily, I will explore the anti-hero as the protagonist in the most popular, and most intricate, of these series. What narrative techniques of their creators have inspired viewers to an increasing – indeed almost compulsive – participation in these anti-heroic stories that stand in the face of moral judgment?

The first section of my work begins from the hypothesis that the narrative evolution of the entertainment industry, involving increasingly complex content, was a direct result of escalating competition in television technology and of changes in the institutions involved. In this light, I show that new cable channels offered fresh creative freedom to screenwriters and directors coming over from feature films, winning over a wider and more diverse viewer base.

In the section to follow, I will analyze the phenomenon of “Quality TV” that has resulted, using the results of a number of studies. My conclusion is that Quality TV is not so much a genre or even sub-genre, but rather a certain kind of quality (hence the name) that has sprung from mutual influences between more sophisticated forms and a more actively involved viewership; I shall examine flexi-narrative and narrative complexity in general – the essential defining components of the new currents.

Here I present my primary thesis: One of Quality TV’s great innovations is the creation of intricate and varied anti-heroes. In support, I shall examine the traditional literary conception of the anti-hero. First of all, we look at the traditional literary models, and then at the ways in which these television series have re-formed them. I contend that anti-heroes could never be successful characters if the audience were unreceptive to these new stories, a receptivity understandable in the light of cognitive and narrative elements that I will explore through analysis based in psychology and film theory.

Next I take up specific case studies to explain the fascination with the anti-hero, through analysis of the now-canonical series in question. We shall examine the personalities of certain

characters, their place in the stories, their relationship to other characters, and the intricate manner in which all this is presented by their creators, and the effect of all of this on the viewer.

Since these anti-heroes are predominantly men, the analysis of particular series will also explore the function of the female characters associated with the protagonists. My conclusion offers the notion that, over this period, female characters in prime-time television are generally given stereotypical roles, while the more complex female characters are the ones who play alongside the anti-heroes of Quality TV – yet it takes time for them to come to the evolve and develop their own stories that are every bit as complex as those of their male counterparts.

The final chapter of the dissertation asserts that European series – Scandinavian ones in particular – have had a great influence on the creators of their American counterparts, just as the American versions have established new trends in Europe, not unlike the path of feature films.

The conclusion of my dissertation establishes that Quality TV has had a revolutionary impact on patterns of mass consumption of fiction, and has brought a fresh, indeed unprecedented, complexity to the television series genre as such. Here it is anti-heroic narratives that have acquired a special significance and enjoyed particular success, exploiting the special tension between the characters' abnormal immorality and the viewers' own moral norms. Current trends lead us to the ultimate conclusion that this character type today, some 20 years from its first appearance, has become somewhat less interesting to viewers, while the earmarks of Quality TV have become diluted amid a flood of series whose genres are increasingly mixed, and whose number has grown exponentially. Today, it is "Peak TV" that is increasingly becoming the designation for the very best of the genre, marking a new era of work that designates the prime examples amid the tremendous volume of productions coming to market.