Intrigue, Blood, and Naked Breasts: Strategies of the Epic Series on Premium Cable

by

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INTRODUCTION
THE TELEVISION PROBLEM

Television is a curious medium because of where the power lies. A movie towers above us, the world around us darkened, and unfolds from start to finish on a huge screen in surround sound. There are rarely interruptions, and walking out of one movie and into another is an activity taken at one's own risk of eviction from the theater. TV is different. It has been called, alternately, a medium constantly interrupted by commercials, a medium of long-form storytelling, a generic medium, a formulaic medium, an experimental medium, a medium that panders to the lowest common denominator, a sophisticated and complex medium, a medium that is smaller than film, a medium that is broader than film, a medium for niche audiences, a medium focused on the widest general audience, a medium whose only goal is to sell Coca-Cola, a medium enjoying an artistic golden age – a single aesthetic is hard to pin down. The power to watch, or not, or stop, or catch up and start again, lies entirely with the viewers, with their own tastes and predilections. We invite TV into our homes. Each show needs to be crafted, for reasons both economic and aesthetic, to reach a plurality of people; but television series are personal. The images that are sent through cable wires and bounced off of satellites have to define worlds that come on in our kitchens. They have to tap into some essential thing that keeps us as viewers engaged, and then keep doing it, by variation and repetition, for an often-indeterminate length of time. The construction of a television show is the sum of myriad choices and intensions all geared towards telling you a story, and
one you’ll want to tune in to watch the same time next week; the study of such a
construction, then, shares an essential kinship with the study of films and
filmmaking, and can illustrate what some of our most basic storytelling impulses
are.

The problem, of course, is that television is not film, however often critics
like to say that a particular TV show or current trend is ‘cinematic,’ (or,
alternately, ‘novelistic’). Neither is the case. Television narratives offer a variety
of scopes; they deal in the arc of a particular episode, of a season, of a series, and
while a show usually favors one of these over the others in its structure, it has to
tell stories in all three, while at the same time providing compelling images
moment to moment. There is opportunity within a wider arc to change tone or
structure dramatically: do a musical episode, an episode in space, an episode
performed live. When a movie gets produced, it is up to the personnel making it
whether or not the film tells a complete story, or leaves room for a sequel, or
kills the main character an hour in. TV shows exist across years and decades and
are somewhat at the mercy of time. Some get cancelled tragically early, without a
chance to resolve their stories; some go on way too long and lose their creative
dge. Within all this uncertainty, there's also room for a kind of improvisation
and growth – the guest star may make enough of an impression to become the
main villain of the series. So, while television is, undeniably, a visual medium,
and uses the same tools and tropes as film, it is to different effects. TV does not
dominate the viewer as much as film does, but allows for an ongoing relationship
with its audience. Even as television shows define their story-worlds absolutely,
and often have unavering creative visions or ‘auteur’ producers, the delay in receiving the whole of the story leaves room for water-cooler talk. One approach to this multiplicity of scopes and delayed narratives might be called the *Lucy* model, and it is the historically favored one: a show creates a world of wonderful characters, who remain static and watchable (either likable [*I Love Lucy*] or particularly competent [*Dragnet*] or at least good-looking [*Brady Bunch*]), even as the situations around them change slightly week to week. That is very modular storytelling. There is what could rightfully be called the *Buffy* model, which takes very watchable, but dynamic characters, varies the problems they deal with in each episode, yet each episode builds to the conclusion of a season or serial narrative and character arcs. Then there is the model that has come to be most identified with the premium cable networks, *The Wire* model of abandoning episodic storytelling altogether in favor of a single, densely layered, seasonal narrative arc pieced out in installments. This is an interesting way to do TV, and fits the premium format: pay-cable does not have commercial interruptions within a given episode, nor does it rely on syndication, and its variability in the order of episodes aired. This model simultaneously brings the pay-cable series closer to a continuous experience and the gradual accumulation of serials. The result is a distinct one. These shows might look ‘cinematic,’ but they are not just film serials on smaller screens and with better budgets: even when shows are presented in a format particularly close to film, they make distinct, televisionary choices.
A good place to look at this interaction is in genres that have not traditionally been embraced by TV series. The epic, in particular the sword-and-sandals/peplum subgenre, what I will be calling the historical epic, does not have good representation as small screen series. It has been traditionally relegated, instead, to the realms of miniseries events and TV movies. As with anything to do with genre studies, there are, of course, exceptions. Yet, the epic series began to appear regularly on both network TV and pay-cable channels in the mid 2000s, and there has been at least one example of the genre on premium cable yearly since 2005 to the time of this writing. This trend occurred in tandem with the resurgence of historical epic films in Hollywood in the early to mid ’aughts; this, I feel, makes the cycle of historical epic series of the 2000s particularly ripe for study. These shows take on the particular challenge of differentiating themselves (or not) from their filmic counterparts, both in terms of narrative and style. The same iconography and conventions of the film genre are available to them as well, to borrow, steal, change, or discard completely. But the time in which they have to tell their stories and the space in which they have to play them out is fundamentally different, and so are their goals.

These goals are certainly influenced by the premium cable format on which they air. Pay-cable is a kind of television unto itself, and it has to be: it has to offer a reason for viewers to become subscribers, to pay money upfront for certain kinds of entertainment and programming, in accordance with the particular draws of a premium network. These work not so differently from the old Hollywood studios, each having to further its brand identity through the
number, type, and taste-quality of its products. HBO produces intricate and dense serialized narratives with big production values and large ensemble casts, distinguishes itself through its tally of critical awards and acclamations, yet still also offers the allure of material that is censorable on network and basic cable. Starz, by contrast, offers shows that are more modular in narrative structure, but still made with high production values, appealing stars, and a cornucopia of censorable content. While the old Hollywood studios tended to be distinguished by genre (Warner’s gangster films, Universal’s horror) it is a more a distinction of narrative scope that differentiates the premium networks; of course, just as MGM could make a good gangster film, Starz is able to do shows with more serial bents, HBO shows that are more modular and less dramatic.

Put all these factors together and the pay-cable epic series start to look like a Frankenstein’s monster of varying and competing network identities, constraints of television storytelling, and baggage of film genre. What is remarkable, however, is that each of these shows is able to take these factors and create coherent, distinct worlds, styles, and viewing experiences. The pay cable epic series of the mid-to-late 2000s share an intense and intentional visual kinship with films of the same production cycle, however they differ from their filmic cousins in several key ways: whereas the films steadily employ spectacular vistas, intense violence and battle sequences, and virtuosic special effects, series tend to offer more scenes of explicit nudity and sexual activity; the films create narratives wherein a hero’s struggle brings about great historical change or solidification of a heroic myth, series do this, too, but often as not with
characters who are caught up in, not leading, the unfolding events: the two main characters of Rome, Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, precipitate and witness the fall of the Roman republic and establishment of the empire, but that historical progression is not their intention. If historical films are, as Roland Barthes claimed, able to look out from “the balcony of history” then the pleasure of the pay-cable epics of ’aughts, one distinct from previous incarnations of epics on television, is to peek in at history from behind its curtains, or up at it from an alley on the street.\textsuperscript{ii}

In the course of this thesis, I will present two test cases, HBO’s Rome and Starz’s Spartacus: Blood and Sand, as examples of series that utilize different visual and narrative strategies, influenced by different films, in accordance with the particular brand identities of their networks. Yet, I will argue they tell their stories in a way that is distinct both from film and from non-premium television because of their fusion of generic concerns and network sensibilities. I will then return to HBO and examine its currently-airing epic series, Game of Thrones, which successfully utilizes strategies of both of my test cases to essentially historicize its fantasy genre roots, in order both to differentiate itself from recent films and more closely adhere to the particularities of HBO’s taste culture. All three shows primarily define themselves through narrative structures and stylistic presentations that are deliberately cultivated to reflect the tones, expectations, and allures of their respective networks. While the series on Starz are designed, presented, and marketed more as guilty pleasures of spectacular premium-cable excess, the HBO series distinguish themselves through the same
means as examples of ‘up-scaled,’ serialized storytelling distinct from ‘lesser’ kinds of television. Series on both networks, however, draw their formal choices from the same pay-cable toolbox, including censorable material, sumptuous period details, diverse or exotic locations, ensemble casts, and heavily serialized narratives.

THE EPIC: DEFINITION AND HISTORY

It is worth, at the outset, pausing to consider what exactly constitutes a historical epic series. The word ‘epic’ is used as a genre, as a descriptor, as a criterion of praise or criticism. The American Film Institute’s definition is phrased quite simply, calling the epic, “a genre of large-scale films set in a cinematic interpretation of the past.” What large-scale means, what its limits entail, what exactly constitutes a ‘cinematic’ interpretation of the past, and how past does an event or time period need to be in order to be considered the past, are all thornier issues that arise from the definition’s vagueness. However, genres live within the space between practiced conventions and expectations, ever-evading concrete definition, so I will tweak the AFI classification only slightly for my purposes here. I believe a historical epic series is first and foremost a television series, a program of episodes created on a seasonal basis and aired in a sequence. Second, it bases its show-world in a setting that reflects the historical past. An epic series often, although certainly not always, includes lavish production values and spectacular imagery (both on a grand scale and in
intricate details), and is often concerned with the fate of a nation or people, even as it follows the actions of an individual hero or set of characters. This definition opens the gates rather wide. Not only can an epic with a medievalist setting like *Camelot* sue for inclusion, but so can *Deadwood*, or, for that matter, the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica*, which (it is ultimately revealed) takes place 150,000 years in the past. These three examples are mutts, though, with the blood of other genres (fantasy, the Western, and sci-fi, respectively) flowing strong in their veins. There are assuredly other historical epic series on premium cable – *Boardwalk Empire* for example – and there are shows with depictions of a historical past(s) that are incidental – many episodes of *Doctor Who*, for instance. All epics are epic, but some epics are more epic than others. The shows I have chosen for my first two test cases are ones that are a little more purebred, heirs to the Roman historical epics of 1950s and 1960s, the television miniseries of the 70s, as well as the current cycle of historical epics on film. By limiting the bulk of my argument to these, I will be able to present a clearer, more concise picture of how genre conventions are being utilized and changed in service to television storytelling, and the demands of the pay-cable format in particular.

This thesis is not concerned with a holistic study of the genre, nor in surveying its history on film or television. This is in part because the series discussed herein are so recent (the oldest airing first in 2005), and are, I will argue, a break from the traditional formats in which the historical epic has been utilized on television. It is sufficient to say the epic was first imported to the States in mini-series format from British serials (themselves influenced by serial
radio plays) with great success in the late 1970s, and were, chiefly, the sagas of families, starting with Rich Man, Poor Man, aired on ABC in 1976. Roots (1977) is perhaps the best-known American example of this model, and I, Claudius (1978 in the US) the most famous example of an ancient epic serial. The trend of big-budgeted ‘event’ epic mini-series trickled off in the early 90s, although smaller budget epic mini-series like The Odyssey (1997) continued to be produced sporadically on the networks.iv Following the success of Ridley Scott’s Gladiator, a rash of epic mini-series were produced on networks and basic cable between 2001-2005, including The Mists of Avalon (2001), Atilla (2001), Warrior Queen (2003), Helen of Troy (2003), Spartacus (2004) and Empire (2005). Rome, however, first aired in 2005, was the first full series set in what could be called an ancient past since Xena: Warrior Princess ended its run in 2000. Showtime answered Rome, which ended in 2006, with The Tudors in 2007, and Starz produced Spartacus: Blood and Sand in 2010, at the very end of The Tudors’ run. 2011 saw an epic on each of the three major premium networks, with Camelot (Starz), The Borgias (Showtime), and Game of Thrones (HBO) all airing around the same times as each other. The former flopped hard, the latter two succeeded to varying degrees, and all three seem to be continuing to include at least one historical epic as a part of their programming slate. In 2012, Spartacus (Starz) ended its run just as Game of Thrones premiered, and The Borgias began airing its second season the following week. Starz also has two other historical epic, Marco Polo and Da Vinci’s Demons, in development as of this writing. These shows are popular, and still of interest to the premium networks.
Although *Crouching Tiger: Hidden Dragon* (2000) was probably the first example of a widely distributed historical epic of the 2000s in the States, contemporary Hollywood epics began to appear with great frequency starting with the huge success of *Gladiator* and Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, both in 2001. These films were noted in reviews of the time as being grittier and more realistic than the production cycle of Hollywood epics of the 50s and 60s, as well as utilizing advances in CG technology to spectacular effect.\(^v\) 2004 saw the release of a number of epics aimed to capture the same enthusiasm for the 2001 films, including *Alexander, Kingdom of Heaven*, *King Arthur*, and *Troy*. These films piggybacked on (and somewhat solidified as generic conventions) several stylistic strategies of the 2001 films – sound and film speed manipulated to produce a subjective experience of combat, large battle sequences that used variants of the MASSIVE software (in addition to hordes of extras) developed for *LOTR*, and as well as other devices: *all* their scores included at least one track of tribal-like female vocals. Certainly these techniques do not originate with the 2001 or 2004 films – the contemporary Hollywood film most remarked on as the first to use subjective combat experience for an intensified, spectacular realism is likely *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). In 2006, however, Zach Snyder’s *300* also achieved improbable box-office success, utilizing a different, more abstract, visual strategy of color grading, rampant manipulation of camera speed, and exaggerated settings (to emulate the look of the comics on which the film was based) as well as cartoonish-ly vivid violence. Since then, the only real success in box-office has

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE/APPROACH**

The epic series has received precious little attention in television scholarship. I have encountered only one kind of analysis applied directly to the historical epic on television and that is the lens of ‘classical reception,’ or the study of the way in which historical events are viewed by subsequent cultures. The epic genre is, after all, a cinematic representation of the past, and this type of study strives to understand series’ ability to be (or not be) historically accurate while creating work that is dramatic, entertaining, and original. This type of analysis, however, is intensely individual to a given series and its historical setting, and tends to ignore television form in favor dissecting themes and plots that relate to a classical source, the accuracy of visual details, costume, and mise-en-scene in relation to a historical setting and its material culture. While this strain of analysis is useful to an understanding of historical events and their relationship to modern culture, it ignores the stylistic intensions and choices of television series.
There is, however, an excellent collection of essays that write from the perspective of classical reception entitled *Rome Season One: History Makes Television*, edited by Monica S. Cyrino. The topics of the essays range from the similarities of the household sets in *Rome* to examples of architecture recovered at Pompeii and the dramatic use of the Latin language in television and film, but the most relevant to the focus of this project is “*Spectacle of Sex: Bodies on Display in Rome*” by Stacie Raucci. Raucci suggests that the it is the spectacle of sex and particular the explicit treatment of the male body that differentiates *Rome* from both cinematic depictions of the epic genre and from the tradition of television mini-series typified by *I, Claudius*. Spectacular battles are traded, she argues, for spectacular bodies, and, “*Rome*, like a big screen toga epic, insists on the male body showing off its power and virtue; but, like a televised series, it stages this body in the personal and sexual sphere.” The idea that cable epic series negotiates a middle ground between film and the mini-series in its presentation is essential not just to an understanding of the function explicitly sexual scenes serve in these shows, but to all the narrative and stylistic choices that they make. If the epic films of the 2000 production cycle have employed virtuosic special effects to offer spectacle from viewing the breadth and scale of history, the television epic has offered an increased, intense intimacy. While her final discussion on audience gaze and its relationship to the ways sex is treated in our current American culture and in ancient Roman culture is introduced too quickly and is too much of a stretch – the spectacle of Bill Clinton was presented and treated with far different intensions in mind than *Rome* – the idea that there
has been a transfer of the primary stage of action in the epic series from the battlefield to the bedroom is very compelling. Raucci provides an excellent historical and conceptual framework from which to consider the epic series, even though she does not employ much in the way formal analysis and ignores economic and industrial concerns completely.

There is more to be had of scholarly works written on the epic film, although again, most authors analyze them from a cultural perspective or look at them as examples of certain production or technological trends across film history. The most useful author – although his work is concerned with cultural analyses of history on film as it contributes to a sense of national identity – I have encountered is Robert Burgoyne, and his chapter on *Gladiator* in *The Hollywood Historical Film* is particularly helpful in defining what this current cycle of epic films’ relationship to the tradition of the epic in Hollywood cinema is. Burgoyne compares *Gladiator* (2000) to *Spartacus* (1960), and argues that *Gladiator* is engaged in a referential process with Hollywood epics of the fifties and sixties, in which the former film acknowledges the symbolic and thematic concerns of past ancient epics in their depiction of history, but the newer film constructs a new set of images that are in opposition to its filmic predecessors. Burgoyne grounds this argument not in formal but in thematic analysis of the concerns of epics as they relate to America’s understanding of its own culture, particular how notions of liberty, nobility, and democracy are treated in Big Hollywood films. *Gladiator*, Burgoyne argues, shoulders this interpretive baggage and offers a darker, more foreboding and melancholy take. His scholarly
aims and manner of argumentation are inappropriate to the focus of this thesis, however he does make salient observations about the kind of associations and genre expectations American audiences bring to the ancient epic.

The last kind of scholarship, although it is not directly related to the epic television series or the epic film, that I have found somewhat useful to consider are some historical overviews of different narrative formats on television, specifically the epic mini-series and serial drama. *Serial Television* by Glen Creeber traces the origins of the historical mini-series, its development, discuss responses to major series in the format like *Roots*, and goes even further, linking that mode of storytelling with soap operas and anthology-dramas. Creeber draws important distinctions and contrasts between different kinds of long-form television dramas; his discussion on the differences between series and serials is particularly useful to my ends. He posits that it was the serial's re-branding as the mini-series in the 1970s and 80s gave it certain connotations – as a space for 'event' television and a receptacle for adaptations of popular novels – that I believe inform the kind of 'branding' that the premium-cable series has undergone in the past decade. Creeber's argumentation is grounded in an observation of form, but often as not he chooses to analyze serials in terms of historical development or to interpret how a given show's themes relate to broader British and American cultural concerns. I will draw on these ideas as well as others as a part of my consideration of the pay-cable epic.

The most glaring deficit in all of this scholarship, however, is the lack of formal analysis or consideration of these shows as they relate to television form.
It is my belief that these concerns, far more than any perceived cultural resonances or the rigors of historical accuracy, inform the choices that make up these series, and it is from that perspective that I will consider them. While I will rely upon marketing materials, reviews – including mainstream and trade papers as well as online entertainment sites – and ratings reports in order to help contextualize the environment in which these shows were produced, their reception is not my primary aim.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter one will present my first television case study, HBO’s Rome. I will, very briefly, sketch the history and identify formal trends in HBO’s dramatic programming since 1997, and give a brief overview of the show’s production history. I will then analyze the show’s integration of period detail and censorable material, and relate these to identified trends of HBO programming. I will discuss the formal ways in which Rome attempts to balance itself: the show grounds itself in a shifted perspective, one more noticeably intimate and plebeian, of classical events of antiquity; yet, it is a highly-referential series: the joy and the meat of it is that the show is constantly, lovingly, undercutting its antecedents. There is perhaps a little bit too much of that. Yet, that change in perspective and referentiality is what differentiates the series and suits it specifically to HBO. I will also talk about how the show’s visual style and its relationship to Gladiator.
In my second chapter, I will give a similar overview of the Starz network’s dramatic programming and identify formal trends local to the channel before introducing my second television case study, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*. First I will discuss the show’s visual style in relation to *300*. Spoiler: they are very similar, but the likeness is intentional. The show cultivates a comic-book-like visual universe in order to heighten and express the emotional melodrama of its narrative. I will closely analyze the show’s treatment of censorable material and graphic violence, and how it uses these things to create visual excess evocative of its epic roots while also appearing distinct from classier, more marble-based show-worlds like *Rome*. I will also touch on these issues in the show’s second season, *Spartacus: Vengeance* and its mini-season, *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena*.

My third chapter will discuss the lessons learned from each of these two test cases by HBO’s *Game of Thrones*. Although not set in the classical world, the show utilizes strategies from both *Rome* and *Spartacus* in order to authenticate and gritty-up its fantasy setting, making zombies and dragons as deadly serious as highbrow political maneuverings and familial drama. I will discuss the show’s dark tone, strategies of exposition, and multiplicity of storylines allow it to make choices that distinguish it from high-fantasy and fits with the HBO brand; the series is essentially doing the same refocusing that *Rome* does with peplum but adding in a ratio of whores and sex much closer to the saturation-level of *Spartacus*.

Finally, I will conclude with a more general discussion of how the narrative and stylistic choices made by all three shows set them apart from other
kinds of scripted programming on television, and make some predictions about the future of epics on premium cable.

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\[1\] For example, a series with a medieval setting, *Covington Cross*, aired on ABC in 1992. *Robin of Sherwood*, a British import, survived three seasons on PBS (as well as on Showtime). Of course the venerable *Blackadder (1983-89)* leaves multiple historical eras in ruin, but it begins in the time of the War of the Roses.


PERFECTLY TRUE
ROME AND THE REFOCUSED HISTORICAL EPIC

The classical or ancient period of history has not, historically, been beloved by television series. Depictions of ancient Rome in particular often involve steep budgets, massive productions, and more highbrow concerns (or at least the specter of Culture) than perhaps some would wish to deal with over dinner. Not until after HBO’s Rome did the settings of the classical world and the medieval period begin to make inroads into dramatic series programming, particularly and most successfully on premium cable. This is because pay channels offer the right venue for a genre that depends on excess – traditionally in film this means visual excess in production scale: bigger sets, more extras, spectacular FX. A premium network, because it has fewer shows to parcel its budget out amongst, is well suited to attempt those things. HBO in particular is a good fit for a genre that is so identifiable by its large scale because the network consciously distinguishing itself as higher quality and more like film from other kinds of television. But what Rome was able to do, and what every epic series since has found different ways of accomplishing, was not to copy tropes of the contemporary film epic, but to adapt and change traditional strategies of spectacle in order to work on a smaller screen, with a smaller budget, but with many more hours of story. Rome’s approach to the ancient epic is one of constant referentiality, both winking and thumbing its nose at its historical and filmic antecedents, using profanity in order to differentiate and intensify its story world. The show takes what is essentially a political soap opera and marries it to
“low” and ordinary scenes of life. It replaces scenes of combat or extreme, large-scale violence with sex scenes, a more intimate but no less spectacular arena of contest on which characters have the chance to prove themselves and achieve their goals. Where the show does borrow stylistic techniques from contemporary epic films, it is with a few and deliberate instances to create monumental effects; these are often undercut afterwards by tonal shifts or mundane details. The show constructs, across seasonal planes, a story that, because of its plebeian characters and the ability of their actions and desires to change the course of history, feels organic and surprising even within its rigid historical framework. The patricians and plebs mix, which is a departure from the world of high politics featured in I, Claudius, but there are no gladiators or slave uprisings, either, no stern, tortured commander of men for a hero. Not only does Caesar have sex, but there's graffiti on the streets about him bedding women. The interaction between high and low spheres is the show's twist on the epic. The series' fidelity to historical events acts like the turns in a racetrack, visible from far away, but the pleasure is in seeing just how the horses come around them. Rome attempts to create the sensation of watching history unfold, but history that is fuller, more colorful, more fun, and much sexier than anything inflicted upon us in world history class.

IT'S NOT TV

Rome was not HBO's first period series (preceded by both Depression-era Carnivale in 2003 and the Western Deadwood in 2004), nor was it the first series
HBO co-produced (with the BBC); however, it was the first show on that network to set itself in the ancient world, and the first series set so on American television since the end of (in an admittedly fantastical version of ancient Greece) Xena: Warrior Princess in 2001. HBO began as small, subscriber based cable service that played sports and movies, but rose to prominence through its innovative use of satellite feed technology; in 1975 the network showed the famous “Thrilla in Manilla” Muhammad Ali/Joe Frazier boxing match in real time.\textsuperscript{vii} Throughout the 80s and 90s, the network developed a number of sports, variety, comedy, and anthology shows. Arguably the most well known of these are Fraggle Rock (1982) and The Larry Sanders Show (1992) the former a Jim Henson children’s program, the latter a comedy consistently nominated for Emmys in directing, writing, and acting.\textsuperscript{viii} In 1997 the channel premiered its first original dramatic hour-long program, the prison drama Oz, followed closely by Sex and the City (1998) and The Sopranos (2000), both huge critical and rating successes.\textsuperscript{ix} The benefit to being on a subscriber-based system is that a viewer who only wants to watch Sex and the City has to pay the same fee and get all the same programming as someone who only wants to watch The Larry Sanders Show. The network can have the variety to appeal to viewers of different tastes without having to appeal to a general audience, and can cover more niche programming with the successes of more popular shows.

The impact of The Sopranos on Home Box Office really cannot be overstated. It was massively popular, critically acclaimed, and narratively innovative in a number of ways that are outside the scope of this project. But
with the advent of Tony Soprano, and the fervent loyalty of his fans, the network began to cultivate similar kinds of subject matter and narrative tendencies in its upcoming dramas in order to appeal to the tastes of its subscribers. HBO dramas tend to be lush and dense affairs, in production values, serialization, and complexity, made with an ensemble cast separated by different locations, occupations, and sympathies. These shows are not designed to be modular, but are meant to be viewed in succession, building towards a conclusion at the end of a season. It would be a challenge to jump into an episode seven or eight of *Rome*. Julius Caesar and Cleopatra are famous enough figures that their plotline might make sense to the uninitiated, but the rest of the characters, their identities, loyalties, motivations, and conflicts, really require the whole of the story. That is a challenge, but works far better for a series competing for views not from the widest possible audience, but a select group of subscribers. It is, too, a fitting narrative format for a long period epic, just as the debauched lushness of Roman spectacle fits the premium cable format’s expectations of heightened depictions of sex and violence – the orgies come with the package. The thing about HBO, though, is that the network has cultivated a brand image that is far classier than the amount of explicitly sexual, profane, or violent scenes might lead one to suspect. The network courts programming that win awards, and tout its victories. Its tagline, ‘It’s Not TV,’ is a means to separate itself from network and basic cable fare, but the implication is that HBO is better than TV, and so subscribers do not have to feel any intellectual anxiety about watching the HBO slate.
Even for HBO, the scale of *Rome’s* production was huge. It was shot in Italy, at the (in)famous Cinecitta studios (the show literally lived in the shadow of *Cleopatra* and *Satyricon*), using massive outdoor sets, including a free-standing forum, as well as six sound stages. The total cost for the first season alone jumped well over $100 million.\textsuperscript{x} When the first episode aired in the US on August 28\textsuperscript{th}, 2005, it drew, according to Variety a “solid” 3.8 million viewers, although it fell well behind both the *Deadwood* and *Carnivale* premieres (5.3 and 5.8 million, respectively).\textsuperscript{xi} The show would never quite get what it needed, either from ratings or from critics. *Rome* received generally favorable reviews, cited for its excellent production values, “among the most lavish and gorgeous in TV history” and abundance of racy material, “[doing] excellent work with slit throats, severed limbs…and barbaric sexual acts.”\textsuperscript{xii} It also won Emmys for costume, cinematography, art direction, hair-styling, and visual effects.\textsuperscript{xiii} But for a show with such big production values, its appeal ended up being modest and not, as the *New York Times* put it, “a swords-and-sandals version of “*The Sopranos,”* as HBO had hoped.”\textsuperscript{xiv} It certainly failed to meet network expectations. However *Rome*, while still very much cut from the same cloth as other HBO dramas, is not just a stale sword-and-sandals *Sopranos*, nor was it constructed to be. It offers a fresh take on the material of the ancient epic genre, and a flexible lattice on which to lay the epic over the series format; it is the latter feat, so little attempted and almost never successful, that sets *Rome* apart.
TESTUDO ET LEPUS

Rome’s attitude towards history is first apparent in its opening credits. The sequence begins with a shot of an alleyway that comes into focus as it tilts down to reveal a remarkably bald Italian man in a red and blue toga walking towards the camera with the equivalent of an ancient messenger bag. The next shot shows the man walking past a wall, out of focus again, from right to left across the foreground of the frame, and lingers on graffiti sketches of gladiators on the wall with a red streak running down left to center frame; the figures are animated, and proceed to fight against each other while the camera tracks in slightly. A score of flutes, Mediterranean strings, and congo-esque drums, play the show’s main theme over all. This is a sequence that is incredibly attuned to the small details of the show world but also quite stylized. While Gladiator and 300 begin by establishing the scale of the ‘known’ world in their stories, Rome begins more or less in media loca, in the middle of a place that is already well-worn, colorful, and full of life. It is not clean, it is not classical, it is not (the producers hope) boring. The credit sequence displays the conceit of the show as whole which is that if you only are able to look closer, look properly as the camera is able to look, at those sketches and snatches of graffiti on the wall – the historical details – you can see the life teeming behind them. In perhaps the most arresting and most stylized moment of the credit sequence, at 53 seconds, the camera tracks in on a shot of a wall caked in layers of paint, morphs into an FX shot as it dives into those paint layers and swerves to the left and right, revealing
new images with each move. The use of bright color accents, not only in the animated figures, but also in the clothing of the humans walking about, imparts vibrancy to the setting itself. The Rome of Gladiators, while the color contrasts in the mis-en-scene of Commodus’ palace are rather striking, maintains the same cool, sepia color palette that seems to always denote capital-H History. 300’s world, too, is well smothered in a golden glow (of glory!) that abstracts its story-world from any verisimilitude. Rome’s approach is to color here is more normalized, while still being invtingly vibrant enough to convey a sense of the exotic.

This is an unusual tack for an epic, but it’s one that makes sense for a television series, and one with precedent on HBO. Another HBO period epic, Deadwood (2004), uses a very nearly identical visual strategy of artful, out-of-context details which convey a sense of daily life – the first shot of that sequence is the reflection of a sunrise in a puddle, and tilts up through mud to reveal a set of pointy black boots and Ian McShane’s credit. Instead of animated graffiti, the running of a wild horse across a landscape is what unites those desperate images: certainly a motif appropriate to a Western. Rome utilizes tropes appropriate to its genre – the wall art contains gladiators, mythological images like a Medusa or an Athena bursting forth from the skull of Zeus. The Medusa head initiates a further level of manipulation of the images and visual play, with the snakes of her hair floating freely in the air. There’s a blending of surfaces that goes along well with the show’s blend of detailed focus and irreverent attitude towards the history. In terms of profanity, too, the credit sequence has its share
of actually imagery that is explicit: namely, a giant phallus with the word *arma* scrawled beneath. It is quite clear from the picture what the word means, but the inclusion of the Latin is also both a period detail that lends historical weight to the vulgarity and a bone thrown to viewers with any kind of classical background. At its best, *Rome* does exactly that: finds ways to make history lively and grounds its drama in the exotic, unexplored corner of the classic world: the mundane. All the surfaces that the viewer sees are readily familiar. The show consciously avoids a large-scale focus, although it has one; nor does it announce itself to be about Important History, although it is. The level of detail gives the show a veneer of historical verisimilitude, but the focus is on the ‘true’ life lived by ordinary people away from the marbled senate halls. That shift in focus is what sets the show apart from its televisionary and filmic forbears. The show does not abandon all its roots, though. Caesar is a main character, and the pilot opens the way many epics do: with an expository narration (the Triumvirate is just beginning to fall apart as Caesar conquers Gaul) and a map, giving a sense of the world and political situation at the time of the show. The flickering sepia color tone on the map is reminiscent of *Gladiator*’s opening sequence, and the narration, which speaks in terms of “kings,” “old friends,” and “the common people,” all part of the traditional vocabulary of ancient epic conflicts of nation building. Indeed, the show’s general lighting palette is similar, although not quite so olive oil in hue, to *Gladiator*’s look. The show does choose to make specific spaces more colorful – Atia’s (Polly Walker) townhouse being one of the major examples – but these are not garishly bright, as in a series of more camp
like a *Hercules*. Indeed, the show’s overall visual aesthetic could be likened to the inside of a World Market: consisting mainly of earthly, wooden browns, but spiced with colorful accents of deep reds and blues.\(^{xvi}\) What is interesting about the map, though, is that it, like the buildings at the beginning of the credit sequence, appears too shadowed around its edges and too close up for the viewer to have a solid understand of what it lies in relation to. The map shows only Italy, and only as far north as Picenum (now the Marche region), even though Rome is described as ruling “many nations.” The camera rotates slightly to the right of frame while the map is on screen, keeping the map in an imperfect alignment with the screen. In keeping with the show’s attention to detail, there are a great many towns and regions noted on the map and all the locations are noted by their Latin names – at all times *Rome* maintains an impressive level of historical detail, beyond the level on display in *Gladiator*. The visual treatment of the map accords well with the words of the narrator – this is a Rome on the precipice of disaster, a Rome that “cannot rule itself.” The focus is not on empire but on a much smaller region, and rests on one man, Julius Caesar (Ciaran Hinds), on his ambitions and his rivals’ fears about him. Although the opening specifically draws stylistically from the opening of *Gladiator*, the initial conflict presented in *Rome* is much more open-ended than *Gladiator’s*, where the action begins with “one final stronghold” standing between Maximus, and “the promise of peace throughout the empire.” This brevity is indicative of the level of familiarity with the kinds of dramatic plotlines used in Roman epics that the
show accords the viewer. There is no need for an extended chronicle (or, goodness knows, an overture) after the manner of Ben Hur.

Whether you are familiar with the life of Julius Caesar or not, enough information is sketched out in the brief exposition montage introducing Caesar and his rival Pompey to give you an idea about the eventual course of the narrative – the repetition of “king,” at the beginning and end of the narration alone gives you a sense of where Caesar’s career trajectory will tend. Yet the imagery is particularly unusual. The montage lingers on the image of an ordinary boy drawing two fighters in a charcoal graffito. Rome is all about upending the narrative and stylistic strategies of film epics, refocusing its perspective through the eyes of the low and the ordinary in order to achieve the same sense of wondrous transport into the past. After the exposition montage, the show begins its action proper with a battle sequence set in Gaul; the set-up is not entirely dissimilar from Gladiator’s opening battle in Germania. The screen fades on a close-up of the dour, blood-spattered face of a Roman soldier gazing forward from the left of frame. The hand-held camera moves from him to another soldier standing impatient in battle formation, the cheek-plates of his helmet swaying slightly. A ragged line of Gauls are working themselves up to charge from behind a tree-line opposite, and as they do, the first soldier blows a whistle. The battle sequence that follows is perfunctory in the very best of senses. The first soldier, Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd), blows the whistle first 20, and then 13 seconds apart, signaling the front line of his soldiers to move to the rear and a fresh line to come up. Vorenus kills his Gauls using the same rote motions multiple times.
When the second soldier, Titus Pullo (Ray Stevenson), kills a Gaul who has launched himself behind the Roman shield-wall, he does so with the same stroke. Swordplay is not a thing of prowess or even of much movement within the frame: weapons are wielded like ordinary tools. There is an intense focus on detail here, on routine, and physical actions are not choreographed to display martial prowess or even to distinguish fighters, but to make the action appear monotonous. This is an entirely different attitude towards battle: even as there are screams and crashes and the clang of metal, it is not meant to be exciting for the thrill of combat. There is no score, the only dialog the bark of Vorenus’ orders, and, apart from the hand-held camera, no overt cinematic flourishes. A high angle shot of the Roman formation shows rows of soldiers moving forward and backward in ordered lines of battle on Vorenus’ whistle almost as a great machine with many moving parts.xvii Gladiator is interesting in its opening sequence for the amount of time that the camera stays with and follows the gaze of the barbarian leader subsequently torn apart by Maximus’ dog. The barbarians get no such treatment here: they are nuisances. The conflict in the scene is between the drunken Pullo, who breaks formation, and Vorenus, who, though exasperated, has to drag him back.xviii It is interpersonal, not political or social. While Rome certainly did not have the budget to destroy a whole forest for the sake of the flaming spectacle, they can and do make the choice to do much more highly stylized battle sequences when it suits their dramatic purposes. In the sixth episode of the second season, “Phillipi,” the show does include some large-scale CGI crowd shots of the advancing armies, and shoots the battle
sequence with particular attention to graphic gore, with a mournful score, sweeping camera movements, and manipulated camera speed conveying a subjective experience of combat that are all strategies of depicting monumental battles utilized in many epic films. Of course, the tone and the emotional impact of this sequence are immediately sabotaged by the cut to Marc Antony, perched on his saddle far away from the action, chewing lustily on a loaf of bread. *Rome's* focus is on its characters, and uses their concerns and conflicts, more often than not, in order to complicate, undermine, or trivialize what would properly be considered an ‘epic’ conflict of political rivals, armies, or famous lovers. The pleasure of the show is watching it with an eye to its genre and its historical underpinnings, which the show takes special care to illustrate with careful visual detail, and seeing the ways in which those are varied or tweaked to suit the stories the show chooses to tell.

Although the show adopts, on specific occasions, several formal flourishes out of the contemporary film epic tradition, it is worth looking at a scene that it shares in common with *Gladiator*, and what it chooses to do differently with it. Both film and show depict a Roman triumph (*Rome* actually has two), a spectacular parade in honor of a victorious general. Commodus’ triumph begins with a fly-over shot of the whole of (CG) Rome on an impossible blue-grey day, dissolves to a shot of clouds moving by, and thence to a giant Roman eagle towering over a building, from the ledge of which a crowd is looking down. Although the camera’s vantage point gradually descends, the imposing hugeness of what is being shown is preserved. *Gladiator*’s Rome is larger than life; its
statures tower seemingly hundreds of feet into the air, its masses appearing as geometrical shapes forming symmetrical lines within the cityscape. The ‘common people’ on whose approval the power of the mighty rest is a part of this very, very monumental space. Scott does move in closer in a quick series of cuts to men in the crowd gesturing and yelling unintelligible things, but the moment goes by too quickly to disrupt the ordered procession and the majestic score.

The image that really solidifies what the space means and where the true power of Rome lies is the extreme long shot of the triumph coming to the steps of the senate building; and in the dead center background of the frame, looming over all the proceedings like a reproach, is the Coliseum. Everything else in the shot is dwarfed by it, and the dark ranks contrast with the white path that leads directly from the Colosseum to the Senate. Scott could not be more spatially clear about what truly matters in Gladiator’s Rome, and what the stakes are (they are huge). Contrast that with Rome’s take on the triumph, which begins with a low angle shot of banners being unfurled from atop the Senate house. The film’s triumph just happens. We do not see the preparation. Rome delights in showing statues being washed and doves being wrangled so much that it does so in slow-motion, and prefaces the parade with a scene of Caesar asking his body-slave Poscar if the shade of red he’s chosen to wear will be “too much...I want to suggest purple without actually wearing it.” The lead-up is bogged down with so much trivia, and yet it is completely appropriate for the show’s purposes. If Gladiator’s triumph is about establishing a spectacular Rome that can never escape the shadow of the Coliseum, the true font of Roman political power, then
Rome’s triumph is much more about how the people in power construct and deal with ritual, how it (and everything else in Rome’s world) is inextricably linked with the rule of the city. The triumph proper begins with another low shot, showing a pool of blood on the marble of a temple, presumably the Capitoline, as a priest (Octavian) strides out to bathe Caesar in the blood of a sacrifice. There’s a clear line of color leading from the pool of blood directly to Caesar. Here then is the path of power. The red paint ceremoniously smeared on Caesar’s face is not so different from the visible blush put on the dying Gaul leader, Vercingetorix (Giovanni Calcagno), to make him appear less pallid. The actual coverage of the triumph itself, however, is mostly at ground (or chariot) level. The bodies of the spectators in front obscure the procession, as it would be for an actual person making their way through the crowd. When the camera does get a clear view of the parade, it is motivated by one of Vorenus’ daughters climbing on top of a statue to get a better look. The camerawork itself is smooth, made up of measured tracks and tilts, except for when it is placed in or on Caesar’s chariot, when it shakes as it would if actually mounted on a chariot.

There is a balance in the triumph scene between extremely detailed treatment and the perspective of the ordinary, and the dynamics of power among the elite. Vercingetorix is strangled before the crowd, and there’s a pair of close-ups of the Gaul’s head dropping as he dies and Caesar’s head drooping, his eyes closed. Then he raises his head, stands up, and we get the only real extreme long shot in the sequence, showing the scale of the crowd lined up. It is that scene that signals the sequence as spectacular in the same manner as a Big Hollywood epic.
The show lacks the budget to be free with landscape shots, but it does include them; without any, there would not be any scope to the sequence at all, not to mention the risk of losing visual clarity, as the Triumph is something that is designed to be viewed from all sides and a wide perspective overall – it travels, always, to a set of marble steps. *Rome* is not reinventing the wheel, here, but it is doing the Triumph for a television series. It has got a scale shot that satisfies the scene’s generic traditions, but is ultimately about these characters’ relationship to power – Brutus is vulnerable and nervous, Antony appropriately glib and green with ambition, Atia smiling in cold triumph, and Caesar acutely aware of how his glory is linked to his doom. Its sense of freshness and proposed realism comes through in how it bases its coverage as much in the vast and spectacular as in the ordinary and profane.

**THE KALENDS OF FEBRUARY**

One of the finest examples of how this works is in the show’s choices regarding the funeral of Julius Caesar, which occurs in the first episode of season two. Here is a famous dramatic scene with a weighty amount of literary and filmic baggage to it. Whatever you shoot will be measured against other representations of that scene, not the least the one in the viewer’s own mind. Whatever speech you write will be judged against the speech that someone else, someone very good, has already written for that scene. The 2005 miniseries *Empire*, which also involves the death of Caesar as a major turning point in its
story, attacks the problem head-on, and the camera alternates between crowd shots and close ups on Antony as he delivers an abbreviated and simply worded address – “Friends of Caesar! Listen to me!” – set to weepy strings. The speech is changed sufficiently to include issues central to Antony’s character arc within the mini-series, it does not feel like plagiarism, but still cannot free itself from the shadow of *Julius Caesar*. *Rome* takes an approach that is much more self-aware of the material it deals with. The lead up to the scene starts with a town crier (the redoubtable Ian McNeice) proclaiming that eulogies are to be delivered by Antony and Brutus (Tobias Menzies) – “No prostitutes, actors, or unclean tradesman may attend!” he notes, a period detail that is both historically accurate and works as humor here. The scene directly before the funeral takes place in the anteroom where Caesar’s body has been laid out, and all the show’s patrician characters gather for the funeral. It is carried sonically only by score, and the camera tracks slowly from character to character, lingering on their various expressions: anticipation, uncertainty, cold triumph, guilt, determination for revenge. The room is dark save for the flicker of a view torches, isolating the characters’ faces in space and heightening the suspense of the moment. The scene then cuts between Caesar’s public funeral, the camera coming near the fire of his funeral pyre, and the private funeral of Niobe (Indira Varma), Vorenus’ wife. It ends with a gorgeous high angle crane shot pulling upwards from the pyre and showing the massive (CG) crowd throwing wood onto the pyre. This in itself is a valid and economical way to attack the scene. It is intercut with another scene (linked by like tone and action) but the images convey all the necessary
information without the need for dialog. The show first primes the viewer to expect an extra-textual source by mentioning the eulogies upfront, thereby acknowledging them, but then manages to sidestep Shakespeare completely.

But then it doesn't. The next shot is of Brutus at home, holding his head in despair, and Antony (James Purefoy) smugly suggesting ways for him to leave the city. “Sorry about all this,” he says, “I got a bit carried away. You gave an excellent speech, incidentally. Perhaps a touch too cerebral for that audience…” Those lines, coming right after the images of the frenzied crowd heaping wood onto an enormous pyre, are all we need in order to fill in what the speeches the men gave were. *Rome* takes its historical and literary antecedents and delights in self-consciously twisting and undercutting them. The reference particularly pays off an audience aware of these: the show is using more intellectual material in the structuring of this moment, but it is tweaking it. The HBO audience can feel both sophisticated and entertained by this moment in a fairly self-conscious way.

If there were any doubt of what the *Rome* writers had in mind, after Brutus and the conspirators leave the city, there is a scene in which a Roman tough (with a cockney accent, no less) describes to his friends (incidentally about to murdered by Pullo and Vorenus for their part in killing Vorenus’ children on the Ides) what happened during the eulogies – “…and then what does ‘e do? ‘E takes the bloody toga and throws it into the crowd. Whoosh! The whole fucking place went up like a tar barrel!” This vulgarization of a classic dramatic moment is funny, but of course, it is only funny assuming that a viewer already has knowledge of the things that the show is altering. *Rome’s* intention of providing a ‘fresh’
perspective on classical events requires some familiarity with those events in order to be fully understood. The sequences here described are perfectly intelligible on their own – the cut to the burning of the pyre and the aftermath of the speeches is as economical an example of visual storytelling as anything – but *Rome* consistently interacts with its own genre, on top of telling a classical Roman story. The show is, at its core, a highly intellectual enterprise. It is neither as gloriously high/lowlbrow as *I, Claudius* nor as gloriously silly as *Xena*. It occupies a sort of liminal space in between those two tones. This conflict may indicate why the show never really got the traction it needed to sustain the massive budget that HBO and the BBC threw at it. Its specific flares of detail are not perhaps as readily decipherable as similar touches on a show like *Deadwood*, whose Western iconography certainly includes a more of place for the crude and uncivilized. The show’s artful coyness with history and the epic genre is what makes the series work, and wonderfully so; but it relies on a certain level of knowledge of the facts and conventions of each; and this refusal to base itself broadly is definitely indicative of its origins on premium cable. Its ‘high’ and ‘low’ stories are either of a piece and well interwoven or they simply are not.

In terms of how this works within an episode, the season one finale is a fine example. The title, “The Kalends of February,” itself is indicative of the show’s referential play with historical fact. The back half of season one depicts the falling out between Brutus and Caesar, and so naturally one’s thoughts turn to the Ides of March. “The Kalends of February” acknowledges that awareness, then, advancing the idea that Caesar’s assassination is close, but yet to come.
In this way, it still maintains the question of whether or not the assassination will be included in the season. The A, B, and C stories are clear, centered on Caesar’s reforms and the conspirators’ reactions to them, Vorenus’ political rise through Caesar, and Pullo’s courting of a servant girl, Eirene (Chiara Mastalli); Vorenus acts as the go-between and agent in both the others’ stories, and the other members of the ensemble are enmeshed in each. Poor Lucius, in the course of the first season, achieves an improbable rise that parallels Caesar’s, going from a “second spear” captain in the legion to a Senator of Rome. Vorenus’ fall is, it turns out, what causes Caesar’s – his senatorial appointment about twenty minutes into the episode is a strategem by Caesar to allow Vorenus to protect him from his enemies on the senate floor, and when Vorenus is lured away by being told of his wife’s infidelity, Brutus and the assassins strike. Caesar loses his life, and Vorenus loses his reason for life when Niobe confesses the crime and commits suicide. The symmetry is intentional, and illustrates the show working with both patrician and plebeian plotlines, and by weaving them together, creating a fuller picture of the city of Rome, more ‘accurate’ for including the lower half and more interesting for positing surprising causes for known historical events. The C plot is a little removed from the other two, but better so as it is played more for comedy (Pullo, now famous after escaping death in the arena, spends the first act limping around Rome flaunting his ‘big name’) and ends more happily, with Pullo and Eirene’s marriage. The episode uses tropes associated with the death of Caesar throughout: it begins, oddly enough, with a play, a group of actors recreating Vorenus and Pullo’s fight in a gladiatorial arena
from the previous episode. A shot of Vorenus’ farmland is the site of Calpurnia’s prophetic dream. One of the ways that the show builds the tension, in addition to a portentous score and a bit of slow motion, in Caesar’s final walk to the Senate is to play with the myth, changed slightly to be a little more realistic but still plant the seed of what an audience member might know about the scene: it is not a soothsayer but a petitioner accosts him on his way out of the house. There are three knives featured in the episode – Eirene’s when she initially wants to kill Pullo, Brutus’, which he lets fall from his hand, and Vorenus’, which he clenches meaning to kill his wife, but does not actually do it. There are, in any case, the many allusions that help unify the whole. The episode certainly works without noticing any of these, but they are so built into the structure that the real pleasure of the series is in the way that the show plays off the historical/cultural narrative of the events it depicts. The pleasure of watching Rome is as much in the intellectual experience of watching Rome as it is in seeing the actual content of the show. This is an interesting choice to make and one that very much fits with HBO’s network identity of drama that is more serious or more prestigious than “normal” TV, but equally entertaining.

This play is also evident in the overall structure of the show. The two main plebeian characters of Rome, Vorenus and Pullo, spend a healthy amount of time Forest Gump-ing their way through the fall of the Roman Republic – again, the ordinariness of the opening battle sequence and the grounding in detailed mise-en-scene is so essential, for it provides a base level from which both characters gradually ascend. Vorenus has heart to heart talks with Caesar and
Pompey, is the last man to see Marc Antony alive, and has a few choice words for Cleopatra, too. Pullo mentors Octavian/Augustus Caesar, sleeps with (on Vorenus’ orders) the Egyptian princess, and as a result is the father of Caesarion, Cleopatra’s ‘son by Caesar.’ They are, in a sense, audience proxies through whom we can view the historical events and form opinions on the motivations and the political maneuverings of the Roman magnates. But the show goes further than that, making Vorenus and Pullo, in fact, central agents in the overall political plot, whose actions have vast consequences for the entire cast and the city of Rome itself. In the second episode of the first season, Pullo, bored, dissolute, and freed from legionary discipline, kills a man loyal to Pompey over a crooked dice game, and one of the two central threads of the episode is Vorenus being burdened with an injured Pullo in his home while he is trying to get to know his estranged wife. As a consequence, when Antony is walking to the senate to make peace with Pompey on behalf of Caesar, a man from the dice game attacks Pullo, guarding Antony. The whole forum goes up in a brawl, and the war that will, as the episode title promises, ‘bring down the republic,’ is on. The confrontation in the forum is deliberately constructed so as to link the more personal plotline with the political situation. The camerawork is mostly hand-held, at person-level, moving in and amongst the throng of Pompeian thugs. This is Rome’s preferred method of dealing with crowd scenes, as the slightly documentary look of it gives the scene a more realistic and less elevated feel as well as being quite a different (and more within budget) strategy of photography from Gladiator’s monumental fly-overs of a CG Rome and spectacular treatment of the teeming CG
Coliseum. Quick shots, no more than two seconds each, focus on Antony, Pullo, and Vorenus making their way intently through the crowd. The next shot, longer at three seconds, finds a member of Pullo’s dice game in the crowd, and a musical cue of very sinister cymbals goes off the moment he appears, signaling the viewer that he is in fact the same guy and he is holding a grudge. There is interplay here between the high-historical doings and the more profane, ‘common’ problems of ordinary Romans, but each has consequences for the other. In this way, Rome is able to have its cake and eat it, too, if you like its particular flavor. Its story plays out on the highest political and historical plane, but escapes being either too stodgy or monumental through the way that its characters of lower order affect those plotlines. The Republic falls, as we all know it must, but because it is Titus Pullo that brings it down, the whole show world and all the characters within it bear watching.

The epic is a genre in which there is an interaction, and usually a progression, between ordinariness and extraordinariness. Spartacus is a simple Thracian man taken captive by the republic. Judah Ben-Hur rises to prominence from the depths of a slave-galley. Maximus is, as characters in the film itself intone with relish, “the general who became a slave, the slave who defied an empire.” Titus Pullo, however, is only ever Titus Pullo. Where he does affect large events, it is unintentionally done, and creates the same level of playfulness and self-awareness as in the show’s treatment of Caesar’s funeral. Part of the problem with doing a series the way that Rome does is that it does not leave too much room for serial variation. News Radio can do a show in space for fun; there
are noteworthy scholarly efforts on how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* plays with both narrative and stylistic form; *The Office* (the US version) soldiers on after losing its main star, Steve Carel, and therefore must find a different center and dynamic while still being recognizable to viewers who have watched the Carel seasons. Variation, in content, tone, and/or presentation, is necessary to TV, particularly the longer a show runs. And yet, it would be rather difficult to sell a musical episode of *Rome*. Part of the suspense and pleasure of the series is in anticipating and watching historical events unfold with surprising or humorous flourishes – like Pullo being the cause of the fight in the forum – but by grounding itself so completely, *Rome’s* effect can really only be varied in the details. To be successful, it has to find a wide enough base that really appreciates this effect and wants to come back for more week-to-week. The series really was not able to pull that off.

It was not so horrible that the show could not, however. Because HBO’s economic model is centered on a subscription base, it does not need as much programming to feed the beast, nor does require a series like *Law and Order* to run open-ended for twenty years; HBO’s dramatic programming differentiates itself by having an intensely serialized focus in comparison to basic cable and the networks. This makes premium the perfect home for an epic series like *Rome*, which builds seasonal arcs (the fall of Caesar and the Rise of Augustus, respectively) that each episode in the show works towards. It is like watching a giant puzzle fall slowly into place, and a very different modus operandi from the most successful network series to take up the problems of the ancient period.
series: Hercules and Xena. Both shows, the latter a spinoff of the former, ran for more than five years, and created the atmosphere of a fantasy/epic saga while still telling largely modular stories. Hercules has a nemesis in the eternally-wrathful Hera, who incinerates his wife and children at the start of The Legendary Journeys, but the subsequent episodes see Herc alternately escorting travelers to safe havens, fighting cave monsters, and rescuing maidens from cursed temples. The overall bent of the show is focused on the level of the individual episode, although narrative threads are woven throughout the series as a whole. A more recent network example, 2008’s Legend of the Seeker, does the same thing, establishing its ‘chosen one’ hero and then letting subsequent episodes tell of the Seeker’s individual adventures. None of these three networks shows are playing their history straight. While any classics professor could fill hours of lecture with all the things that Rome got wrong, the show does play itself off as being a more realistic depiction of the past, in part because its perspective is so profane.

“I FUCK CONCORD IN HER ARSE!”

The most overt, and arguably the most effective, means that the show uses to bring the epic down to size, as it were, is the way in which it incorporates verbal profanity and sexual activity, making them a part of the fabric of detail the show uses to convey the historical setting and substituting scenes of spectacular
violence for scene of explicit sex. The first scene with nudity in the series is only the third scene in the first episode, wherein Vercingetorix, leader of the Gauls, surrenders to Caesar. He enters the camp, is stripped, made to kneel before Caesar and his generals, and kiss the eagle standard that will figure as a plot point later in the episode. While the camera certainly does not linger on Vercingetorix’s form, it does not elide anything, either. More importantly, the scene introduces male nudity as a concept of power display – namely that Caesar has the power to strip his enemies to their skins. Although the image itself would not fly on a network, in the context of the show, its use is not just for pure eroticism. Certainly, the image of a half-starved, dirty, long-bearded Gaul is not (typically) ideal for titillation. The point of the display is that it is an in-show indicator of the total surrender of the Gauls. There is a similar scene in episode three of season one in which Vorenus calls on Antony as he is bathing with oils. James Purefoy’s glistening abs, while they are a benison on behalf of the production team to interested viewers, are also a point of rank. He can afford the oil, and has the slaves that will oil him down in his courtyard whenever he so pleases, and he is not embarrassed for Vorenus to see that. It is a form of display, of conspicuous consumption. This ‘commonplace’ kind of nudity accords with the rest of the show’s dressing down of more formal presentation of historical figures – even the prim Octavian (Simon Woods) gets a fairly shocking, sadomasochistic sex scene. It also helps, in defining the limits of the show’s universe as one that includes nudity everywhere, to differentiate the series from rival approaches. As much nudity as there is in The Tudors, it lacks the same zeal
for bare abs in public. If on one side of its scales, Rome holds obscure and clever classical references, on the other it hopes to balance out the measure with lots of naked bodies.

Repetition is key when it comes to Rome and sex. While battle sequences and scenes of outright fighting are sparring, there is not an episode of the show’s first season that does not have sexually explicit visuals that are only permissible on premium cable. The first explicitly sexual scene in the show occurs only eleven minutes into the first episode, in which Timon the Jew (Lee Bordman), in payment for acquiring a horse for Atia, is recompensed in her bedroom. Off a cut of Timon walking into Atia’s townhouse, the scene begins by looking through a gossamer bedpost curtain, a woman’s grunts coming from just outside of frame. The camera moves left to get around the bedpost, but what is remarkable is that the first that comes into clear focus is a giant feathery fan, being waved up and down by a slave. The scene then focuses on Atia, gyrating on top of Timon, Timon coming, and ends with Atia being handed a glass of water by another slave (there are about four watching from the wings) after they have finished. It is a rather sensational introduction to Atia, and cements for us from the first that she uses sex and seduction as a means to manipulate men. When she says glibly, “Two stallions have come to Rome today,” he rolls his eyes and replies, “Of course...you want the horse.” She smiles and says, “I do.” Their shared understanding of the perfunctory nature of their meeting is what brings the action down to the level of the mundane. This is not Maximus and Lucilla stealing a kiss in his candle-lit cell; this is sex as a business transaction, treated
unceremoniously, in a semi-public space. It is, in a sense, a much more
contemporary attitude, certainly a more casual one than most film epics, where
women are rarely present and either keep chaste for the hero or end up dead for
being sinfully active. The very next scene shows Atia in a bath of completely
see-through water, and young Octavian (Max Pirkis) awkwardly trying to avoid
his naked mother by peeping out and then ducking back beside a curtain. The
coverage of Octavian stays at the level of his eyes, the unease in his face, and yet
his eyes not looking away. He is here having likely very similar to that of a first-
time viewer: a voyeur who doesn’t quite know what to do with what he’s seeing.
There are four direct point of view shots peering at Atia through the curtain as
well, reinforcing Octavian’s perspective. What works about this scene, and the
scenes of nudity previously described, is how quickly the nudity passes even as
the scene continues. Octavian comes in and Atia puts a robe on. The humiliated
Gaul is quickly led away from Caesar’s camp. Both male and female bodies are
treated explicitly and casually, so as to convey a different, more physically open
culture; and while they are certainly something a viewer might wish to peer at
through a curtain, a sex scene in Rome is almost never just a sex scene.

Stacie Raucci, in her essay on sexual display in Rome, identifies another
function of sex in the series, writing, “the virtue and strength of men are
contingent upon sexual prowess, and their arena is the bedroom, not just the
battlefield...Rome, like a big screen toga epic, insists on the male body showing
off its power and virtue; but, like a televised series, it stages this body in the
personal and sexual sphere.” One of Rauci’s example comes from episode two
of the first season, in which Antony, in full battle gear and in full view of his army – there is not much guilt over voyeurism in this series; lots of people are watching and nobody seems to mind – has sex with a peasant girl against a tree and, after leaving her, literally pumps his fists in the air and roars in triumph. Of course, the other part to that scene is Pullo teasing Vorenus about his anxiety on returning to Rome after eight years away from his wife. The scene does, as Raucci says, show Antony’s masculine prowess as well as his willingness to have a go with just about any girl he encounters by the wayside. It also acts as a counterpoint to Vorenus, who is still very much “under the standard” as he terms it. Antony is totally unconstrained and glories in it. Vorenus is very constrained by his morals, and significantly more miserable. Another example of how Antony’s prowess for violence is conflated with sex is late in season two, in episode nine, when Antony and Cleopatra host a peace delegation from Octavian. Once he goes Egyptian, almost all of Antony’s body goes on display. In this scene he is wearing an almost see-through white robe, his chest bare. Although there is no full frontal nudity, there is, initially, also no sign of his pants. His eyes are lined with kohl and he is wearing a gaudy necklace of pearls and interlinking gold coins. This Antony is well and truly far gone, an Antony fully embracing wantonness and debauchery. He is constantly on display, ever under Cleopatra’s spell. She, likewise, is more exposed than ever, wearing a spiky brass bra worthy of a Valkyrie. In the aforementioned scene, he and Cleopatra stage a ‘hunt,’ with a slave wearing deer skin, while the Roman senators stand by, not quite sure what to do. “The animal thinks only of his thirst,” Antony husks. “He knows there is
danger, but he cannot resist the water,” and then he kisses Cleopatra in front of them. This is, all at once, an apt consideration of Antony’s own political ambitions, a show to befuddle the Roman delegation, a violent expression of his love for Cleopatra, and a display of power. The negotiations with the Romans proceed as Cleopatra starts to use real arrows, trying to shoot the ‘deer,’ while Antony nuzzles and kisses her thighs. Sex, play, and politics are all part of the same action. At the moment Antony is successful at frustrating the delegation, Cleopatra sends an arrow through the ‘deer’s’ throat. Antony’s madness and skill in equal measure are expressed violently, although not in actual combat. The show doesn’t have the budget to do Antony’s adventures in Parthia or the naval battle at Actium, but it finds ways to build the same sense of martial worth in its principal characters through their physical accomplishments in love.

The build is gradual, of course. Antony and Cleopatra’s relationship begins when the Egyptian Queen comes to Rome in order to legitimate her son by Caesar. Antony is firmly on Atia’s side in the matter, much as he finds Cleopatra alluring. It is only at the end of the eighth episode of the second season that she reappears, but this particular moment leaves no doubt for the viewer about the arc of their relationship. Antony strides into the palace and sees Caesarion on the throne, playing catch with a woman, but then his name is called from offscreen, and in a series of close-ups, with a more ‘eastern’ mix of the show’s theme music and flurry of strings leaping in and out of the soundtrack, Cleopatra walks towards the camera from where she was slinking against a wall; Antony watches her walk. The music cuts out on a close-up of Antony with a final
bang of drums; he simply smiles and says her name, the show cuts back to her impassive face for a second, then there's a smash cut to black and the music starts up again. The number of close shots of each lover, intercut as they are with those alternating strings on the score, is basically the visual flaring of their relationship – the fact that the music cuts out so that we all can better appreciate Antony saying “Cleopatra” and then cutting to black fills in the gaps in the viewer’s mind for what these two are about to do next. Again, this is the show using history as a key part of its structure, but not being beholden to high-toned importance. After this heated exchange of coverage, the show continues to take their passion to higher levels. There is a scene in the penultimate episode in which Antony and Cleopatra are talking about having Atia murdered on her visit to Alexandra. The scene alternates between medium and medium long shots of the two of them talking, and close-ups of the two of them kissing. When Antony demurs, Cleopatra stands up (in the middle of their bed, no less), and yells, “Either you are a coward, or you still have feelings for her!” Antony's manhood is in question, but while it concerns a question of political maneuvering, it is the private arena of the bedroom and over romantic feelings that he is tested. Shots of Atia waiting outside their palace are intercut with Cleopatra and Antony having a violent fight, complete with throwing and biting, that quickly devolves into sex.

Whether photographed with hard cuts, gauzy slow motion, or as a montage, sex in Rome is both its own spectacle (quite literally, people in the scene are almost always watching) and wrapped up in ulterior plotlines and
motivations. One of the best examples of this is in episode eight of season one, in a montage that moves between two sex scenes and a fight. The fight is anchored by Vorenus and Pullo, watching anxiously as a mob of angry Egyptians start to form and then lob rocks at them; The first sex scene is Caesar’s and Cleopatra’s; the second is Servilia’s (Lindsey Duncan) and Octavia’s (Kerry Condon). What is interesting about the second sex scene here is that it is oblique, for *Rome*, with less action at much slower pace. Both women are lit so that only their faces and bare shoulders are clearly visible, Servilia on top doing the kissing while Octavia gazes at her in wonder from the pillows; The out of focus bedframe obscures the rest of their bodies, and the room itself is lit but dimly. The sequence with Cleopatra and Caesar is much more visible and the actions of their lovemaking more explicit – we see tongue in close-up, and even Ciaran Hinds, normally clad even in bedroom scenes, takes off his shirt. The score uniting all three lines is made up both of mournful winds and vocal wailing, the pounding of drums, and the playful plucking of strings. The action in the girls’ sequence is heightened through style precisely because it is less explicit and there is less of it, and what is there is lit rather mysteriously. This keeps it visually distinct from its counterpart in the montage, as well as illustrates a point of character. Caesar is aggressive and forceful, seizing Cleopatra in his embrace. While Servilia and Octavia hardly move at all within the frame, Caesar and Cleopatra move quite a lot. The heat of their encounter is given literal form in the many candles strategically placed around the bed. Even as his soldiers are trying to subdue the mob, he is subduing the Egyptian queen. Servilia, on the other hand, is a
constant, looming presence, quietly and gradually maneuvering her way into a position of dominance over her rivals, the Julii. It is a mark of her own prowess that she can do this through a tender seduction. Again, sex and exposed bodies are conflated with war here and used as a spectacular and performative act that resolves or reveals a power dynamic. The montage sequences ends on a close-up of Cleopatra, her eyes large in the frame and dancing with the light of the candles, having successfully won Caesar’s love and therefore his protection. The camera then tracks into the candle flames, and the shot dissolves into one of Servilia’s bedroom, the camera still tracking in the same direction, and holds on her face, masked in shadow. Both women are united by the track, each having achieved what they want by the end of the sequence. This is a very visual way to show goals being accomplished, and a clear choice to combine the development of relationships and changing of power dynamics with a distinct visual presentation – the actual sex parts. It is a choice only available to pay-cable and one suited to HBO. The show gets to look sexy and convey information cinematically at the same time.

Verbal profanity serves a different purpose. It is also another strategy that the show uses in order to richly layer its world while bringing the show’s material down to a more, well, profane level. It is this profanity that the show sells as historical realism that is also relatable to an audience. Most of the swearing in Rome utilizes something classical. Antony playfully swears an oath on “Juno’s cunt,” and Vorenus’ go-to curse is “Sons of Dis,” and while in Egypt Pullo sullenly dubs the climate “hotter than Vulcan’s cock.” All three profanities
incorporate a modern base swear word with a classical, and specifically mythological, reference.xxxii There is a clear, conscious linkage between the modern obscenities and period detail, meant to create that fusion of high and low material that Rome is about at the core of its construction. Although several characters use the more archaic sounding “mumping” as a obscene intensifier, the rest of profanity in the show is straight English swears: truly English, too, as ‘bugger,’ and ‘bollocks,’ both crop up regularly. The frequency of swearing is not quite as high as the level in Deadwood but it is a consistent part of the show’s language, as well as HBO’s own set of network conventions. Of course the network has (mostly comedy) shows like The Larry Sanders Show, wherein profanity is present but not ever a dominant force within the dialog. But cussing is one of the format’s, and the channel’s, prime means of differentiation from cable and network TV fare. The language in Rome is definitely doctored in order to include profanity for this purpose. To be fair, the show also uses swearing and cursing for dramatic effect. One of the most memorable scenes in the show, in the fifth episode of the first season, is the casting of an actual curse, intoned by, of course, the scorned Servilia. The scene is shot with smooth, circular tracks around Servilia’s face, intercut with the detail of her stylus tracing the lines on the papyrus scroll. As the tenor and cadence of her voice builds, the detail cutaways move to her stylus scratching and stabbing desperately at a stick figure on a lead scroll. The smooth circles that slowly accelerate create a rather mesmerizing effect that pairs well with the dialog; it’s worth quoting the curse against Caesar in full:
Servilia: “By the spirits of my ancestors I curse Gaius Julius Caesar. Let his penis wither. Let his bones crack. Let him see his legions drown in their own blood. Gods of the Inferno, I offer you his limbs, his mouth, his speech, his hands, his liver, his heart, his stomach. Gods of the Inferno, let him suffer deeply, and I will rejoice and sacrifice to you.”

There is an intentional conflation here of Caesar’s physical attributes and political power, a combination of Caesar’s inmost and private parts (penis, bones, liver), and the parts that give him public agency (legions, speech, hands). The very repetition of physical details, ordinary in themselves, of Caesar is what gives the curse its momentum; the language is more chilling, delivered in a monotone of fury by Lindsey Duncan, because of how simple and specific it is. This is what Rome does best: it takes a small focal point, but shapes it to have as much of an impact as anything shot in widescreen. Of course, Rome is also playing its realism card here, because that curse is actually based on a historical Egyptian curse.

The most notable instance of low profanity, on the other hand, occurs in episode two of the second season. Here, Vorenus, still silently raging with grief after his wife’s death, calls a meeting of warring urban gangs on orders from Antony to make a peace. They meet under the auspices of the goddess Concord, and several minor characters make much of the sanctity of the peace set up by the goddess – represented by a Mary-like wooden statue. In the course of the meeting, Vorenus’ power to control the gangs is put into question, and he responds by smashing the goddess statue against a column and bellowing, “I am a son of Hades! I fuck Concord in her arse!” The contrast of the silent soundtrack,
the flying splinters, and rage etched into Kevin McKidd’s face all sell the violence of the declaration and the breaking of a huge taboo, and the stunned Roman gangsters are appropriately shocked into submission. This, again, is an instance of profane violence, in place of the violence of combat, being used by Vorenus to achieve his goals. With verbal profanity as well as visual, *Rome* is all about how characters are able to utilize them to further propagate their own influence.

*DE PATRE VOSTRO...*

Ultimately, the show was perhaps too unrelenting in its cutely clever allusions, and had its feet spread too unevenly between the stately monumentality of film epics and the camp of previous epic series, to accrue as large a following as HBO hoped. It certainly did not sustain a viewership large enough to justify the incredible budget costs to the series; and once the BBC pulled out of funding the show, it was finished.xxxii But the way that the series defines and presents itself is done in a way that could not have been aired on network or basic cable television, and not just because of the multiple occasions for orgies. *Rome* is a narrative creation of the premium cable and specifically the HBO narrative mold, promoting a show-world that comes off as more authentic for being less elevated. As such, the series utilizes the tools available to a premium cable show in order to create recognizably epic spectacle in ways that more practical for a TV budget: it transfers the epic hero’s arena of action from the battlefield into the bedroom, and uses the sex and profanity in order to
create a level of violence that acts as a substitute for graphic violence (although there is plenty of that on a small scale as well). The show does try to meet filmic modes of excess halfway, however, with its massive sets, hordes of Italian extras, and targeted use of CGI to evoke a visual sense of scale. The show may sometimes get caught between the humor generated by the plebs and the melodrama of the patricians, but their stories are purposefully interwoven in order to create a deeper, and seemingly more ‘realistic’ interpretation of the period. Overall, what *Rome* does is play with traditional epic narratives, both in history and film, by dirtying them up, diverting them through the actions of the ‘lower’ characters, and throwing in massive amounts of sex. It is this play that gives the show its richness, that caters to an intellectual viewership by engaging the audience on a level removed from the show’s universe, and also that sort of makes the series a one-trick pony. The series’ choice to refocus the ancient epic, however, was a huge departure from previous depictions of the genre on television in the 2000s. Though later shows chose different centers of focus and means to differentiate themselves, *Rome* paved the way for all other premium cable epics to come.

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ix They were huge successes. The season four premiere of *The Sopranos* drew, according to the Nielsen, 13.4 million viewers. The season four premiere of *Lost* also captured 13.4, airing on a
network available to a wider potential audience than HBO's subscriber pool. Data taken from <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com>


xiv See xii.

xv Compare:

xvi Even Roman slums have splashes of bright colors:

xvii The Roman war machine at work:
This scene is a representation of the only historical traces of Vorenus and Pullo, centurions mentioned by Caesar in *The Gallic Wars* and singled out for the valor of Pullo’s charge and Vorenus’ rescue of him. That Pullo is drunk during the moment is typical of *Rome’s* irreverent flexibility towards its sources.

An Epic (TV) Battle:

An impractically large eagle:

Triumph of the Roman Will:

Triumph?
The paint was part of his assumption of the guise of Jupiter. The show does not explain this, but does not need to, with the earlier emphasis on display. *Rome* can afford to be a little bit more exotic, while *Gladiator* relies more heavily on painting and other films for its iconography.

Note the sign:

The Kalends are literally the first day of the month according to the Roman calendar.

"The Road to Calydon", "Eye of the Beholder," and "The Wrong Path" respectively.

300 is an exception, and also has a woman using sex to try and accomplish political ends. Although in that film, Gorgo’s semi-forced liaison with an unctuous councilor is more of a close-your-eyes-and-think-of-Sparta affair.

A slight exception: the scene between Pullo and Cleopatra in episode eight of season one. And even that scene is played for humor, as it cuts to poor Vorenus, who has to camp in his kip tent outside, forced to listen not only to the two of them going at it, but also a number of Cleopatra’s attendants, doing some kind of tribal ululating during the act.


Vorenus excuses Antony’s behavior by pointing out that the general is currently not under Caesar’s eagle standard while potentially raping a farm girl.

The backstory here is that Servilia, once a lover of Caesar’s but scorned by him, seduces Octavia, his niece, in order to use her to bring down Caesar’s family.

Dis is Dis Pater, the god of the underworld who preceded Hades in the development of the Roman mythos. Juno is of course the Roman name for Hera, queen of the Olympian pantheon, and Vulcan is the Roman smith-god, ever at his hot, but not-so-hot-as-Egypt, forge. Because of the modern base, however, none of this background information is necessary for a viewer to understand the foul intent behind the references, nor their conscious link with classical source material. The humor comes through understanding these references, though. Otherwise, they are just not as satisfying as Ian McShane’s many and varied deliveries of, “Cocksucker!”

Interestingly enough, the BBC kept the *Rome* sets long enough to do an episode of *Doctor Who* with them, set in the last days of Pompeii; it even included future Companion, Karen Gillan, in a bit part.
Refocusing the narrative of the Fall of the Roman Republic through plebeian eyes in order to leave an audience with a different impression of known historical events is an intricate and highly intellectual endeavor, and it is not for everyone. On the opposite end of the sophistication spectrum from *Rome* is *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, a gleefully blunt and bloody retelling of the titular Thracian rebel’s days as a gladiator in Capua. Fantastical where the other is suffused in precise period detail, crude and direct where the other uses allusion and omission, shot almost entirely against green screen where the other based production on massive outdoor stages in Italy, the intentions and executions of these two shows could not be more different. While *Rome* operates with an awareness of the Big Hollywood epics of the Fifties and Sixties, *Spartacus* owes almost nothing to the 1960 Kubrick/Douglas film besides a line of dialog. But just because the show is of a different mold from its HBO contemporary does not mean that *Spartacus* any less successfully takes up (by completely ignoring) established tropes of the epic and merges them with the adult-entertainment format expectations of pay-cable, creating a hybrid that is distinct. It has the particular challenge of having to define and differentiate itself against an established model of narrative structure and serial focus – the intellectual, so-called ‘novelistic’ storytelling of HBO – on a network with less money, less prestige, and a smaller, more general subscriber base interested in popular contemporary Hollywood films. So the series bolts in the other direction. The
show constructs a unique universe, defined through its individual visual style but propelled by its most soapy of melodramas. It delights as equally in the immediacy and modular focus of arena brawls and Roman orgies as it does in tracing and torturing the long-term hopes and ambitions of its cast of slaves and citizens. *Spartacus*, when it operates on all cylinders, uses sex and violence in a supremely expressive, emotionally graphic manner. The show is completely lowbrow, silly, and excessive in everything, to the point where it departs completely from any kind of fidelity to its historical period (although the show does have touches of it). However, *Spartacus* also utilizes the long-form storytelling so promoted by the premium cable format to develop a few, key character goals and emotional relationships rather than the intricately plotted, slow narrative sprawl of the HBO model. Although closer to the cable/network format in its narrative scope, the show’s use of censorable material in service to its orgasmic sensibility sets it apart; it would be impossible to make the show in any other format besides pay-cable.

ARE YOU READY?

In sharp contrast to competitor HBO, the Starz network did not start creating its own original dramatic programming until 2005. The channel first began broadcasting in 1994, over two decades after its biggest competitors HBO and Showtime got their start, with a focus on airing major studio releases and award-winning films. The channel had a hard time of it in the Nineties,
changing hands a couple of times and in 1997 reporting a $150 million loss in revenue. However, Starz rebounded in the ‘aughts, and by March, 2011 had gained 18 million subscribers, just 1 million shy of Showtime but still well removed from HBO’s 28 million.xxxv Like HBO, the Starz brand has branched out across multiple channels and crafted specific focuses to each, including Starz Kids and Family, Starz Comedy, Starz in Black (formerly Starz BET Movies), and (my personal favorite, the channel marketed specifically to a youth audience) Starz Edge.xxxvi The changes in the brand’s slogans are, in kind of a poetic way, illustrative of the channels sifting for a clear identity, moving from, among others, Only on Starz and No Other Movie Channel (in 1994) to #1 in New Hit Movies (in 2000) to Are You Ready? (in 2008).xxxvii The channel has shifted its definition from a catalogue of movies of various descriptions to something more nebulous that includes original content, but from all of these mottos, there is the sense of definition against more the established networks, of making the argument for Starz as an alternative to Showtime and HBO, either as the keeper of exclusive content, the best at a given kind of content, or the network that will surprise you with exciting content. The network has produced or co-produced six dramatic series to date, and with only Boss and Spartacus airing at the time of this writing it is hard to pick apart any consistent characteristics of the Starz programming slate besides the usual premium cable predilections for nudity and violence. Both are scanty in terms of awards and critical praise.xxxviii However, of the network’s six produced dramas, two – Camelot and Spartacus – qualify as historical epics, as fine an indicator as any of the genre’s current popularity
among the premium networks. Examining both these series, one is struck by how dissimilar they are to each other. They create, for better and worse, completely unique show universes, in respect to each other and to everything else on the Starz network. *Rome* shares a strong kinship in tone and narrative structure with *Deadwood*, *The Sopranos*, and *Boardwalk Empire*, although those series all were created by different people and aired at different times. *Spartacus*, fortunately, is nothing like *Crash*.

*Spartacus: Blood and Sand* first aired on January 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2010, to largely dismal reviews.\textsuperscript{xxxix} The aspect universally mentioned in all immediate reactions to the series was its visual similarity to the film *300*.\textsuperscript{xl} Although production of the series is based in New Zealand, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* was shot entirely on sound stages with heavily abstract landscape effects added in later. This is the exact opposite approach of *Rome*, which created massive standing outdoor sets in Italy to achieve its level of scale. But it was one of necessity. *Blood and Sand*’s budget was well under half of *Rome*’s, limiting the traditional means – large and lavishly dressed sets, outdoor settings, hordes of extras – epics have to make themselves properly, well, epic.\textsuperscript{xli} Still, the show’s premiere received .659 million viewers, a network record at the time, and Nielsen rating of .3 in adults 18-49; its viewership grew steadily, the finale garnering 1.227 million viewers.\textsuperscript{xlii} Its viewership, too, is not particularly linked to a specific community or the Starz brand. Since the advent of the internet, fan websites are one of the key ways that viewers can reach out to one another and have a communal experience of watching a television series, but aside from the official Starz forum and comment
threads on episode reviews on sites like The AV Club and IGN, there are not
distinct hubs for Spartacus fans online. Starz main online vehicle of promotion
has been through ancillary content, a motion-comic and video games playable on
Facebook. The youth/masculine bent to both of these suggests that the kind of
viewer the network is trying to court is the same teenage boy who liked 300.
This demographic, though, is pretty different from the demographic that would
most shine to Boss, older, urbane, Frazier/West Wing fans - that show has no
promotional Facebook games (yet). The network has not established that same
sense of unified quality in its slate or the Sopranos-property that will define its
brand. All HBO shows, whether campy like True Blood or more high flown like
Boardwalk Empire, have a veneer both of edginess and sophistication; they are
not actually alike in tone, but have the same membership card, as it were, to the
swankiest country club in the land of premium cable. Rome is also soap, but tries
to take the high road. Spartacus comes in through the service entrance: it is
definitely on the low road.

Although the show was immediately renewed for a second season at the
time of its premiere, its trajectory since its first season has been heavily altered
by the health problems and eventual death of the lead actor of Blood and Sand,
Andy Whitfield. Production on Season 2 was initially delayed in March 2010 due
to Whitfield being diagnosed with Non-Hogkin's lymphoma. This led to the
production of six episode mini-season/mini-series prequel to the first season
titled Spartacus: Gods of the Arena which utilized other actors in the series and
focused on a new lead gladiator, Gannicus (Dustin Clare). Whitfield himself
appears only briefly in a voice-over. The mini-series aired first on January 21st, 2011, and was better received critically than Blood and Sand, although cited as more of the same and good only if you like the kind of experience that the show offers. Whitfield bowed out of the role in September of 2011, and another Australian actor, Liam McIntyre, was recast as the troublesome Thracian. The show’s second full season, Spartacus: Vengeance premiered on January 27th, 2012, and will run ten episodes, airing its finale on March 30th, 2012. Deadline constraints prevents this chapter from discussing the show’s second season in its entirety, however I will discuss the ways in which McIntyre’s recasting as Spartacus has been integrated into the show and the general trends of the second season’s first four episodes, how they compare to the course of the first season. That the show has survived and thrived with a different – and even without – a Spartacus demonstrates how much more open its world is than the simple retelling of the Third Servile War of 73 BCE that most treatments of the story employ, from the rightly famed Kubrick film of 1960 on down a truly, truly awful mini-series, also called Spartacus, broadcast on USA in 2004. Blood and Sand takes the approach of focusing on Spartacus’ rise in the arena, and thus is actually able to make episodes more modular – episode 1.04 is about Spartacus fighting in an underground, unofficial dog-fight-like arena while 1.10 revolves around a party thrown by Spartacus’ master Batiatus (John Hannah) during which the gladiators fight as part of the entertainment for high society Romans. Rome is essentially a political melodrama that unfolds slowly and inexorably across two seasons; there’s no Christmas episode, as it were. Blood and Sand is
closer to networks and basic cable in that while each episode develops the show's characters and complicates their motivations, each episode's circumstances, tone, and narrative structure are variable and not dependent on the overarching narrative of slave revolt; the show makes up for this similarity, of course, with such a glut of sex and violence that would make even Tony Soprano blush.

**THIS IS SPARTA/CUS!**

We always wanted to tell this story in a very graphic novel way,” says DeKnight, who has also written several comic book arcs...[Zack Snyder] took a giant leap forward with what was possible with ‘300’ and we definitely wanted to see if we could take elements of that technology and apply it to TV in a way it hasn’t been seen in TV.’

‘One [reason for the show’s style] was to stick with the graphic novel presentation we were shooting for and the other reason was because we didn’t want to turn people off by making everything brutally realistic. There are moments in the series where we do go realistic and we pick them very carefully... Otherwise, Rob [Tapert, the other showrunner] and I both want to present it in a very operatic way.

[Rome] was incredibly expensive...Our budget isn’t anywhere close. It’s the same with ‘300,’ which if you crunched the numbers is twice our budget for a two-hour movie and we have 13 hours..."\[xlvii\]

This series of quotes the series creator Steven S. DeKnight gave in an online interview sheds some light on the economic and creative reasonings behind the show’s choice of a distinctively comic-book aesthetic. The visual style of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* would not exist without the movie *300*. The one has
stolen wholesale from the other. The show consciously and faithfully emulates the film’s look in its overall palette of abstract, CG landscapes and its expressive and exaggerated use of color, and well, just compare these two screen shots:

![Screen Shots](image)

The color scheme in these two shots is almost identical; the landscapes in the background of both are gauzily out of focus; even the rays of sunshine are exaggerated in both in the same way, casting dramatic shadows and emphasizing the (well sculpted) arms of Leonidas and the gladiator extra. Both film and show shoot their actors against green screens and consciously make them pop out of the backgrounds, which, with their dusty, copper-y color palate, exist almost on a separate plane from the action in the foreground. There is a disconnect between the characters and their environment that appears as though they are moving through atmospheric landscape paintings: an effect usually held out as a criticism of bad CGI, but here it so saturates the presentation that it becomes a part, a physical property, of the how the show defines its universe. This accomplishes a couple of things. First, by making the world of the show a visually abstract, non-real setting, it provides a level of distance for the viewer to accept the graphic actions depicted onscreen. If the thing looks like a comic book, then
it is easier to treat the violence within them as one would treat comic-book violence, and therefore easier to have more and more extravagant violence. Secondly, because the show’s uniquely painted or abstracted backgrounds are aesthetically interesting on their own, they take on their own kind of wondrous scope. The naturalistic (still CG) Rome of Gladiator is gigantic by design so that the viewer wonders at the scale of the set – remember that impractically large eagle during Commodus’ triumph. Blood and Sand cannot exaggerate on the same level of grandiose, and so it goes completely in the other direction, creating alien textures that actually appear all the more mythical (and therefore elevated to such a level as to be epic in their own right) for being unrealistic. It does 300 style on the cheap so thoroughly and so much that it ceases to be a small screen’s pale imitation of the fuller imagery of its cinematic cousin and instead becomes the show’s visual bona fides. That mythical look, however, undercuts the sensation that the events being depicted onscreen exist in a strictly historical past. 300 skirts this problem just by being hyper-stylized, but it also does trouble to frame its narrative through David Wenham’s voice-over relating the story of the other 299 Spartans who followed Leonidas into the Hot Gates; the visual exaggeration is reflective of the exaggeration in the storytelling itself. Blood and Sand signals the same distance within the visual presentation of its opening title, and wholly embraces an animation aesthetic. The title lasts only five seconds, and is almost an inversion of a piece of Rome’s opening credits sequence. A single shot, it begins on a scuffed, red and black background, and drawings of the show’s main characters in bright yellow relief flash by as the camera quickly
tracks back, as if moving through layers of wall art. Then, streaks of blood flash across the foreground of the shot, obscuring the characters, and a bright yellow streak appears horizontally across the frame, *SPARTACUS: BLOOD AND SAND* seemingly embossed onto it. Last, the streak of paints spreads outward and covers the rest of the frame, giving the picture the look of a wall onto which this bright red and yellow spatter was thrown. In case you were looking away at that particular moment, *Blood and Sand* also fades from the title card into an episode title, red lettering against a black background. It sets itself up as no more than what it is: a TV show. It has intense stylization – the quick, violent spatters of the paint – but these are not real, normal Romans moving through the streets of Capua. The characters are drawn; these are not real people, and this is not history. *Blood and Sand* is history ramped into the territory of lavish melodrama.

Beyond simply the show’s use of exaggerated color and abstract landscapes to create a unique, unreal, mythic scope to the show’s universe, *Blood and Sand*’s has in its kit a key device to heighten, intensify, and elevate the events it presents on screen into an epic mythical realm and that is the manipulation of shot speed, with a particular emphasis on slow motion. The show is absolutely rife with slo-mo action sequences, the frequency of which work, in effect, much like the overt manipulation of the show’s landscape through CGI: they help move the fight sequences onto an unreal plane of action, where graphic violence is acceptable to look at and gore is merely part of a beautiful composition; when you slow an action down, each frame becomes ‘bigger’ within the action. The show does not have the budget for five spear-encrusted chariots and four tigers,
or even enough of a CG budget for an army of undead samurai swordsmen or
giant Cave Trolls with saws for hands. So it amps up the scale by making smaller
actions count for more, by focusing and lingering on the wonder of physical
movement. Stabs and leads and blocks all take on an almost balletic look. The
slo-mo saturation is a part of the visual language of the show, and is unified with
its other stylistic manipulations in the creation of a unique experience of combat
that is not remotely realistic nor even tied to a single character’s subjectivity, but
instead abstracted in order to emphasize maximum visual pleasure. By making
blood-letting aesthetically pleasing, and alternating slowed down actions with
quick bursts of activity in short cuts, the construction of *Blood and Sand*’s action
sequences creates the same morbid passion for the arena in the viewer as exists
within the world of the show. *Spartacus* arguably owes its love-affair with slow-
motion, just as *300* does, to *Gladiator*, a much more grounded presentation that
nonetheless plays with motion speed to create a subjective experience of
combat. 

Perhaps the best illustration of how the manipulation of camera speed
functions within action sequences occurs in episode 1.05, in a climactic battle
between Spartacus and Crixus on one side, and a giant albino with the aptly
named Theokoles, “the Shadow of Death,” on the other. The lead-up to the
sequence begins with an extreme long shot, completely CG, of the arena at Capua
in the center of the frame, seemingly in the center of the city, the sun cresting
over mountains to bathe the center of the arena in light. It is typical of the
expressive atmospheres in the show – this place we see is central to the world
and what is about to happen inside it will have cosmic significance. The show establishes several mini-arenas within the amphitheater. There is the central box where the Roman swells watch, the arena itself, the crowd out in the bleachers and then there is a sort of barred doorway where the other gladiators can view the games as well. The show cuts to each space in turn as clouds move in and the arena darkens, and the camera, with slow, smooth tracks, explores each space as gladiators, equestrians, and hoi polloi alike all lean onto the edges of their seats. Theokoles enters the center of the arena at normal speed, but the camera starts low to the sands, and winds up slowly towards his face as he moves closer to the camera. The camera movement and the cutting from space to space draws out the tension before the fight. Then the tension breaks, and both the sides rush towards each other, in two separate shots. Theokoles is placed in an extreme long shot and runs in slow motion from the left to right of frame, the camera tracking with him at a low angle; the visual distance between him and the backdrop of the arena and his size relative to the height of the frame makes him appear larger than life, and the slowed-down action of his run makes it appear as though he is moving through a space with moon-gravity. Our heroes, on the other hand, are placed much closer to the camera, which lets them run all the way out of frame at normal speed. They are operating in a world closer to actual earth physics, and so seem outclassed by the giant Greek, even though there are two of them. The three clash in a very expressive long shot but the way the camera speed changes is interesting first because it is tied to the characters and second because it establishes the rhythm of the sequence. It starts with
Theokoles charging in slow-motion, and then as Spartacus and Crixus enter the frame, the speed is pushed in the other direction, going in fast motion for a second at their initial clash, and then settles on normal speed; but at this point, the camera has begun to slowly track around and behind the fight, there is a fantastic instant when a sword hits a shield and the camera shakes, maintaining the feeling of suspended motion even as the actions on screen increase. In the next shot, the slowed-motion of Spartacus’ shield moving past the camera matches the motion of the camera itself, even though it is placed on the opposite side of the conflict, given the whole fight, from all angles, a kind of memorizing fluidity. Of course the scene then completely shatters that smoothness with very quick shots, of the fight from the arena floor, of Spartacus inside his helmet, of the three different crowds. Still, even within these quick shots, there is an alternation between the slowed-down motion of Theokoles’ swords banging onto our heroes’ shields and quick camera movement around the fighters as they recover positions. Then, in the moment of first blood, Spartacus moves across the frame rather rapidly, but in the same shot, blood leaps out of Theokoles’ gut in slow motion. There is a marked ebb and flow to the speed of the fight, with surprises in action coming fast and then being slowed down to allow the viewer to savor them. The show shoots the fight making sure to elongate all the choice bits. The slowed speed also helps negate the horror of the actual bloodshed; cartoon-red blood that bursts out of men’s bodies like water released from a dam and simply flows across the frame. We don’t have to see it behave like actual blood in real time and that makes it safer to watch. At the fight’s midpoint,
when Spartacus and Crixus think they have won, the crowd in the stands, which has up until this point been shot at normal or faster than normal speed, is suddenly shot in slow-motion, their bodies sinking down in the frame, going silent, and looking out in wonder. As Theokoles gets to his feet, clouds buzzing with lighting roll across frame. That is what Blood and Sand loves to do with its style of combat. It provides fast-paced action with quick cuts from a variety of viewpoints, but then isolates moments of drama through framing and shot speed, and spices them with expressive colors and CG landscapes. The resulting simply decoded, aesthetically pleasing visuals – this Shadow of Death fellow looks sinister can call forth lightning when he gets angry – abstract and elevate physical action to a place where it can be appreciated on its own or intensify an action to make it more exciting, or heighten moments of anticipation and suspense. Theokoles does not just knock Crixus down when he wounds the Gaul. The long shot of Crixus falling is a slower speed to begin with, and as he descends, gets even slower; dust in the wind flows past his form and sand ripples out like water when he hits the ground. The moment is doubly horrible because there is a rhythmic jerk when the speed slows down further, and the elongation of the moment only intensifies the viewer’s worry for the show’s favorite Gaul. In the next shot, the camera is placed about at Theokoles’ elbow as he and Spartacus trade blows, but because it is much shorter, shot at normal speed, and the camera moves with the swing of the giant’s sword, it is all the more shocking and abrupt. Blood and Sand constructs its fights to be both immediate and viscerally thrilling and to be sort of abstractly, viciously beautiful.
The moment of triumph in the sequence, the killing blow, is covered first in a long shot, with slowed down speed and expressive lighting of Crixus using the glare off a helmet to blind Theokoles; next in a series of quick cuts (Spartacus grabbing his sword, thrusting and parrying, reaction shots from the cheering crowd that shorten and then lengthen, building and stretching excitement for the death-dealing) and finally climaxing in a cartoon-gory beheading that is quickly masked by surfeit of blood.\textsuperscript{14v}

The show does not just lavish these manipulations of camera speed and color on scenes of combat. Like Rome, an equal, if not dominant, arena is that of the bedroom. In episode 1.09, playfully entitled “Whore,” Lucretia attempts to curry favor for her husband by plying Illythia, the powerful legate’s wife, with a sexy gladiator (Spartacus of course, although for reasons best not delved into he is presented to her in disguise) to do what she will with for an evening. This particular sequence begins with two shots that work in the same way the atmospheric long shots to in the arena. Illythia is shown first, as two completely naked (women, and I mention this as clarification because the show isn’t shy about full-frontal nudity from both sexes) slaves remove a gossamer curtain in slow-motion. It is the manipulation of the camera speed, again, that signals spectacle, that gives the viewer, by slowing down time, an unreal space in which to regard physical forms in motion. The camera slow-tracks into a candle-lit room and draws close to Illythia, also wearing a mask, lying on a divan, and after a cut the camera actually tracks along her body to her eyes behind the mask. The next shot mirrors the first, revealing Spartacus himself behind an opposite set of
The slow motion and the symmetry revealed by the depth in staging here, the high contrast between the colorful red and yellow curtains and the rest of the room, create the same effect as the extreme long shot of the Capuani amphitheater in episode five: it establishes a stylized, exaggerated space within which it makes sense for exaggerated things to happen; it also very clearly, through the frames in the compositions, places these two people on offer for the viewer to ogle without prompting the guilt of voyeurism. Illythia crosses the pool in the atrium, slinks onto a divan, and raises herself to meet her gladiator, all either slowed in camera speed or in the speed of the performance. The sex proper is covered from a number of angles, and there is a gradual movement from left to right in terms of the camera placement, which gives the sense of a sort of global view of the action – although that pattern is broken up by two eye-of-God angles over the divan, one covering both partners and one closer in on Illythia's reaction, at the moment of entry. The cutting pattern pretty well matches the pace of their lovemaking, shots passing more rapidly as they reach climax, and moments of transition between sexual positions are done twice in three different ways, the first in a long shot showing them upright, framed between an opening in the curtains which place them as part of the symmetry of the room as a whole, the second with a sudden, sharp change in speed, the third using an eye-of-God angle (although not necessary one that's placed too far physically from the bed). What is interesting about this scene, besides the obvious, is that for all the visual manipulation that initiates the sequence, it is the scene's use of sound that facilitates re-entry into the not-quite-as-heightened
reality of the show world. There is only an appropriately tribal score over the sequence, with choral vocals coming in as the pace picks up, but about ten seconds before the couple are to be rudely interrupted by Lucretia, Illythia’s gasps and heavy breathing start to appear on the soundtrack. While both are masked (and Spartacus is covered in golden oil/glitter paint to objectify him even further) and with only score for backing, the action is removed a little from the characters, and exists on its own terms of spectacle, in a time and space that are stylized precisely for that purpose. Bringing in the sound tied to characters brings the story out of the more unreal and back to the reality of the show.

While what I have discussed above is certainly the dominant style the show uses for its action sequences, both in battle and the bedroom, it is not the show’s only strategy. There are moments of action rendered naturalistically, and consciously done so to make them stand out. One example occurs in episode four, in which one of the pit fighters actually takes the face off of his fallen opponent and then wears it over his own. There’s no cartoon gore, nor any obvious manipulation of the image; it is shot as though out of the Saw cycle of horror films. The brutality of the image helps differentiate the pit arena from the honorable and glorious sands of the amphitheater. It is also a shocking image in its own right, and so transforms the face-wearer into a monstrous horror. This is a moment where the show gets closer to how 300 depicts its villains: physically mangled and deformed monsters covered in leather and piercings as opposed to the bare, muscled image of the heroes. An entirely different example occurs in the fourth episode of season two, when while Spartacus and his band of outlaws
are being pursued, his love interest Mira (Katrina Law) kills her first Roman
soldier by basically leaping onto him like a flying squirrel and stabbing him
repeatedly in the neck; the action is covered in four shots, a long shot of the
jump, and three quick shots that draw closer and closer to her face as she
repeatedly punctures his jugular. The entire action is covered at regular speed,
although there is a whooshing sound effect to emphasize that she has just leapt
onto the man. While the blood is definitely bright red blood, it does not flow out
in slow motion or spatter-hit the lens of the camera. The treatment of this
particular act of violence mostly subjugates the observation of style in favor of
color – Mira previously vowed that she would fight for herself, and my, but
watch how she fights. There is a give and take between the atmospheric
pageantry of the show’s backdrops and color and its comic-book spatter
violence. There is an alternation between the lingered-on spectacle of the bodies
of gladiators in physical motion – and here is where the show is really akin to
*Rome*, which in a less stylized way also builds the observation of bare chests into
every single episode of its run – and quick cuts and kinetic camera movement. It
is this alteration that keeps the style from ever becoming a just
monolithic exercise in slick CGI and slow motion.

*Blood and Sand* differentiates itself through its visual style, distinct from
all other interpretations of *Rome* on television. Although the show steals
unabashedly and wholesale from the film *300*, it puts the same stylistic devices
to its own dramatic purposes. *300* uses its stylization to create a whole world
that is a fable-space, a story obviously based on the Frank Miller graphic novel,
and full of innumerable hordes of inhuman monsters and heroic warriors as befits its source material. *Blood and Sand* goes to that same mythic place during scenes of action – of either a violent or a sexual nature – but also moves back from it. The stylization suspends action sequences on their own plane of existence, while the plot of the series takes place in a less exaggerated space. The important thing is that this approach to creating spectacle is a huge departure from the large-scale, detail-oriented, intellectual naturalism of *Rome*. Its surplus of graphic violence and explicitly sexual imagery is made possible by the pay-cable format, and it is the freedom from censorship that allows the show to reach properly epic heights of spectacle.

“PLACE EAR TO CHEST AND YOU WILL FIND IT ABSENT SOUND.”

The other non-visual aspect of the show that sets its universe apart from other kinds of television is the particular diction of its dialog. People in *Blood and Sand* have a very casual relationship to articles, most extremely so when cussing. While characters in *Rome* operate more or less as voluble Englishmen in their delivery – Vorenus and Pullo on Caesar’s march to Rome: “How could Mars allow such a thing to happen?” “Maybe he was out having a crap and missed it!” – with the result that historical fustiness, especially as regards Roman religion, is undercut for humorous purposes by modern turns of phrase; the overall tenor of the dialog is modern, although slightly formal, English. It works for that series because the setting is a more naturalistic rendering of an ancient culture, but
*Blood and Sand* uses abstracted language in its dialog to convey a sense of the historical period. Of course, the result of such tinkering with syntax leads not just to a sense of historicity, but also to humor. That Batiatus (John Hannah) crows, “At last, the Gods remove cock from fucking ass!” with complete sincerity is not a nod to period details. It is certainly campy, but imagine the difference if the line had been written in more grammatically correct English – At last the gods have removed their cock from my fucking ass! There’s too much delay, too much padding, between the key words there. When stripped of auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and articles, the line has its own punch to match its sentiment. It is the aural equivalent of CG blood spraying against the camera lens: it is obviously artificial, but that artificiality is a part of what elevates the universe of the show into entertaining absurdity. Even when not trying to mine humor out of inventive ways of combining the profane and the divine in obscenities, the show uses skewed dialog in order to foreground the emotional needs of the characters and provide emotional clarity. Characters in Spartacus are not subtle about expressing what they are feeling. When Spartacus is trying to recruit Crixus to join in his escape plans, their exchange is as follows:

**Crixus:** My escape would not aid Naevia. How would I purchase her freedom, or even find her?
**Spartacus:** Join me, and we will find her together.
**Crixus:** You know that in another life, you and I may have been as brothers. But not in this one. I must win my freedom in the arena.
**Spartacus:** Then we stand in the way of each other’s cause.
**Crixus:** And both are just, but if I fall I’d have you swear to find Naevia, see her freed.
**Spartacus:** And I would have word that if you are victorious, one day you will have Batiatus’ life... Tomorrow then, one of us dies.
**Crixus:** I fear it was always fated so.
Reading those lines out of context, the clichés – brother warriors on opposite 
sides of a conflict, freedom in the arena, just quests to bring down an evil,
corrupt Roman and/or free a slave-woman, are quite striking. And again, if they 
were rendered closer to the way that characters speak on Law and Order, closer 
to normal English, they would be overbearing. But because the dialog is its own 
animal, attuned to the level of absurdity in the show’s universe, what comes 
through are not the words themselves, but the emotions behind them. A viewer 
can either accept that people speak this way in the world of Blood and Sand, or 
the viewer can just not watch Blood and Sand. Even further, because the style of 
dialog is tied to the heightened reality of the show, the show can get away with 
being quite obvious about it. Character goals may be tucked between almost 
Shakespearean turns of phrase, but are not obscured by their density. The 
exaggerated language with its own particular cadence still has clear meanings. It 
is readily apparent from the quote above what the stakes are for Crixus and 
Spartacus, why they are going to kill each other, and what their relationship is 
with one another that each would trust his killer to carry out his own dearest 
wishes. It’s a deeply melodramatic style of writing dialog, bare in both diction 
and meaning.

But the secret of Spartacus: Blood and Sand is that as much as it visually 
shares in common with 300, it owes still as much in its narrative structure to 
Upstairs, Downstairs. Although the first few episodes begin more in the vein of a 
traditional hero’s journey – an unnamed Thracian warrior with an attractive 
wife is pressed into the service of the Roman legions, bucks the authority of the
nefarious legate Glaber, and is hauled back to Italy as a slave who will become a gladiator (a gladiator...who will defy a empire republic)\textsuperscript{lv} – by the end of episode four the show establishes a symbiotic relationship between the world of the gladiatorial ludi\textsuperscript{a} and the Roman world of marble villas and candle-lit orgies. The characters in each are dependent on each other in order to realize their emotional desires. Consider the previously discussed sex scene from episode nine. I have already gone into the ways that, visually, it is isolated as an instance of pure spectacle. However that spectacle is nonetheless grounded in dramatic stakes, and the results of the action leads to more drama. Here’s a quick summary for context: Lucretia befriends Illythia in order to help raise the position of her politically ambitious husband. But in this episode, the daughter of an even more powerful man comes to town and Lucretia is ready to shift her attentions to that woman. Illythia, intent on showing up a rival by being even better friends with Lucretia, responds by accepting her offer to use a gladiator for sex, and requests Crixus, the muscular Gaul. This is a problem for Lucretia, who has genuine affection for Crixus, and has been sleeping with him in order to try and conceive a son for her beloved Batiatus. So she gives Spartacus to Illythia instead. This is all super soapy, yes, but it adds an operatic intensity to the sex scene. The long-term viewer of the show is also watching it as Lucretia’s bait-and-switch bid for power, as Illythia unknowingly sleeps with the man who almost killed and ruined her husband, and as Spartacus unknowingly sleeping with the wife of the man who condemned his own wife to slavery and death. The can stand on its own – the show does a fine job of keeping character goals clear
and the particular style of dialog delivers conflicts in a very clear, blunt way – but for a long-term viewer the images take on additional meaning. Those sharp, quick shots of the pair’s limbs moving across each other or towards the camera become more violent and shocking within the overall plot of the episode. It is just as much an action sequence as anything set in the arena. There is enough stylization to the scene that plot concerns do not take away from the action, but they do enhance it. The spectacle is broken ultimately by Lucretia “mistakenly” pulling back the curtains on the two with Licenia, the other aristocrat, in tow; by doing so, she corners Illythia and puts her into danger of gossip, scandal, and ruin. The sex is set up as a power transaction between two women – Illythia is showing up her richer rival and holding power over Lucretia by forcing her to surrender Crixus; so the scene, for Illythia, takes on a strong sense of conquest – and yet it ends up a trap, Lucretia ambushing the younger woman in a compromising situation and therefore able to control her through the threat of its divulgence. *Rome* has sex scenes that represent power grabs or the manipulation of characters, but nothing close to the level of soap-opera complexity present in *Blood and Sand*. And it gets even worse (or better). The show dives from a more objective spectacle into Illythia’s subjectivity as she desperately attempts to cover herself, Licenia’s derisive laughter amplified across a series of quick, extreme close-ups of her mouth and eyes. There is a buildup of tension as the cuts become rapid, then Illythia loses it, grabs the other woman, and cracks her skull open on the stone steps, the show’s signature CG blood spurting up into the air. The sequence concludes with a long shot tracking
back, framing the women through the columns: the same symmetry in the act of violence is there as in the beginning of the sex scene. The rhythmic cutting and abstracted compositions integrate this crime of passion into the same style of violence as exists in the arena, but it is the slow tracking long shot that provides a unity to the sequence as a whole, pleasure and power leading, inevitably, to pain and death. So the scene is operating on different levels: there is the level of graphic, illicit content that is rendered as spectacle, and there is the level of the show’s plot, where the action is informed and creates consequences based on the characters’ emotional desires. *Spartacus* may not have narrative sprawl in the same way that HBO shows do, but what it does have is a clear central narrative that is complicated and deepened through visual stylization. This makes the experience of watching the show not one that leans as heavily on cumulative viewing, although the show certainly rewards its regulars. It is a part of the show’s balance between modular and serial storytelling – anyone can come for the spectacle, but dedicated viewers stay for the soap. *Blood and Sand* thrives where it finds ways to combine the first (visual entertainment) with the second (viewer alignment with characters) and the show constantly creates arenas, full of sands or sheets, on which to play out both.

The series really comes into its own, ironically, once Spartacus becomes fully integrated into the class of gladiators and slaves whose grasps at happiness are dependent on the whims of Batiatus and Lucretia; and they in turn must rely on their gladiators for the fulfillment of their desires. Pullo and Vorenus very often acts as agents of plot, encountering Pompey or stealing the gold that
provides Caesar with his war chest; but the effects they have on the patrician storyline are often accidental. Spartacus’ desire to reunite with his wife directly affects his performance in the arena, which directly affects Batiatus’ fortunes and ambitions for political office. Episode ten, called “Party Favors,” is an excellent illustration of this, and is fairly representative of how a single episode of the show works in terms of structure. It begins with Spartacus and his buddy Varro (Jai Courtney) waiting to enter the arena, and the first reminds the second to keep his head in the game, however worried he is about his wife. Then we get the fight itself, but breaking up the gut-ripping and decapitations is the action in the magistrate’s box, where the gladiators’ success is thrilling the son of an important Roman and the boy’s pleasure allows Batiatus to curry favor with his father. The fight ends with Spartacus and Varro using their chains to pop the head off their most giant opponent, sending out a geyser of blood, and a deal struck to have the boy’s birthday party at Batiatus’ ludus, so that he can see gladiators fight to his heart’s content. The show opens with a spectacular action sequence as well as the establishment of an upcoming event of importance to the Romans, where the third act will take place. The first act introduces all the storylines that will play out over the course of the episode. There is no a true A plot, because while the main focus is on the upcoming party being hosted by Batiatus, his preparations are given the same amount of screen time as the C plot of Crixus training to best Spartacus and regain his the title of champion. The threads are these: Batiatus’ preparation for the party that will allow him to make contacts and initiate his political career, Varro’s reconciliation with his wife,
Lucretia’s using her influence over Illythia to get a bunch of high-class Romans to come to the party, and Naevia and Mira’s problems with an inappropriately interested guardsman. In the second act, Spartacus himself moves between most of these plots, training with Varro and taking pleasure in his friend’s happiness, coming to Naevia and Mira’s rescue by pushing the guard’s face against a brazier, taunting Crixus who takes his anger out on a new recruit, aiding Batiatus’ quest for advancement by teaching him the finer points of a board game, and training with Numerius, the magistrate’s son. Even though Spartacus does not directly interact with Illythia or Lucretia, he is a central part of that plot as well: Lucretia’s pressure makes Illythia look for ways to revenge herself on the other woman; she does this by convincing the magistrate’s son to have Spartacus fight Varro to the death at his party. The third act culminates with an exhibition match between Spartacus and Varro at the party in which Spartacus is forced to kill his best friend and afterwards Batiatus is rebuffed in his attempt to gain political favor. Each plot is in some way woven into at least one other, and the result of each has an effect upon the others. More than that, though, while the episode deals with a specific circumstance – the magistrate’s son’s party – the characters’ relationships carry directly over from prior episodes and the actions at the party directly affect the equilibrium of those relationships. Again, the show is striking a balance in its narrative structuring between modularity in the plot’s events and serialization in the emotional arcs of its characters. The narrative set-ups in *Spartacus* are distinct but a little more cumulative. Batiatus is only able to rub elbows with the elites and throw his fancy party because Spartacus is the
gladiatorial champion of Capua. The frustration of Hannah’s political ambitions and the death of Varro sets both Batiatus and Spartacus onto the deadly courses they take at the end of the season, which will lead to the death of one and the emergence of the other as a rebel leader. While each episode has its own identity, it ultimately serves a larger seasonal and series focus. It’s a balance that places the show firmly in the expectations of the basic cable/pay cable formats, over more modular network series, but differentiates it from HBO’s model.\textsuperscript{10c}

An exception to this, but one which is also illustrative of the show’s ability to experiment, (given its stronger focus on individual episodes) is the very next episode, “Old Wounds.” It picks up right where episode ten leaves off, opening on a shot of Varro’s pale and lifeless body laid out on a table. There are very clear A, B, and C plots that resolve themselves by the end of the episode, although they do not converge the way a more modular show (something like, for example, \textit{The Office}) might unite its plotlines at the end. The threads are these: Batiatus’ plans to kill the magistrate that slighted him at the party, Crixus’ return to the arena, and Spartacus’ recovery from his wounds suffered fighting Varro. The first act still establishes an appointed date, the games against the city of Pompeii, during which the third act will take place, and still opens with a measure of violence in showing Crixus training. But Spartacus’ storyline is initially isolated from the others as he begins to have hallucinations and visions on account of a festering wound. Although Spartacus is perplexed to see his sparring partner turn into Varro, there are enough shots of his open wound and bloodshot eyes to clarify for the viewer that what he is seeing is the result of a fever-state. What is
fascinating is where the episode decides to take his delirium and the use it is put
to. In his final dream, he sees himself as he was in Thrace, but dead and laid out
on a table in the *ludus*. “Why did you kill him,” his now-dead wife Sura (Erin
Cummings) appears out of nowhere and asks. Now, episode seven had already
done a finale battle in which Spartacus sees himself killing himself and thereby
wholly embracing his new identity as a gladiator; its inclusion within the vision
signals the beginning of a replay of past events where, because of Spartacus’
exaggerated perspective within the dream, he is finally able to see that it was
Batiatus himself who was responsible for Sura’s death. The vision uses almost
entirely old footage from the show, but colored in a colder, grey-blue tone, with
more slow motion and of course the inclusion of Sura and Varro, who nudge
Spartacus towards understanding. It is a pretty clever way of revealing
information with maximum impact for little effort. The logic of dreams allows
the show to skip around in time, provide point of views, and focus in on details
that would be impossible for Spartacus to put together in reality. It motivates
Spartacus’ reason for rebellion without wasting narrative on any lengthy
investigations to discover the truth. It also adds balance to the story, the
stylization of the vision sequences making up for Batiatus’ more straightforward
political maneuverings.

The show is very free with dreams, visions, and all manner of direct and
indirect subjectivity, not just of Spartacus but also of most other characters; it
has no problem undercutting its own established reality. Epic films, unless they
are hyper-stylized affairs like *Satyricon* or *300*, work very hard to establish a
credible reality that bears at least a passing resemblance to images we have of history; places where visions and direct subjectivity intrude tend to occur in combat or when a character’s state of mind is somehow effected by being drunk or dying or some kind of altered state. *Gladiator's* flashes to fields of wheat/the afterlife are a fine example of this approach. But *Blood and Sand* is not only willing to make the fevered imaginings of its lead a storyline but have that vision alter a character’s level of knowledge and lead to ramifications outside the dreamscape. All action in the show is rooted in the emotional states and desires of its characters, and the strength of them can exaggerate the presentation of its world – and this, of course, is a hallmark of a certain kind of melodrama. The show is just as much a member of the epic genre as *Rome* is, but it is less interested in sweeping political drama with historical ramifications than it is in observing over time the lives of its characters within the world, how they are circumscribed even as they strive for better things beyond their reach. In this, *Blood and Sand* is doing a different kind of storytelling than HBO shows. However, its scope is so built into its exaggerated visuals, which are themselves dependent on censorable content, that the show still meets the format expectations of viewers. The other show that Starz has in its line-up right now is the (much better critically received, but worse in ratings terms) Kelsey Grammer vehicle *Boss.* That show is a modern political drama about an unscrupulous but effective mayor of Chicago (named Tom Kane, rather suggestively if not subtly) with the twist that he has a degenerative brain disorder and cannot trust his reality, especially not of the sociopaths around him that make up his family and
staff. It takes many of the same strategies used by Spartacus – a confluence of political and personal melodrama, a somewhat spicier take on the reality of a given universe (although Boss does not come close to expressing this augmentation as visually as Spartacus does) – classes it up and puts it in a suit. Even in that suit, though, there are a ridiculous amount of sexual encounters within episodes and over the course of the show’s first season. Something about pay cable seems to demand the inclusion of a vast quantity of graphic nudity across the board, and Spartacus is, at its best, able to both set it off as spectacle and integrate it into the story Spartacus wants to tell. This is not a particularly subtle series: as the first season unfolds, you can see it gradually solving its problems: what to do if you want to have awesome, blood-and-thunder kind of entertainment (or, if the shop across the street has wrapped up all the customers looking more midbrow fare) and still have your story play out in a historical setting, what do if you want to make an epic on lesser budget, what to do if you are expected to include lots of censorable material and also want to delve into the deep, dark, messy desires of many different, and many different kinds, of people.

"I AM MYSELF AGAIN"

Perhaps the most fascinating, if initially unintentional, thing about Spartacus is that the show is able to exist and even thrive without a Spartacus. Because of Andy Whitfield’s battle with cancer, the show’s six episode, mini-
series prequel, *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena*, takes place in the House of Batiatus before its doors were darkened by the Thracian rebel. It tells the origin story of many of the characters from *Blood and Sand* as well as introduces a slew of new ones, featuring a new gladiator champion, Gannicus. The prequel is motivated by the last moments of the first season, the camera zooming in on Batiatus’ dying eyes and through them back in time five years, but after that exists completely apart from *Blood and Sand*. *Gods of the Arena* is really evidence of how the melodramatic excess and the particular visual language of the first season are enough of a definition of the show’s world to sustain any kind of story it wants to tell. In contrast, think about how viable a *The Tudors* prequel would be without Henry, but with Thomas Moore and Anne Boleyn. The mini-season ties into the series proper, rather cannily, by varying the status and relationships of the existing characters: Crixus and Ashur are introduced as raw recruits, Batiatus and Solunius (Craig Wrightson) are best friends, Lucretia is an innocent and faithful housewife, Oenomaus (Peter Mensah) only just past his prime days in the arena. So there is appeal for returning viewers in seeing how Point A becomes Point B. But the show also ties its new characters into relationships with the older ones and, as the first season does once it hits its stride, make the desires of every single person somehow dependent on the actions of another. The drama of these particular dynamics makes the mini-season accessible to the uninitiated. Oenomaus, it is revealed or simply introduced, has a wife, Melitta (Marisa Ramirez), and Gannicus at the outset is sort of a lovable playboy friend to their cute, committed couple. Batiatus and Solunius, the one eventually
engineering the death of the other, begin the series under the thumb of an even slimier Roman businessman named Tullius (Stephen Lovatt) who plots to shut them out of the games entirely.

*Gods of the Arena* is able to justify its moments of absurdity through emotional stakes driving the characters with as much skill as the back half of *Blood and Sand*. There’s plenty of 300-style ultra-violence, but what ultimately underpins it is the characters’ constant battles to achieve their desires. Perhaps nothing so encapsulates what *Spartacus* is about as does the climactic action sequence at the end of the second episode, “Missio.” Very quickly: Batiatus has lured a wealthy patron into his villa with the hope of business, and although the man is not that impressed with the gladiatorial show, he does ask for a demonstration of Gannicus’ sexual prowess (this is the mixing of combat and sex, again). The man commands him to have sex with Oenomaus’ wife as entertainment. At the same time all this is going on, the old *doctore*, or gladiator trainer, fights with Oenomaus to the death because Batiatus has appointed him the new head trainer. No one is happy about what is happening, including Batiatus and Lucretia, who five years earlier were apparently kinder and more respectful of the coupling arrangements of their slaves, and they watch with awkward helplessness. Matches on action motivate the intercutting between the two sequences – Oenomaus being knocked down by a blow to Gannicus and Melitta falling to the floor, a sword going through the *doctore’s* body cut to the moment of climax between the couple; these are not at all subtle connections – unify both the combat and the sex scenes, and the pace of movement is the same
in each, the fight reaching the point of no return just as Gannicus and Melitta forget themselves in the act. Both are presented in the standard visual language of the show, with plenty of manipulation of the shot speed, quick, kinetic cuts, expressive color and atmosphere (the fight takes place, naturally, in a lightning storm) and explicit gore/nudity. The sequence is very clearly spectacle in and of itself. But the very excess of the actions reflect the strength of the revulsion that the characters performing them have. There is a sort of brutal clarity to their emotional desires and the complications that are thrust upon them, and the actions of visual excess take place in that rather fraught emotional space. But the revulsion that the sequence wants to foster in the viewer is set up through a couple of key moments earlier on. One happens between Oenomaus and the doctore who trained him, each acknowledging their fondness and respect for the other; there’s another between the married couple and Gannicus sharing a jug of wine between them, Melitta playfully taking him to task for his devil-may-care ways and Gannicus answering rather prophetically, “Well, I may have to fuck my way clear of [unhappy circumstances].” The sequence at the end of the episode takes on extra baggage because of the character moments established leading up to it. The emotional arc does not take away from the spectacle, but forces the viewer to view it in a certain, and here deeply tragic, light. The result of that forced encounter, however, is that Gannicus and Melitta discover feelings for each other and have a clandestine physical relationship across the mini-season, and at the same time are really quite tortured over it. The instance works both as
standalone spectacle and as the catalyst for the emotional arcs of these two characters.

The show’s second season, *Spartacus: Vengeance*, takes on the different but still daunting problem of having to replace the lead character with a different actor. The show hits the reset button in a number of ways, first by recapping the first season not with clips but with motion-comic style collage of imagery with text at the bottom of the frame explaining the immediate consequences after the gladiators have begun their revolt. Swaths of red color flash across the screen as images fade in and out. This is overtly artificial, but by introducing the new Spartacus in such a way, the comic-book look of the prologue, note how his abs have artful cracks in them so as to appear like antique paint, visually distracts from the fact that it is not Andy Whitfield. The action sequence that opens the episode proper, too, begins completely out of focus as a figure runs pursued by men on horseback. Given what the intro just mentioned about hunting slaves down, and given the time the viewer has to look at the image before it becomes clear, we guess that it is Spartacus long before we see what he looks like. The image fades to black and then fades back in on Spartacus’ signature two swords pumping as he runs, again, giving all the cues that he is Spartacus before we can have a look at his face. The first episode is conscious to keep him in the frame with more familiar characters, Crixus and Mira especially, rather than alone. It also makes sure to spend equal time in familiar places, showing the arena where gladiatorial games are distracting the people of Capua from the unrest, and showing all planes of action within that space: the sands themselves, the crowd,
and the magistrate’s box full of higher-ups. That particular sequence does a really nice job of reestablishing the connection between the slaves and their masters, as news of fresh ambush by Spartacus puts the magistrate in a sour mood and causes him to condemn a gladiator in the arena. Much more than the first season, too, lines of dialog take on multiple meanings – the magistrate calls the games, “A poor showing” as he gives the thumbs down but is referring both to the games and to the efforts to catch Spartacus.\textsuperscript{xi} Not just in terms of locations, but also in overall narrative bent \textit{Vengeance} stays with the familiar as we get used to Liam McIntyre. The band of rebels does not have much of a mission except to free more slaves so that they can kill more Romans, or perhaps to help Crixus find Naevia, who had been sold to parts unknown at the end of the first season. The Romans, also, are at the start focused fairly exclusively on finding and killing Spartacus. Each episode has had distinct locations for the rebels – episode One they have a cistern outside Capua as their base, Two a villa in the countryside, Three finds them in a mine, and Four in very Middle-Earthian woodlands – but their basic survival needs, goals, and problems in leadership remain fundamentally the same. \textit{Vengeance} ramps up its serial bent a little further in this, but it does not abandon the melodramatic sympathy between the problems besetting both sides. The final way in which the show has transitioned to a new lead is through having flashbacks to the time period of \textit{Blood and Sand} with the new actors – and they are used to different effects. One is a PTSD flashback of Lucretia’s to the slave’s initial breakout and the slaughter of her husband. Another is played for humor as one of the mining guards the band is
trying to fool recognizes Spartacus and asks if he has seen him somewhere before; then a *Family Guy*-style smash cut shows McIntyre bellowing in triumph in the arena, his face on display for the whole city to see. If episode four is any indication, *Vengeance* will continue to explore the similarities between the Romans and their slaves, letting their desires play out in scenes of stylized excess. Spartacus and his troop take a backseat in episode four, their B story of escape from the mines woven in throughout, but with more repetition than variation in their flight through the woods; the main focus of the episode is a lush party thrown by Illythia in honor of a rival praetor, Varinius, that would make Vincente Minnelli proud – the orgies are just backdrop. There is political maneuvering couched in polite turns of phrase as well as in sexual maneuvering; alliances are upended, struck, or betrayed. But the most striking part of that storyline is when a captured rebel is brought in, trussed up, and tortured for sport by the partygoers. The first instance of it begins with a sickeningly naturalistic rendering of a man’s tongue being cut out, then held up to applause and placed on a silver platter. It is a deliberately memorable moment, and will rob these people of any sympathy once Spartacus and friends arrive to bring down their titular vengeance. But when the episode comes back to the torture, it is undertaken as part of the drama. Illythia has decided to forsake her husband and is competing with a younger woman for the attentions of a more powerful man. She shows her rival up by eviscerating the slave when the girl loses her nerve to do the deed lxii The stakes for winning the Praetor’s affections are high and deadly for both women, and their contest is manifested in a way that is as
physically vicious – Ilythia’s ability to drive a sword through a man’s gut is representative of her womanly dexterity; it’s almost a reverse of what Rome does with violence and sex because here the it is ability to kill that is equated with sexual prowess. Brutal and explicit spectacle is combined with Machiavellian plots and clear character motivations. And really, that is Spartacus. The show provides an overabundance of censorable content, much more than even an HBO series, and plotlines often much simpler to untangle; however, it also it uses that visual excess to externalize emotional conflicts. This is a process that is completely independent of the show’s historical setting. Indeed, Spartacus sidesteps any concern with classics or high culture, sticking to the low road. Its absurdity is the way that the show vulgarizes its genre, and while it unmistakably looks like 300, its ability to develop the characters within its exaggerated world over the long-term ultimately gives the show a more compelling hook and more room to develop over time.

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xxxvi See xxxiv.


xxxviii See xxiv. Perhaps the most adorable part of Starz’s own Channel History on their website is the record of Kelsey Grammer’s Golden Globe win for Boss on January 15th, 2012 – “First Win for Starz.” Although the record of the “Facebook Social Media Game” launched in concert with the premiere of Spartacus: Gods of the Arena is probably the oddest thing that timeline commemorates. The network’s been consistent about launching Spartacus companion games on Facebook for each season of the show: such do foster a much younger viewership than Rome, and a community united less in understanding the same material as in interacting with it individually.

The Variety Review is more scathing than most, saying that the show's title, "was chosen for Starz's latest dramatic foray because "300: Blood and Sand" or "Gladiator: Sand and Blood" wouldn't clear legal."


Data from <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/>


See xliiv.

Spartacus (2004), Empire (2005), and Helen of Troy (2003) were all cable and network answers to the resurgence in popularity of the genre on film. None of them were particularly well received and were criticized, not unlike Blood and Sand, for being overly imitative of successful epic movies, particularly Gladiator.


Which characters are featured in the title changes as the show progresses. In the first episode, only Lucretia (Lucy Lawless) and Spartacus himself are discernable. In the second season premiere, Lucretia, Illythia (Viva Bianca), and Glaber (Craig Parker) are all larger and more visible than the new Spartacus. It's an indication of how equally the show focuses on the conflicts of its slave rebels and its villainous Roman equestrians.

This is the cover of a comic book:
The first two items appear in *Gladiator*, the second are enemies mowed down by the 300. *Rome* has little in the way of combat sequences for the sake of action; it's focused on the outcome of battles as they affect political drama.

Oddly enough, *Gladiator* also utilizes moments of the same dislocation between character and background, as well when Maximus floats above the (saturated and atmospheric) ground. Again, the choice is tied to character subjectivity, not world-building.

There is expressive color grading in the shot. Heroes are in the lighter area; Troll in the darker:

The lightning waxes over the sky as Theokoles rises:

Notice the three separate planes in this shot: blood, man, and crowd. The dislocation between them because of the CGI, as well as the slow motion and the animation of the blood, makes the image safe to look at.

Are you not entertained?
Substitute Thracian warrior for Spanish general and you essentially have the plot of *Gladiator*.

The end composition is quite similar to lv, but full of death.

This game of military strategy has a great name, *Latrunculi*, “the game of brigands.” It’s essentially checkers. It does show, though, that *Blood and Sand* is just as able to incorporate classical detail into its world as *Rome*, only for different purposes. Batiatus wants to be good at the game in order to show his sophistication to the Roman patrician types, and it also reminds the viewer of Spartacus’ own keenly strategic mind. The function is character-building, not world-building.

There are, of course, exceptions. An example on the network side is *Lost*. One on the premium side is *Extras*.


For good and all, thumbs pressed (*pollices premere*) against the index finger signifies mercy, thumbs raises upwards (*infesto pollice*) means death, not that it matters, because the gladiator fight in the first episode ends in a composition that is reminiscent of the famous Gerome painting that got it wrong. Not that *that* matters, because the moment passes too quickly for *Spartacus* to make an issue of it.

The perfect hostess providing her guests with a human piñata:
PERFECTLY REAL
GAME OF THRONES AND HISTORICAL FANTASY

You just want to know what is going to happen to [the characters], and you are terrified about what’s going to happen to them because George is brutal…It’s one of the things that he is famous for – just a willingness to kill anyone. That keeps you nervous...

HBO found an answer both to the somewhat overburdened historicism of *Rome* and lushly lowbrow, almost anti-historical melodrama of *Spartacus* in the adaptation of an epic fantasy series of novels, *The Song of Ice and Fire* saga by George R.R. Martin. The show, *Game of Thrones*, takes on the problem of making a dense, sprawling fantasy epic accessible to its base by utilizing a mix of the strategies put forward in *Rome* and *Spartacus* to render a compelling vision of a historically detailed setting. The series drenches itself in (fictional) history to the point where exposition becomes a key aspect of the show’s narrative progression. It also uses its visual style to promote investment in the emotional arcs of multiple characters. The show trades in the same Machievelli-flavored melodrama of *Rome*, increases the frequency of censorable content per episode and across the season to a level closer to *Spartacus*, and sets the whole in a hyper-historical universe that in cool look, brutal tone, and grim detail echo darker, more brooding period films like *Gladiator* or *Centurion*. What unites all these disparate elements is how deeply all the aspects of the show’s presentation are tied to its wide array of characters, as well as the way that these characters are set adrift in a vast, unfeeling and naturalistic landscape, where no high fantasy trope or convention of epic struggle can shield them from others’ ambitions and their own choices.
Both the appeal and the problem with the show is that it wraps itself in complexity. It utilizes the same fusion of epic and fantasy as its most direct film relation, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and is, like that film series, a long-form adaptation of multiple novels. Unlike *LOTR*, however, *Game of Thrones* delights in being unrelentingly bleak. The pleasure of the series’ melodrama is in its global view of the unfolding, fluctuating fortunes of the show’s various factions, and the series makes certain to provide points of entry through character alignment and subjectivity for multiple parties. This multiple focus (and deep cast bench) is also what allows the show to be as brutal as it is in dispensing with many principal characters; that brutality, in turn, differentiates the series from its high fantasy origins and brings out the show’s highly political melodrama, at the expense of all its long swords and leather-clad horsemen. Indeed, while the source material’s author, George Martin, has been called, “The American Tolkien,” the show chooses to undercut the tropes of high fantasy wherever possible.\textsuperscript{lv} The show becomes, subsequently, a series more palatable to the less geeky portions of HBO’s subscriber base (the show is most frequently compared not to any fantasy series but other acclaimed dramas *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*) while at the same time fostering a fan-friendly viewership through its fidelity to the series’ dark source material. Its brutality and ambiguity differentiates the series from its filmic predecessors and its television counterparts.

As much of this chapter will be given over to discussing events that, unlike Roman history, are not necessarily known to the uninitiated, I believe it will be helpful to quickly sketch out the plot of *A Game of Thrones*, the novel on
which the first season of the series is based. The action takes place in this fantasy world on the continent of Westeros, an England analogue that used to be ruled by a dynasty of Dragon-riding conquerors, the Targaryens, but is now, in an age without dragons, controlled by the heptarch King Robert Baratheon, a warlord who overthrew the ‘Mad King’ Aerys. Robert belongs to one of the seven major families of Westeros, each controlling one of the ‘Seven Kingdoms’ ruled overall by the king. The plot of both season and novel focuses on the chaos that ensues when one of these family heads and Robert's second-in-command, Jon Arryn, dies suddenly under suspicious circumstances and the king turns to his old comrade Ned Stark, the ruler of the North, for help. This happens as the last of the Targaryens, siblings Viserys and Daenerys, are attempting to raise an army to reclaim their father’s (the Mad King’s) throne.\textsuperscript{lxv} The plot, focused on the members of the Stark family – Ned, his wife Catelyn, and their children Robb, Sansa, Arya, and Bran – but also equally involving a host of additional characters, is one of mysteries, scandals, betrayals, and treachery. In the end, poor, honorable Ned is executed by Joffrey Baratheon, Robert’s preening, teenaged heir and the new king upon Robert’s death; Joffrey is, however, secretly the offspring of Robert’s wife Cersei and her brother Jaime Lannister. Ned’s execution sets off a war between the Starks of the North and the Lannisters of the West. Meanwhile, far away on the continent of Essos, Dany Targaryen hatches three dragons for the first time in hundreds of years. Also, in the frozen wastes of the north, beyond the Kingdoms’ wall, there may or may not be a zombie invasion rising.
This story is extraordinarily complicated, filled with frustratingly mysterious, tangled rivalries and confusing names with alien spellings. The summary I just gave does not cover many significant events of the first book/season of the series, nor does it mention many major characters. This is rather the point of the show, however. It is Byzantine. Much like a viewer must first accept the visual absurdity and excess of Spartacus in order to enjoy that show’s rewarding emotional operatics, the viewer of Game of Thrones (or, for that matter, the reader of this chapter) must first be willing to commit to an absurd excess of plot, fictional history, and world-building for the fate of the series’ many characters, none of whom are presented as strictly good or evil, to have meaning. To help distinguish the players, each house has its sigil, or coat of arms, and each house has its motto. Most are descriptive of a given family – The Lannisters’ is “Hear Me Roar,” and the Baratheons’ is “Ours is the Fury” – but only the Starks’ words, “Winter Is Coming,” presage a kind of cosmic doom lying in wait for every ambitious faction, every character, and, if the zombie Others invade, the whole of Westeros altogether. Both the thrill and the dramatic weight of watching Game of Thrones is simply this: Winter is always coming, for everyone.
“WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE.”

In 2007, HBO’s premier series, *The Sopranos*, cut to black on its controversial finale. The network’s other megahit, *Sex and the City*, had wrapped in 2004, and its critical gem, *The Wire*, still stubbornly ignored by all givers of awards, was in production for its final season, to be aired in 2008. Between 2004 and 2007, eight out of the eleven original series (discounting mini-series and documentaries) that the network produced failed to survive more than three years, including period epics *Deadwood* and *Rome*. Only *Big Love* (2006-2011) and *Entourage* (2004-2011) had proved successful and would enjoy long series runs. In the aftermath, Home Box Office produced a series of shows that took after the playful, somewhat testosterone-fueled disposition of *Entourage*, including *Hung* (2009), *Bored to Death* (2009), and *Eastbound & Down* (2009). Of these, only *Eastbound & Down* is running its third and final season as of this writing. The other show produced by the network between 2007 and 2009 still on the air, currently in its fourth and already renewed for a fifth season, is the steamy, supernatural *True Blood* (2008). Even as the network had reliable successes, if not runaway hits, and continued its (still unbroken) domination of Showtime and Starz in terms of subscribers, HBO was experimenting with the balance of its programming slate. The network continued to enjoy waves of awards and critical praise – for example *In Treatment* (2008-2010) and historical miniseries *John Adams* (2008) – but it was still in the hunt for an heir to *The Sopranos*, a long-running dramatic heavy that could anchor some of
the network's shorter-lived and niche shows, such as New Zealand import *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-2009).

2007 was also the year that HBO purchased the rights to George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, bringing in fantasy author and screenwriter D.B. Weiss, screenwriter David Benioff (best known at the time for 2004's *Troy*) as well as Martin himself (who worked in television on *The Twilight Zone* and *Beauty and the Beast*) to adapt the property.\textsuperscript{lxviii} The pilot aired on April 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2011, to a respectable audience of 2.22 million viewers and largely positive reviews.\textsuperscript{lxix} Praise of the show tended to focus on the glorious robustness of the plot, setting, and full-blooded sex and violence that, unlike *Spartacus*, critics deemed non-gratuitous, but instead is, in the words of the EW review, “...grounded in plot and motivation.”\textsuperscript{lxx} In terms of visual similarities, more than one review makes the comparison to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy – Sean Bean, who plays principal character Ned Stark, is of course a *LOTR* alumnus, and Lena Headey, who plays the scheming Queen Cersei Lannister, is a recognizable veteran of *300* – but argue that the show’s political intrigue and psychological acuteness set it apart from the film series. Of particular critical focus, wholly positive, has been Peter Dinklage’s portrayal of the soulful ‘imp,’ Tyrion Lannister.\textsuperscript{lxxi} Although equipped with the not-stingy budget of around $50 million, the show made use of the lessons of *Rome*'s production woes, finding economically advantageous locations in Northern Ireland and Malta for its shoot and utilizing CG set extensions and specifically graded color palettes to relatively inexpensively add depth and scope, and differentiate locations within the show’s
massive world. The network ordered a second season based on the strength of the pilot's premiere.

While HBO, at least in terms of ratings, still hasn’t found that same Sopranos high, it’s found in Game of Thrones, and, to a lesser degree, 2010’s Boardwalk Empire fair supports. Both shows have been described by critics as Sopranos-like, focused as they are on power struggles, families, corruption, and rich characters plagued by contradiction. Game of Thrones’ first season DVD also broke HBO sales records, moving 350,000 units in the first week of its release. For better and for worse – according to online file-sharing tracker TorrentFreak Game of Thrones was the second most pirated show of 2011 – the series has a marked appeal outside of HBO’s established subscriber base. Indeed, Game of Thrones is of the HBO mold in terms of its serial focus, large ensemble cast, abundance of censorable content, and basic narrative structure, and yet the show embraces its cinematic roots in a way that Rome really did not. It freely steals from other generic traditions, notably horror, is judicious with its use of CG imagery, saving detailed FX shots more for emotional punctuation than stage-setting, and finds ways to integrate its sex and violence into the flow of the show’s plot. While Rome crafted strategies specifically to make it visually and narratively distinct from its peplum antecedents, Game of Thrones is unafraid to tread where The Lord of the Rings has already gone and take up the mantle of a fantasy epic. Its confidence, and its differentiation, comes through in the way all aspects of the show’s presentation are marshaled in service to its story, which is
equally mythic, equally engrossing, but a coldly non-magical fantasy, with more brutality, more ambiguity, and more naked bits.

“I ONCE BROUGHT AN ASS AND A HONEYCOMB INTO A BROTHEL...”

It is worth considering a problem Game of Thrones faced that was never an issue for either Rome or Spartacus. There are history buffs, classics majors, and Latin scholars, any of who might well be expected to have an attachment to the subject matter adapted by both Rome and Spartacus, but then there are fans of fantasy novels, who have used the Internet to organize themselves and build far-reaching international fan communities. The Song of Ice and Fire online presence, while not as prolific as the Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter fandoms, is a strong one that predates the series, containing hundreds of sites for forums, newsfeeds, detailed chapter summaries, fan-fiction and role-playing games: there has been a separate, dedicated online fan encyclopedia, “A Wiki of Ice and Fire,” since 2007. Well before production began on the pilot, in 2008, a site called winteriscoming.net launched to find and follow all news of the (then recently commissioned) show. WiC.net is very similar in its focus to theonering.net, the site launched to follow production on The Lord of the Rings, and similarly became a hub for ‘spy’ reports and photos of shooting in Northern Ireland, as well as many of the show’s other diverse locations. It also has interviewed members of the cast and crew, and hosted discussions on everything from the type of music that the series ought to employ to perspective
casting choices, from breakdowns of which episodes would contain which chapters in the book to a debate whether or not his involvement on *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* was cause to be nervous about showrunner David Benioff’s scripting abilities. Even while the producers and HBO worked hard to make a fantasy series that would be accessible to a more general audience, they were being scrutinized at every stage of production by the old guard. The show constantly has to find ways to balance thousands of pages of novel backstory with the series’ many plotlines, without boring those who have read the books, leaving newcomers in the dark, or flooding the narrative with too much explanation. A not insignificant portion of the strategy that the showrunners employ to combat this issue involves boobs.

There are vast amounts of sex being had by all and sundry while the show’s high political drama is being played out, and not just consensual, heteronormative passions. The series deals with incest, rape, adultery, prostitution, and (thankfully only) implications of bestiality. All of these things originate in the source material but very much fit into what the rest of the show is doing with conventions of high fantasy: throwing them into a pile of dung. It is interesting that the most well-adjusted couple the series shows having sex is King Robert’s brother, Renly Baratheon (Gethin Anthony) and Loras “The Knight of the Flowers” Tyrell (Finn Jones). *Game of Thrones* does not have the same libertine attitude towards sex that the Roman shows do, however. Renly and Loras try (badly) to hide their relationship and the threat of scandal hangs over lords with unusual appetites. The discovery of Jaime (Nicolaj Coster-Waldau) and Cersei’s
incest is what gets Jon Arryn killed and young Bran Stark (Isaac Hempsted-Wright) thrown from atop a tower, the two catalysts for the arc of the entire first season. Tyrion’s whoring is the thing that his father Tywin (Charles Dance) fixates on as an excuse to continually be cruel to him, which causes the emotionally wounded dwarf to fly into the arms of more whores. King Robert (Mark Addy) roughly has Pullo’s sexual appetites and the wherewithal to achieve them, but is instead undone by debauchery. A moment that illustrates this occurs in episode four when a Stark guard comes to deliver a message to the king. Sounds of an orgy come from behind the door that Robert’s brother-in-law Jaime is standing guard over. “He likes to do this when I’m on duty,” Jaime says, “He makes me listen while he dishonors my sister.” Of course, Jaime and Cersei are dishonoring Robert behind his back, as well as all natural decency. It’s a situation where no one involved is clean, and Game of Thrones leans on murky sexual politics to make its actual politics that much more sordid. Brutality and cruelty infest every aspect of the series. Shows set in the Roman period like Rome and Spartacus have both visual and narrative traditions of mad orgies and dissolute morals (contrasted, often, with tortured and chaste heroes like Maximus or Judah Ben-Hur, and to a lesser extent Vorenus) but fantasy often elides everything but romantic love and certainly never includes religions. By including the same degree of debauchery as a show with a Romanesque setting, but making it as unrelentingly harsh as everything else in the series, Game of Thrones is able to have many quite ridiculous sex scenes without loosing (most of the time, anyway) its grim tone, or the stakes for the characters engaging in sexual
activities. It veers much less towards the camp of *Spartacus*, in other words, while still being have to include sex scenes with greater frequency and variation than *Rome*.

Even in the Starks’ honorable and idyllic, if snowy, realm of the North, there remains the sore presence of Jon Snow (Kit Harington), Ned’s bastard, whose step-mother Catelyn (Michelle Fairley) cannot bear to be in the same room with for more than a minute at a time. Steven S. DeKnight, the exec producer on *Spartacus*, gave an interview in which he praised the way *Thrones* handles its incest plotline, a story idea he and his writers had wanted to use for *Vengeance*, and the point of admiration is a good one. Although *Thrones* falls much less often into slow-mo, tribal-music-scored sex montages than either *Rome* or *Spartacus* (the former a soft-focus, the latter a color-graded offender) its sex scenes, especially those between Cersei and Jaime or Dany (Emilia Clarke) and Khal Drogo (Jason Mamo), the rape case, are moments where private, internal, and emotional desire are given expression through physical action; that action, in turn, profoundly influences other more public actions and the power dynamics between characters: Dany essentially gains sexual proficiency in order to earn a measure of self-determination from her husband and his horsemen. Her ability to command Drogo’s men in the field is directly tied to her ability to command Drogo in bed. There is a sympathy here between the personal and the political that echoes the interconnectedness of the fortunes of masters and slaves, rulers and rebels on *Spartacus*. 
But the show’s most noted strategy for explicit displays of sexuality is what’s come to be critically known as “sexposition.” One example of this particular portmanteau occurs in a scene between Viserys Targaryen (Harry Lloyd), the pretender to the Iron Thrones, and his slave Doreah (Roxanne McKee). Lloyd relates to the audience, through Doreah, some lore about the Targaryens and dragons in general, as well as an anecdote about his own stolen childhood. It’s an important moment of characterization that also fills out audience knowledge of the universe. It also happens that in this scene they both are naked in a bathtub. As Viserys recites the lineage of the Targaryan dragons, a list of names known only to those who would’ve absorbed the novels’ appendices, he speaks in time with the movement of their thighs. This moment plays well to fans, who do know about the dragons and receive a certain pleasure in their inclusion in the series (sites like WiC.net certainly evidence the desire to see such details appear in the show) while everyone else gets both a fuller knowledge of the world of Game of Thrones and of Roxanne McKee’s torso.

The longest and grandest of all sexposition scenes (to date), though, occurs in episode seven, as unctuous councilman Petyr “Littlefinger” Baelish (Aiden Gillan) in one rambling monologue discusses his personal backstory which involves an unrequited love affair with Catelyn Stark, how the two whores – one of them a ubiquitous northern redhead created specifically for the series named Ros (Esme Bianco) – on his couch ought to fake orgasms, Catelyn’s relationship history, the proper technique for manual stimulation, and his personal philosophy of power-grabbing. This goes on for five and half minutes of screen
time. It’s a little much. But the scene uses sexual activity as a way to vary the scenery and break up more advanced facts about the world of Westeros and secondary characters; there are other kinds of exposition dumping that are handled differently. The scene in Littlefinger’s brothel comes right on the heels of a confrontation between Ned and Cersei, whose heated discussion reveal to the audience both the immediate aftermath of Robert’s rebellion and the course of Cersei’s soured relationship with her husband, largely by having the two of them correct each other’s accounts of the same events known to both of them. These facts are more immediately essential for the events of episode seven, which include the implication that Cersei set up Robert’s death and Ned’s (indecisive) response to the power vacuum. It is less essential that the viewer know Catelyn was first going to be married to Ned’s older brother, who was killed by the Mad King. But it is not completely trivia, either, because Littlefinger’s explanation of how he fought a duel over Catelyn, lost, and subsequently became a conniving SOB illuminates very clearly why it is that he betrays Ned in the episode’s ending, and sets the city guards to slaughter the Starks. There is a multiplicity of motivations and backstories milling below the physical actions in this scene. It’s completely exploitable sex, but it is also dealing with complex issues of character at the same time. Compare this scene to an example from *Rome*, the sex montage of Caesar/Cleopatra and Servilia/Octavia. In that scene, each player’s motivation is very clear, and their political goals are achieved through sexual consummation. Here, there is really no reason for the
whores to be on that couch other than the fact that it visually breaks up a wordy monologue to have whores going at each other on the couch.

This scene does contain an instance in which it is able to marry, as it were, the sexual action onscreen to the characterization of Littlefinger, through a powerful moment of direct address. He leans over a table (itself overburdened with ripe fruit) while instructing the two practicing whores, one half of his face artfully shadowed, wearing a wolfish grin, and he says, ostensibly of the girls’ prospective Johns, “He knows he’s better than other men. He’s always known it deep down inside, and now he has proof.” The dialog could read either way, but Aiden Gillan’s delivery emphasises just how much Littlefinger is talking about himself here; for added measure, the cutaway shot after this moment is of Ros climbing on top of the other whore and dominating her in the way that’s evocative of Littlefinger’s sense of control. There are certainly less smooth combinations of Gillan’s backstory and the girls’ sex antics, but the intent here is clearly to break up separate veins of exposition, some of which are not activated within the source material well into the fourth book, while still having engrossing action on the screen.\textsuperscript{xxx}

This gets at another function of sexposition, which is to weave in, as painlessly as possible, characters and bits of history that are not now, but will be important in future seasons. This is really the reason why Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen) and Ros share so much screen time in the beginning of the season, and, I expect, why Ros has a brief liaison with Pycelle (Julian Glover): these characters step to the fore later on in the grand scheme of events. Inlaying future major
players and plotlines is definitely something that would be impossible to do if the show did not shoot its order all at once. It is also a gamble, wagering precious screen time of a 1,000 page book adaptation, that those future seasons of the series will be produced at all. But it shows the level of commitment that the series has for realizing as much of Martin’s fantasy world as it possibly can. The show wants its audience to have a full understanding of the world, in order that its characters are grounded in a very firm reality and their emotions come through as genuine. This is not to say that fantasy, or any other genre for that matter, can’t have genuine emotions and a fantastical setting. But it is a conscious choice on the part of the series to establish its universe with such a thorough historical framework. Because the exposition is somewhat gratuitous in the moment, however, it is fitting, strangely enough, to cover it in a gratuitously explicit way. The show has enough backstory for its own antiquity, which gives it seriousness and reality. But at the same time, executing that backstory through sexposition visually lightens the load of all that history for the viewer. Think about the difference between watching a show like this, that has multiple internal layers of story that relate both to characters and the larger story-world, in comparison to a more straightforward adventure-fantasy series like Conan: The Adventurer (1997). The latter is completely untethered (besides being painfully awful) while the former has both instances of censorable excess and a more serious context for it. Game of Thrones indulges in explicit spectacle, but also provides an intellectual out for the viewer in the same moment – people are always talking during sex. This is a property that could not be better suited
to HBO’s network image of offering more complex, slightly more highbrow programming, both in terms of its censorable content and its Byzantine layers of drama; sexposition marries those two things in the service of defining a fantasy universe through historical narratives.

“YOU WIN OR YOU DIE.”

This necessary balance of accessibility and depth is first exemplified visually within the show by its opening credits. All three series I have covered use their openings to define their visual universes and ways in which the shows differentiate themselves from the genre iconography of the historical epic. While Rome’s credit sequence focuses on the street-level reality and lush detail of its eternal city and Spartacus eschews typical epic scene-setting by offering only a tribal wail and a bloody, comic-book-like splash cover of a title card, Game of Thrones’ completely CG credit sequence takes a roving, global tour through its universe. Like any self-respecting epic that needs to illustrate the scope of a world that is recognizable but markedly different from our own, it gives the viewer a map. Unlike the maps in the beginnings of both Rome and Gladiator, however, the sequence begins farther above the map, in the aether, looking at a frenetically whirling astrolabe, within which is a burning sun. This is not simply a different political configuration of Europe; this is a wholly different, particularly configured universe. The fluid circling of the camera reveals the fictional continent of Westeros below. As the camera tracks down, the rotations
of another of the astrolabe’s outer rings briefly obscures the image twice in quick succession, at the same time a metallic slashing sound effect cuts over the score’s opening theme, and the interruption acts like a cut within the camera’s descending journey into the space of the show-world; when the image reappears, the camera has traversed a great deal of space and is now close in on the sequence’s first location, the capitol of Westeros, King’s Landing. It takes only 12 seconds to get to this point, but within these first 12 seconds of show, the series has established a universe that is distinct – there is a particularly tactile, almost cut-paper collage feel to the animation, and its color scheme is decidedly more washed-out and bronzed than either Rome or (especially) Spartacus. Those shows both make a habit of employing brash reds and yellows in order to make the ancient world vibrant again. The particular look of the CGI definitely sets Game of Thrones’ credit sequence apart from both of these. It is simultaneously a more comprehensive, epic opening than the brief title card in Spartacus, but also, simply, has clearer movement in it than Rome’s opening.

Even at this lowest level, Game of Thrones is balancing the HBO brand’s expectations of narrative density with a very distinctive visual presentation. It is the camera’s coming to focus on King’s Landing that initiates the next beat in the sequence, wherein the city, first a flat space on the map, comes alive and begins to rise up in three dimensions, buildings being raised by gears, cogs, and levers. The animation evokes a sense of late-medieval mechanical gadgetry, providing the viewer with a shorthand milieu for the action, while also subtly conveying the sense of gaming underlying the structure of the world: the animated set-
pieces look like things a particularly artistic and enterprising dungeon master would design, and indeed in this particular world keeps and kingdoms will rise and fall based on who controls the switches to those gears. The map is more than a map. There are several instances in the credit sequence where the angle of the camera reveals the curvature of a globe. There’s an underlying sense of a (still fantasy) realism that sometimes undercuts the fantastical nature of those spaces, but doesn’t diminish how grand those spaces are.

Further, the rings of the astrolabe are banded with leather-like embossed illustrations of animal sigils that represent the different factions on the show – a more straight-faced answer to the tapestry or illuminated manuscript type animations used by Monty Python or a Big Hollywood epic like The Vikings. What is more, fans of the books will recognize that these friezes retell some of the history of Westeros, specifically the coming of the dragon-riding Targaryan conquerors and King Robert’s rebellion and ascension to the Iron Throne. Also included to the left of each actor’s credit is a little square badge with an image of the their house’s sigil – Sean Bean and Michelle Fairley play Starks and so receive the Starks’ blazon of a direwolf (a direwolf is just like a wolf, only more dire) while Peter Dinklage as a Lannister gets a lion, and Iain Glen, who plays exiled knight Ser Jorah Mormont, receives the Mormont house badge of a bear. It is not important at any point in the first season that the viewer understand Ser Jorah’s family symbol is a bear, but the symbol is still there as a little extra facet for viewers who know the world. Here Game of Thrones is embedding precise details into its presentation for the pleasure of the initiates, not foregrounding
them in its structure as *Rome* does. But as a greenhorn viewer comes to tie
characters in with their familial symbols – in the pilot the Stark children adopt a
litter of direwolves; flags, shields, and crests make up background set-dressing
of many episodes; and the fifth episode wherein tensions boil over between the
Starks and the Lannisters is actually called “The Wolf and the Lion” – the opening
credits do not get any more complicated or obscure. Newcomers can start to
grasp the hidden depth to the sequence, but by making its allusions visual details
– instead of narrative signposts as in *Rome* – those depths are nonessential to a
first pass at the series. The show balances accessibility and depth in a way that is
subtler, visually, than the mythological pictures and period details on the walls
of *Rome’s* forum. The credit sequence still maintains very tactile details, but ones
more elevated (by the rousing score and by the cities actually rising from the
earth) and fantastic, as befits the show’s setting.

The world of *Game of Thrones* operates on a plane of magical Realism. Its
fantasy universe is one that actually shuns most conventions of ‘high’ or
Tolkienesque fantasy. The continent of Westeros is in most respects a post-
magic fantasy space, where honorable do-gooders pay exactly as much for their
noble and altruistic choices as they ought to, and unscrupulous survivalists are
the only ones likely to achieve their goals; no messianic Lions come to the
rescue, no army of giant eagles plays the cavalry, no power of love protects you
from the killing curse, and there are no orcs as clear baddies. It is, again, the
perfect blend for HBO. An exotic, exploitable setting treated in a very grounded
and serious way. This applies even for when there is magic. Within the world of
Westeros, winters have a yet-unexplained magical property that makes them occur irregularly and last for years on end; Dany has an unexplained superpower: resistance to fire and heat, which is dropped in slow hints throughout the first five episodes and becomes a significant plot point at the end of episode six and the finale. And of course, the show begins and ends its first season with highly supernatural elements: the introduction of the monstrous, zombified White Walkers and the birth of Daenerys Targaryan’s three dragons, respectively. The pilot separates the seven-minute sequence with the White Walkers from the remainder of the episode, putting it ahead of the credit sequence and fading to black at its conclusion. Likewise, the reveal of Dany’s dragons begins by fading into a particularly bleached and smoky landscape from a close tracking up shot of flame against black, without sense of spatial clarity. These two big supernatural revelations have a sense of separation to them, and it helps that in both moments the show devotes multiple reaction shots to characters staring, if not directly at the camera then directly at the Magic Thing in old-fashioned awe. Spartacus operates in an abstracted, almost ahistorical setting and Rome refocalizes its historical setting to view familiar events from the vantage points of 'lower' characters in order to vary their presentations of the classical world, but a sense of the weight of history is actually essential to Game of Thrones. Its characters are laden with history, they are haunted by it, they live in its shadow. The conflict of the series is precipitated by the death of Jon Arryn, the old Hand of the King, a character whose face we never see, but whose prior choices, loyalties, and enmities all profoundly affect the actions of
the show’s characters. The show suggests through expository dialog that great
gallantry of King Robert’s rebellion against the ‘Mad King’ Aerys Targaryan,
which took place seventeen years before the events of the show, was this world’s
watershed moment. Even Robert himself bitterly comments in episode five that,
“Our purpose died with the Mad King. Now we’ve got as many armies as there
are men with gold in their purse, and everybody wants something different.” The
wealth of competing, sometimes mysterious, ambitions that drive these various
factions rule almost all of the character relationships within the show. The jaded,
brutal, fatalistic mood is not so unlike the tone of a revisionist Western – Ned
Stark, a remarkably honorable man set on doing his duty while surrounded by
nothing but cowards and scoundrels, shares a similarity with Gary Cooper’s Will
Kane; and his narrative arc is might be like a High Noon, if the townsfolk, instead
of hiding, seize the sheriff while he is still crying at his desk, and throw him
under the tracks of Frank Miller’s train as it arrives. The more wearied, cynical
approach to fantasy certainly fits with HBO’s cultivated balance between the
thrill of censurable content and the weight of (perceived) serious drama.

What sets Game of Thrones apart from the majority of its fantasy
forebears is that there are no good and evil ‘sides’ to the factions on the show.
Each family is closer to a mob, with varied combinations of admirable and
despicable qualities. The novels themselves are structured in alternating point of
view chapters from a range of characters on opposite sides of the power struggle
for Westeros, and the series reflects this in its narrative sprawl, dealing in every
episode with at least four separate locations and more than six characters, the
viewer given access to most of their subjectivities. In a sense, it is this complexity in itself that sets the series on a different road from *Spartacus*. That show is (and I deliberately choose this word) nakedly melodramatic. There is a lot of violence, and sex, and certainly an ensemble of characters who all have intense emotions and desires that get expressed through this highly stylized violence and sex; when Crixus stabs Lucretia in her pregnant belly and she slowly drops to the floor, reaching for Batiatus’ lifeless hand, the action brings out both Crixus’ righteous vengeance for his victimization by this Roman woman, and Lucretia’s rather terrible position, too – all the horrible things she did, she did for the love of her husband. Action clarifies the right and wrong of the situation, and *Spartacus* encourages its audience to find those things on both sides, Roman and Rebel. Still, the image is one of a very tan, muscular New Zealander stabbing Lucy Lawless just below her semi-exposed bust, and the camera speed slows down to emphasize that moment and that visual. *Game of Thrones* is slightly more restrained in its presentation and ambiguous in its cues to the audience. Viserys’ death scene at the end of episode six, for instance, does not rely on any cinematic devices or particularly titillating mis-en-scene; the coverage alternates between Viserys, Dany, and Drogo’s perspectives – it is a tense standoff wherein everyone’s face becomes stiff, and the heavy close-ups on the three of them looking at each other, from one to the others, bring out little twitches and touches of all their performances. Ultimately, though, Viserys’ ‘crowning’ with molten gold is covered in five shots, all of them from side positions of the action, at different angles. It is not an image that is necessarily
more shocking than the example from *Spartacus*, nor is it less able to bring out the conflicting emotions of multiple characters. But the dull metallic thud as Viserys hits the ground simply is not as viscerally satisfying as watching Lucy Lawless go down. The gore is more unpleasant, and the multiple perspectives make it less clear who to feel for the most. It’s a complex, deadly serious sequence, in which most everyone is fully clothed, and so the entertainment value is tied up more into the familial drama, less in the sheer visual spectacle of violence. Violence darkens and punctures dramatic moments, and is not set off by cinematic devices in the same way that *Spartacus* separates its sequences of violence. The show plays everything more naturally.

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Thebleakness of the drama, then, forms the bulk of the show’s appeal. A viewer of *Game of Thrones* is as able to be transported into a “realistic” fantasy world as a viewer of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The difference between those experiences is that for *Thrones* the authenticity comes from its brutal tone, as opposed to the untamed beauty of the New Zealand landscape and the precision of Jackson’s production values.

“Agrim, multi-layered presentation certainly characterizes *Game of Thrones*’ approach to visual style. The series steals liberally from *Gladiator* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but, unlike *Rome*, appropriates from other genres as well, notably contemporary action and horror films. This visual variation helps give

“**THE NIGHT IS DARK AND FULL OF TERRORS.”**
the show its own distinctive, blended look, as opposed to being so closely tied to a particular film that it draws critical flack, as *Spartacus* did. It also avoids the budgetary trap of trying to take on the scale of a film epic, but giving it more color and a different focus, as *Rome* did. The show-world is a harsher, more violent, embittered version of fantasy, and the show’s visual style reflects that. A good example of how the show blends these elements occurs in the opening sequence with the White Walkers. A winch sounds as the shot fades in from black into three riders waiting for a portcullis to be raised. The gate obscures the camera’s viewpoint as it rises and then completely clears the top of the framing, revealing the three riders in heroic pose. There is a tight balance between medium close/close shots of each of the riders, not just the clean-looking one in the center with more elegant furs, and long shots of the tunnel they ride through to reach the other side of the wall. The show earns a lot of currency from what it spends on the next two shots, extreme long shots of the riders emerging from beneath the Wall. The first shows them as small figures moving across the bottom of the frame out of an opening in what to the new viewer would merely look like the foot of snow-covered mountain. But in the next shot the camera retreats further back and higher up, giving a better sense of the landscape:
These two shots affords the show a lot of scope simply by doing the rather obviously epic (although often dismissed as a viable strategy for television) thing of making the landscape bigger, a void white wash that Andre de Toth would be proud of. *Spartacus* blows up the backgrounds to its arena, too, but they are such abstracted blends of color on such a separate plane from the physical actions of the characters – although they are often expressive of character emotion – that they take on the aspect of comic panel backgrounds. Here, the CGI is just as crisp and naturalistic as the previous live-action shots. It is worth comparing these two shots with some of the shots in the Beacon lighting sequence in *Return of the King*. Quite simply, that thrilling montage is made up of helicopter shots of gorgeous New Zealand mountain peaks with CGI fires catching over the bombastic, triumphant score. What gives that scene its uplift is that it is stealthily initiated by Pippin and reaches Aragorn, miles and miles away. The hobbit’s efforts are literally elevated to untouched, snow-capped summits. *Game of Thrones*’ first look at the Wall is the inverse of that. The landscape is appropriately bleak, the Wall slanting diagonally from the left mid-ground into almost the right background, but not set off or composed to be beautiful. The show takes a set of very manly, medieval warrior types and then uses the landscape to make them about as insignificant as can be. This moment of shock distracts from the unreal dimensions of the Wall itself – no glacier is that high. Its spectacle of scale does not remove viewers from the realism of the show’s world, but rather helps define the fantasy landscape as real: the world is revealed to be bigger than previously thought and also include giant ice-walls
stretching across hundreds of miles. There is no color grading or swirl of clouds that dislocates the wall from the rest of the natural landscape. The bleakness delivers more grimness and naturalism to the world – think about how very black the Ash Mountains of Mordor are throughout _LOTR_. The show at all times tries to justify and normalize its fantasy setting, by providing as much grounded and making it look as realistic as possible. The goal of that is, of course, that then the emotions of the characters will come across as real and relevant as well.

Once the rangers enter the woods and discover a batch of mysteriously and viciously butchered wildlings, though, the show enters visual horror territory.\textsuperscript{xlvii} The gore is naturalistic – shorn limbs and mangled torsos are covered in a thin layer of snow. Off a close-up of the young ranger (unnamed in the series but called Will in the books) peering over a snow bank, fourteen shots, six of them reaction shots of Will’s horror, reveal the slaughtered wildlings. The camera is placed on the ground for both POV and reaction shots, getting as close to the gore as possible. Reverberating thumps on the soundtrack emphasize new cut and new shots of heads on spikes. Blood spatters the white snow. As Will starts to run away and runs past the initial edge of the frame, the camera moves with him to suddenly reveal a corpse of a man’s body with a girl’s head attached stuck to a tree. All this is very straightforward horror. It gets even better (and so much worse) when Will returns with the other rangers to the site and all the carnage has mysteriously vanished. Then as the two look around, off the reaction shot of one ranger, a Walker slowly rises in the background from the bottom of frame behind the shoulder of the other ranger while drums of doom begin to
The coverage of the remaining two rangers running for their lives looks familiar to any viewer who has ever seen a trailer for a Jason Bourne movie. The beat is shot with a hand-held, frantically moving camera, and edited with rapid jump cuts. However, the show employs this kinetic stylistic tendency purely for momentary energy, and not as a governing strategy for its action. The hand-held work is not as jarring, the camera tracking at a slightly slower speed than its subjects are running. The sequence pulls a neat trick by having a beat of panicked motion (the six most shaky-cam shots appear as jump cuts in a three second interval) and then planting the camera in one spot and having each ranger run towards center from opposite sides of the frame (Will from the left, the other ranger, Gared, from the right). Although the viewer still has no idea of the relative geography of the space, we do get a sense of these characters’ relationship to each other, a relationship that is tightened when the two stop running, look and find each other, and then off a horrified reaction in close up of Will’s face, the older ranger’s head is cut off by a Walker who materializes from beyond the shallow focus depth of the frame. Will slumps to the ground in a reaction shot before the shot of the ranger’s body falling occurs. The cutting pattern continues a strong relationship between the two men so that a dislocation in space does not distract the viewer. The one man’s fate informs the other’s, which makes the show’s choice to fade to black off a low angle close-up of Will’s terror all the more dreadful for the elision. It is hard to imagine Rome shooting an action sequence in this way. That show does not really mix the tendencies of other genres in its presentation, relying rather on its twists within
the epic genre (a more colorful Rome, more plebeian characters) to differentiate its material. However, *Game of Thrones* sets itself up in opposition to the traditions of high fantasy, and so first of all needs to look a little different from *The Chronicles of Narnia* (BBC, 1988-90). By bringing in conventions of multiple other genres in the very first sequence, the show opens up room for some stylistic variation and creates a look distinct from other shows and, to a certain extent, other films.

While never as loudly stylized as *Spartacus* is, *Game of Thrones* does *Rome* one better in terms of being cinematic by judiciously choosing when to up its scale but always tying its varied array of coverage into the emotions and the positions of its characters. The end of episode nine, “Baelor,” is a virtuosic assemblage of multiple character subjectivities and heartbreakingly objective shots, stylized camerawork and sound. It is right and proper for the show to put so much stylistic energy into this sequence, as it is the death scene of the show’s ostensible main character, Ned Stark. A problem for a series with so many swords and so much violence is that it necessarily must find compelling stakes for its killing and at the same time deliver a quantity of death equal to the expectations of the audience – *Rome* is very strict about limiting its battle sequences to soldiers and proto-mobsters, restricting it to the professionals, as it were, so that the villa sequences do not to seem to be lacking excitement in comparison. This is a problem, because, to quote a member of the Wesleyan film department upon watching episode five, “the show obviously can’t have Sean Bean die.” The expectation-flouting decision to kill Bean’s character is, of course,
the beginning of the political climax of Martin’s first novel and as much an inevitability for the series as the Ides of March. Placing such a game-changing event as killing your touchstone character (despite all the first season marketing with Ned on the Iron Throne, he is really only one of five main characters) in the penultimate episode is a nice way to structure the abruptness of the stunning deed, too: it is an act more shocking for not even occurring in the season finale.

The scene lasts six minutes and ten seconds; it includes the direct POV of five different major characters – Arya (Maisie Williams), Ned, Sansa (Sophie Turner), Yoren (Francis Magee), and Joffrey. Like the triumph scenes in *Rome*, the camera is placed among the crowd but also pulls back for one identifiably epic long shot. The sequence begins with Arya, still a fugitive from the Queen, joining the gathering crowd in front of the Sept of Baelor, the sort of High Temple of the realm, the camera following at her height and just behind her shoulder, but as she climbs onto a statue of Baelor the camera continues to crane up into that long shot. There’s no regular-Roman-in-the-crowd documentary approach to this, nor any grand, swooping overhead shots of the action as there are in Sean Bean’s death scene as Boromir in *Fellowship of the Ring.* Most everything is at the level of the characters, and what visuals are larger than life accentuate, often with dread at a thing being so much larger and inescapable, the characters’ fortunes. The space is established clearly and completely, as are the stakes for the characters. When Ned is led to the Sept, the camera follows him in much the same way it did for Arya, and off of his gaze, there’s a strong push-in direct POV shot over the heads of the crowd to Arya crouching at the base of the statue. In a
final act of fatherhood, Ned leans towards Yoren, a brother of the Night’s Watch, and shouting, “Baelor!” gets him to notice Arya as well. As Ned confesses his ‘treasons’ and proclaims Joffrey the rightful king, a monologue that takes only a minute to deliver, there are exactly twenty cuts and thirteen separate camera setups. This is how committed the show is to providing a wealth of viewpoints; although tellingly, in this scene, the characters whose direct subjectivity are shown are all aligned with the Stark faction. Once Joffrey condemns Ned, his subjectivity starts to alter the soundtrack, crowd noise dies almost completely and the soft sound of his own breathing becomes the sum of the track. The imagery also warps a little, shots of Ned becoming a sickly sort of rust color. Of course, *Game of Thrones* never shows something just one way, and so even as Ned kneels down, Arya jumps down from her perch (the area noise back on the soundtrack) and starts making her way through the crowd with her sword in an attempt to save her father. One affects the other: as Arya moves there is a direct POV shot of Ned’s that shows the statue of Baelor absent Arya – he has the consolation of thinking that Yoren has ferried her to safety but will never see his daughter again; there is a reaction shot of him coming to this realization and then what could arguably be a POV shot from the perspective of the headsman, but regardless works in the same way that the long shot of the Sept works to convey a sense of the gravity of the stakes for the character. However, it is the most intimate of detail shots: the vulnerably bare, dirtied back of Ned Stark’s neck.xd On the other end, Arya comes up against Yoren in the crowd, and he forcibly holds her to him, blocking her view of the execution. All the other
viewpoints finally fall away and in two shots, Ned’s head is struck off and Arya looks desperately up at the sky. The sequence and the episode end on her POV shot of birds flying, isolated in space and with only their wings flapping on the soundtrack. This scene uses all the pieces in *Game of Thrones’* visual toolbox. It has intricate, layered, ever-switching presentations of character subjectivity, spectacular CGI landscapes, brutally realistic detail, and even a touch of lyricism in its final image.

The show even finds instances to indulge in a little play with contemporary stylistic tropes of subjective combat experience. Episode nine ends with Ned’s death, but is concerned in the main with the open war between the armies of Robb Stark and Tywin and Tyrion Lannister. Tyrion is, as his sellsword buddy Bronn (Jerome Flynn), puts it, “a shit warrior,” but after falling flat on his face and being trampled by his own men, for a moment he still appears to float over the battlefield *Gladiator*-style, representative of his sliding in and out of consciousness; but as Tyrion returns to the waking world, off a detail shot of Bronn cleaning blood from his sword, the trick of the floating shot is revealed: Dinklage actually is moving slightly above the ground because he is laid out on a moving cart. Tyrion is the perfect person for this gag, too, as he is often a sideline commentator on the action and undercuts drama with crudeness, wit, or crude wit – the only other current television character to rival him in his cache of one-liners is the Dowager Countess of *Downton Abbey*. In truth, the first season of *Game of Thrones* follows *Rome’s* lead in completely eliminating pitched battles where it can, and uses techniques of subjective combat – altered camera speeds
and sound fidelity – as a shorthand in order to represent the massive battles it lacks the budget to film. Where it does have violence, though, it seldom offers a release of tension as it often does in *Spartacus* and *Rome*.

"YOU MUST MAKE THE CHOICE AND LIVE WITH IT FOR THE REST OF YOUR DAYS."

For a show so preoccupied with history, it necessarily has to do a lot of talking. It is remarkable that although the show’s visuals consistently find moments to be ‘sweeping,’ either through a gorgeous Irish/Maltese landscape shot, or a CGI set-piece, or a stylized camera move, *Game of Thrones* is just awash in exposition: exposition for world-building, for character motivation, for the creation of conflict through verbal sparring, or for all three things. This allows for a very in-depth level of immersion in the story-world, but it is also a huge challenge for the balance of each episode and the series as a whole. Within the structure of a given episode, the show has to find ways to smooth out the disparity between action and setup. One of the key ways that it does this is through the cliffhanger. The storyline, as multi-layered and dense as it is, is propelled violently and inexorably forward from episode to episode by fire and blood. Each ending changes the chessboard, but the game is the same and still ongoing. There is never a sense of completion or closure the way a cop procedural works or even the way certain episodes of *Spartacus* resolve. The season one finale of *Rome* ends with two deaths and a marriage – even as some
characters are left in the lurch, it could serve as a series finale in its own right.

Six out of the ten episodes in the first season of *Game of Thrones* end violently, and three with the possibility (or worse, the promise) of violence to come. Horrible things keep happening to the Starks: the pilot notably has Bran Stark pushed from a tower by Jaime Lannister, seemingly to his death. An interesting example of an episode end that doesn’t end with blood but rather with the ominous promise of it occurs in the last scene of episode three, which deals with Ned’s daughter Arya’s seemingly-innocuous fencing lesson. As Ned looks on from the side, the sound of steel being crossed and vague reverberations of battle come in on the soundtrack, replacing the hits of the wooden swords, strongly and subjectively foreshadowing that real battles are in Arya’s future. Only the finale ends on a high note, but that note is the advent of dragons into a universe where they were thought to be extinct. It is also a cliffhanger, as it radically alters the viewer’s previous understanding of the show-world’s reality.

Where it works best, seemingly extra exposition motivates action and character development. In episode nine, Jon Snow and Maester Aemon (Peter Vaughan) have a conversation in the rookery of Castle Black, just after word has spread that Robb Stark has ridden to war. Aemon gives a two and a half minute monologue both about the origin of the celibacy vow in the Night’s Watch – so that the men have no outside ties, only their ‘Black Brothers’ – and about how during Robert’s rebellion his loyalties were divided as a member of the Watch and one of the few remaining Targaryens. The story, however, sets up Jon’s arc within the episode, as he must choose between the Watch and his familial
relationship with the Starks. "But when I heard they had killed my brother’s son,
and his poor son, and the children, even the little children...I will not tell you to
stay or go. You must make that choice yourself, and live with it the rest of your
days, as I have," he says. Aemon’s expository speech connects directly to Jon’s
plight, and the conflict Aemon puts to him is activated in the episode, as Jon
chooses to leave Castle Black, but is then convinced to return by his friends, who
ride out after him. *Game of Thrones* is so saturated with exposition that it runs
the risk of turning off viewers who are not willing to look past all this talking and
slow-pedaling of the overall narrative; nor is it very able to hold onto latecomers,
who might find themselves in far too deep to begin with, before unfamiliar
characters start talking about events that shaped them years and years ago.
Interested parties had best start at the beginning, but because an HBO
subscriber has numerous online viewing options, reruns, and the ability to rent
the DVDs, this is not a fatal disadvantage. The show’s rigid narrative is
structured and demands to be seen in order, as opposed to, say, something like
*Friends* or even a drama like *The West Wing* that can have its episodes stand
alone in syndicatio This level of interwoven, intricate plotting is the premium
series standard. The mysterious conflicts setting the show’s characters in motion
have their big-bang moment in the pilot, and ever afterwards are expanding
furiously outwards. The strategy works particularly well for the adaptation of a
series of novels, too.

It is worth looking at an individual episode to see how the show handles
this issue of ameliorating exposition between the credits and the cliffhanger.
Episode four, entitled “Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things,” is both top-heavy on characters telling illustrative or expository stories to others, and introduces two key secondary characters, Sam Tarly (John Bradley) and Bronn, as well as a tertiary character, Gendry (Joe Dempsie), who will reappear in the episode ten and take on a more prominent role in season two. It alternates between five geographic locations – the Wall, King’s Landing, Winterfell, Vaes Dothrak, and the Riverlands – and could be said to have 8 distinct plotlines, every single one of which expands on or somehow alters a concern established in prior episodes.

The events in King’s Landing comprise a simple majority of the episode’s run time, followed by the doings at the Wall, with Vaes Dothrak coming in third, and so the overarching conflicts at each of these sites – Ned’s investigation into Jon Arryn’s death, Jon’s assimilation into the Night’s Watch, and Daenerys’ marriage to the horse lord Khal Drogo and its awkward crowding by her power-crazed, cravenly brother, Viserys, respectively – could be said to constitute the A, B, and C plots. Of course, a host of additional characters dance in and out of these plotlines with varying degrees of association with those stories. The preponderance of exposition is performed by these minor players, and actually offers as much a chance for character development as for world building. The tyrannical weapons master at the Wall, Ser Alliser Thorne (Owen Teale), gets to voice some of the unthinkable things he has had to do to survive in the winter and give the viewer a new perspective on his bitter, hardline attitude towards Jon, even when he is informing the viewer (through Jon and Sam) about the effective guerilla tactics of the hostile Wildlings and name-checking a future
character, Mance Raydar. Without having to write a specific conflict for tertiary characters, which the show cannot do anyway because it jumps around so much it does not have the time, *Game of Thrones* is able to bring depth to its wide array of characters even as they are bringing depth to the series' universe.

Expositional exchanges/narrations lasting more than twenty seconds, of which there are five, occur at spaced intervals in the episode: Viserys shares the origins of dragons with his pleasure slave Doreah at the 12.5 minute mark, Sam relates to Jon how he came to join the Watch at 26 minutes, Jon explains bastardy in Westeros while he also confesses to Sam of his (lack of) experience with the omnipresent Ros at 40 minutes, Thorne interrupts and promptly tells Jon and Sam about life beyond the wall at 42 minutes, and Littlefinger divulges the story of ‘The Mountain and the Hound’ to Sansa at 48 minutes. The show makes another virtue of its long exposition stories by using their themes and focus to create organic transitions between the different plotlines and locations. The dragon history lesson in the bathtub between Viserys and Doreah – whose love of dragons’ ability to fly away is illustrative of her character – ends badly, with Viserys angry at what Robert must have been done with the dragon skulls in the hall of the Iron Throne. The next scene is one of Sansa and her lady-in-waiting walking in the hall of the Iron Throne, talking about the pressures of Sansa’s future if she were to wed Prince Joffrey. There is verbal-to-visual continuity in the setting of this little scene in the throne room, and Sansa’s anxieties echo Doreah’s feeling of entrapment as well as Viserys’ frustration at forces beyond his control. Likewise, the scene before Sam stands lookout with
Jon and reveals that his father banished him to the Wall on pain of death is an interaction between Arya and Ned, the former practicing agility for swordsmanship, the latter, although affectionately indulging her tomboy interests, describing her life’s highest future achievement as marriage to a high lord. One father’s casual proscription of his child dovetails nicely into another’s. The exposition provides depth to both the show-world and to character, and contributes to the episode’s overall narrative flow. As I have discussed previously, the preponderance of history and varied points of view helps create a realistic-seeming world rife with moral ambiguity vastly different from high fantasy. The heavy exposition is the aspect of the series that could potentially be an Achilles heel, as historical lantern-hanging is for Rome. However, Game of Thrones frankly does a good job at integrating its wealth of information into character psychology and motivation, as well as the actual action of the plot.

“THERE’S A KING IN EVERY CORNER NOW.”

As of this writing, only the first episode of the second season of the series has aired. “The North Remembers” premiered on April 1st to substantial gains in terms of ratings and even wider critical acclaim. Rather than settling on its established setting, however, the show continues to expand ever outwards, introducing new characters and locations as well as reestablishing its surviving season one regulars, and in many cases their more robust facial hair. The first episode, as a consequence, is mostly table-setting, not spending more a couple of
scenes with any one character, although it does have a neat unifying visual in a red comet blotting the sky that characters in disparate locations look up at and the show uses as means to move from location to location. The first episode does initiate two interesting shifts from the first season, however. With more screen-time for Daenerys’ dragons and the introduction of the red priestess Melisandre (Carice Van Houten), the world of Game of Thrones is becoming a much more magical place. The grounding of the first season really pays off, though, because the magical elements that are now integrated into the world are still that much more spectacular rarities, and pose dangers of their own, as opposed to being problem-solving devices. Stuck trekking through a desert aptly named ‘The Red Waste’, baby dragons are not really much help to Dany. They need to eat too, and she is having trouble feeding them. Mel has a fantastic scene at the 30-minute mark in which a councilor tries to poison her, and she knowingly drinks with him. As he collapses and dies, there is an extreme low angle shot of her, a large red gem on her necklace in the center of frame, and it starts glowing as the camera begins to track up on her face and she ominously intones, “The night is dark and full of terrors, old man. But the fire burns them all away.” It is a simple visual effect, but gets across very supernatural, seemingly limitless magical powers. It is quite something for a show that has previously been so insistent on characters reaping realistic consequences for the choices that they make (see: Ned Stark) to introduce a figure capable of escaping death so effortlessly. The world of the show is beginning to change, to be more fantastical, even though the gritty real politick and the moral ambiguity of its
overall tone is the same. Like the second of *Spartacus*, the setting is getting wider and the conflicts becoming even more complicated. That scene with Mel also gets across something that has changed from season one. The first episode is a far looser adaptation in terms of the chronology of the second book, *A Clash of Kings*. The poising scene is the prologue to that book, but occurs roughly at the same point in time as all the events concerning our established characters. So in the series, it is included as part of the episode’s whistle-stop tour of competing factions to the Iron Throne, not set off on its own, as is the White Walkers sequence. Far more than in season one, the show’s pacing and overall narrative structure seems reflective of the overall series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, not a singular book-to-season translation. The show is telling the whole story, in all its complexity and depth, balancing four (soon five) claimants to the Iron Throne, all their retainers, and two separate wars outside a Westeros being torn apart by civil war. Season one established multiple, morally ambiguous perspectives and dark narratives lathered in history; even as it provides interesting variation on the show-world, season two is only multiplying those conflicts. There is, in other words, even less room for ads; and there never was any to begin with. *Game of Thrones* employs exactly the kind of storytelling best fostered by HBO, and the strategies it uses to achieve that narrative model are distinct to the network, as well as being the sum of the accumulated wisdom of other epic series that have gone before it.

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lxv The Iron Throne of Westeros, forged with Dragonfire from the swords of the vanquished. HBO really stressed the throne itself in its promotional posters for the first season, and it is as sure an indicator as any prop of the brutality of this particular world:

![Image of Iron Throne](image_url)


lxvii *In Treatment* garnered Emmy, Golden Globe, Directors and Writers Guild nods, wins for actors Dianne West, Glynn Turman, and lead Gabriel Byrne as well as recognition from the WGA for Best New Series. *John Adams* won awards for pretty near everything, and Laura Linney and Paul Giamatti both swept the Emmys, Globes, and Screen Actors Guild awards.


lxix The first season holds a reputable metacritic score of 79.


lxv The most pirated show was another premium offering, Showtime's *Dexter*, but network hits *The Big Bang Theory, House*, and *How I Met Your Mother* round out the top five. "Top 10 Most


Particularly impressive has been the site's ability to find Icelandic news reports and photos from snow-bound location shoots in that country for season 2.


The most obvious example is when Ros asks why Baelish won't join in with them:
Ros: She must be very beautiful.
Baelish: No, not really. Impeccable bloodlines, though.
Ros: I do believe my lord's in love.
Baelish: For many years. For most of my life, really. Play with her arse."

Emilia Clarke has her dragon, of course.

Martin's credit is naturally the one featured over the skewed image.

Dany is a few times seen touching hot things or going into hot pools and being unaffected, although those could be explained away by emotional preoccupations and the trance-like look on Emilia Clarke's face. Viserys, although a Targaryan, doesn't have the same power. He feels pain at hot wax on his skin, and later dies after he drunkenly threatens his sister and Khal Drogo gives him his 'crown' by pouring molten gold onto his head. The camera tracks in close on Dany, who
looks, with the same entranced expression, directly into it and murmurs, “He was no dragon. Fire cannot kill a Dragon.” We never understand why or how Dany knows this, but she does. This is how Thrones handles magic. It is not shown in a flashy way, and for at least one character it is unremarkable, physical fact.

lxxxiv What new devilry is this?

lxxxv There is a beat in Rome when Vorenus mentions how the Gracchi wouldn’t have stood for something, and Pullo makes a face and exclaims, “Who?” Even as much as Rome utilized historical detail, it was to create additional depth for the viewer, rather than flesh out the world or characterization. It never matters that Caesar’s father supported Marius against Sulla.

lxxxvi Dany tells her brother, purposefully mistranslating her husband’s threat, “You shall have a golden crown, that men shall tremble to behold.” Tremble indeed:

lxxxvii A global look at atmospheric gore:

lxxxviii The glowing blue eyes and black void where a face should be on this Other is very much a horror image for being so obscured. The Dementors of the Harry Potter series are more visibly legible entities, as magic is a more obvious force in that universe:
This is how big it is and this is what matters:

Excepting the deliciously 80s _Sharpe’s Rifles_ series, Bean has a remarkable tendency toward playing roles that involve his onscreen death. Boromir’s choked last words are yin to Ned Stark’s forced confessionary yang; Bean’s delivery of the lines in both is very similar, pained and tinged with regret, but one is a redemptive declaration of honor and brotherhood and the other a bald-faced lie that will cast him forever into disgrace.

This shot is exactly what the show does best. Touches of realistic detail with a clear sense of scope:

With a metacritic score of 88 and a jump during its initial airing of .9 million viewers from the season 1 finale, the show is very likely to be renewed in short order.


CONCLUSION
WINTER IS COMING

In these three chapters, I have examined some of the key formal strategies with which epic series have adapted generic material of the epic to television, specifically to the premium cable format. *Rome* introduced a set of plebeian characters into the story of Julius Caesar; from their ‘lower’ perspectives were important historical events viewed and influenced in surprising ways. Refocusing a very traditional epic plot brought up several issues important to the whole of this thesis: first that these series are choosing to differentiate themselves from the formal and stylistic conventions of the film genre. The television miniseries of the early ‘aughts copied more directly, as their budgets allowed, and created show-worlds that did not differ dramatically in look from the iconography of the film genre; but *Rome* covered its version of the Eternal City in accents of bright color, in graffiti, and in prostitutes. The idea of presenting a show-world that is somehow ‘more authentic’ and true to the period is a strategy that appeals specifically to HBO’s brand identity, and has been utilized by other period shows on the network, including *Deadwood* and *Boardwalk Empire*. I found that the supposed authenticity comes of profaning historical space and populating it with heroes whose lives are more incidental to historical events: the pleasure of watching them in is seeing how their strictly personal concerns influence sweeping historical changes. This allows the show to be quite liberal with censorable content, especially sex, but at the same time still maintain the appearance of weighty drama. In a similar vein, *Rome* solves
the problem of competing with epic film battle sequences by transferring the
scenes of its heroes exercising physical prowess into the bedroom. Although the
show buried itself a little too much and too self-consciously in its history to
attract a wide following - it knows what it’s different from better than it knows
what it can do on its own – it is still important for consciously making choices to
differentiate itself from the tone and presentation of previous television epics.

*Spartacus: Blood and Sand* essentially does the same thing, and more
successfully, by making completely opposite creative choices. Its visual style is
lifted wholesale from the visual look of a particular film, *300*. The showrunners
constructed a television series that looks, intentionally, like a comic book, with
abstracted, ahistorical and almost mythological landscapes, as well as constant,
over stylistic manipulations that set off acts of violence and explicit sexuality as
visual spectacles. Given time, however, the show matches its level of visual
absurdity to a melodramatic narrative of equal intensity. CG blood spatter,
atmospheric landscapes, death or sex (or both) enacted in languorous slow
motion become not merely excessive but expressive, given a context of the
emotional conflicts and desires of the series’ characters. Thus, the show has a
duel appeal of being a sometimes silly, slick-looking action spectacle that can
only exist on a premium cable channel, and a very operatic melodrama, one in
which the pathos of each character somehow informs or hinders or determines
the emotional fulfillment of the others. The show takes *300’s* visual style and
actually uses it to heighten an emotional story and emphasize other things
besides the bare, oiled biceps of the show’s brotherhood of gladiators. It does not
hurt that all those gladiators’ biceps are so huge, however. *Spartacus* is significant for taking a story that has historically been handled in a very serious dramatic way and going completely lowbrow with it, vulgarizing it. Like *Rome*, that choice reflects the brand identity of the network on which *Spartacus* airs.

Finally, *Game of Thrones* takes different strategies from both my previous examples and fuses them in order to realize a very complex, hyper-historical fantasy universe. Instead of being saturated with visual excess, it is saturated with narrative complexity. Immersion into the story derives from an understanding of the cultures, histories, and rivalries that haunt all the show’s characters in various ways and inform their choices. Unlike *Rome*, however, the show is not merely interacting with and against a generic tradition, but fusing and varying conventions of different genres to create a distinct universe that is fantastical, but also brutally realistic and serious. The show uses a wide array of characters and varies character subjectivities in its presentation in order to provide points of viewer alignment without specifically directing viewer sympathies. *Game of Thrones* wants its audience to root for and worry after characters living a world that will ultimately devour most of them, leaving nothing but the bones. The grim and ambiguous tone of the series sets it apart from most high-fantasy universes, and its multiple, global perspectives and preoccupation with history give it the proper scope of an epic. The show is a collection of the most successful strategies utilized by the previous two series, but still fits into the HBO model and creates a distinctive universe all its own.
The niggling question that, much like a Westerosi Winter, looms over all my analysis is this: Why not just make a new hospital drama? What is the value of doing a television show in this way? The pleasure and the appeal of the peculiar collection of creative choices that define these shows are also the choices that hinder their appeal and make them challenging to watch. Either you are able to get on-board with the extreme historical referentiality of *Rome*, the absurd visual excess of *Spartacus*, and the bleak, Byzantine complexity of *Game of Thrones*, or you’re simply not able to do so. This is why these series are well suited to the premium cable format. They offer a particular kind of experience that viewers have to commit to over an extended period of time. In essence, these are shows that seek out not viewers so much as subscribers. Just as premium networks themselves must cultivate distinct brand identities in order to attract a healthy subscriber base, premium series distinguish themselves and cultivate particular viewships through intensified levels of visual excess and narrative density, embracing a highly serialized structure that is akin to more continuous experiences, such as watching a series of films or reading a novel. It is a kind of storytelling that derives from and is best suited for the premium format. What is remarkable about these series, however, is that, even while being constructed with an eye to cinema and for a particular economic model, they still do the television thing: they have clear intentions and make distinct choices, repeating and varying these choices over many hours of storytelling. They create a relationship between the audience and a set of characters, whose
hijinks and developments and challenges and triumphs we make room for in our kitchens.

Perhaps the fact that they are distinct and yet entirely conventional explains why these series are popular, and do not look to be going away anytime soon. As I mentioned, Starz has two other specifically historical epic series in development: *Marco Polo*, set in what is sure to a very sensuous version of the court of Kublai Khan, and *Da Vinci's Demons*, which will answer Showtime's *The Borgias* with an equally if not more overblown depiction of Renaissance romance. Starz is in an interesting place right now. *Spartacus* is the biggest success the network has had with original programming, and is already renewed for a third full season; *Magic City*, its newly premiered answer to *Mad Men*, features the same opportunities for ripe censorable excess and lush scenery as the Thracian's rebellion, but set in flashy, 1950s Miami Beach. It could be that the Roman soap opera will have a long-term effect on the network's identity and programming choices. Starz is embracing a less serious taste track than its competitors, and yet under the dominating, saturating emphasis of explicit nudity and sex, *Spartacus: Vengeance* executes bold narrative choices and more ambitious plots in a way that resembles more closely a show like *Game of Thrones*. It will exciting to see how and to where the network charts a course between its predilection for bevies of censorable content, tagged as gratuitous often as not, and the more serious things that its shows are trying to do. In a similar vein, HBO just renewed *Game of Thrones* for a third season; it is investing in other epic fantasy series adaptations as well, specifically a version of
Neil Gaiman’s novel *American Gods* and potentially producing a part of *The Dark Tower* series by Stephen King. Adaptations in general seem to be where the network is pointing its slate: *A Visit From The Goon Squad* and *The Viagra Diaries* are both in the works as series, and an HBO version of *The Corrections* has several name film actors, including Ewan McGregor and Chris Cooper, attached to it. More prestigious names, in fact, are the other trend at HBO likely only to grow in the future. Julianne Moore and Kate Winslet both came over to the network for miniseries and TV movie work, and before issues of animal treatment shut down its production, Dustin Hoffman headlined the cast of *Luck*. The network got Martin Scorsese to direct the *Boardwalk Empire* pilot, is working with Will Farrell and Adam McKay on comedy/variety program *Funny or Die Presents*, and lured Aaron Sorkin away from network TV to produce *The Newsroom*. The network continues to paint a glaze of prestige over its programming, even though censorable, explicit material often rests at these series' gooey centers.

This thesis was meant to raise issues of television storytelling that this cycle of pay-cable epics addresses by varying generic conventions, but my hope is that more accomplished, perceptive scholars than I take these problems up in the future. An in-depth study of a single premium network – looking at HBO's approach to dense narratives, for instance – might prove valuable to our understanding of the variety and limits of choices available to shows on pay-cable. I did not even touched upon premium cable comedies, and what they do to differentiate themselves from network offerings. A closer look at a network
might also reveal interesting comparisons to the makeup and practices of the old Hollywood studio system: the subscription model allows for a kind of block-booking to take place, and while HBO does not have a stable of stars under contract, it definitely utilizes a group of regular players. Aiden Gillan is a morally suspect councilman on *The Wire* and he is a morally suspect councilman on *Game of Thrones* (with a brothel). I myself believe that the premium networks do have very distinct brand identities, ones far stronger than the basic networks, which influence the formation and content of their series. On the other hand, it would be equally interesting to take up the issue of long-form storytelling from the perspective of contemporary film franchises. Some originate as modular, contained entities, and are only expanded on after the success of a first film, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy for example; however, the 2000s were dominated by a number of wildly successful film franchises based on book series and purposefully structured across multiple films, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Twilight*. An investigation of these might discover that those film series have to make choices based on similar problems of narrative scope that television series face; it would be fascinating to see if both types of film series are borrowing from TV at all, or in ways perhaps similar to how the heavily serialized shows discussed in this thesis borrow from films. My suspicion is that there is an interaction between the two.

This project has taken up the issues of censorable content and narrative depth in premium cable series and dealt with them from a formal perspective, a strain of analysis that epic series really have not received much of from scholars.
I hope I have demonstrated that because the pay-cable format has unique constraints to it, these shows create universes that are different from network television series, but not simply visualizations of novels or film serials meant for smaller screens. By looking at what a cycle of pay-cable series have done with an established genre, the historical epic, I find these shows provide variation on its generic conventions, creating universes that conform to the expectations of their networks; but also, and more importantly, their choices illustrate what is unique about the television-watching experience. They refocus the epic down on a more intimate level, moving combat into the bedroom or substituting large-scale production values for an stylized CG reality, for instance, where large-scale conflicts like the struggle to overthrow evil or the transformation of a nation are of incidental concern. The stakes do not get any smaller, but instead are tied to the long-term emotional goals and happiness of characters. They allow an audience to have an ongoing relationship with these shows. Film is alive because it moves. But TV is animate because it happens over time.

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WORKS CONSULTED


TELEVISION/FILMOGRAPHY

Main Series:

Additional Series and Miniseries:
Boardwalk Empire. Exec Pro: Terence Winter. HBO. 2010 –

Films: