What Is It, If It’s Not TV? Differentiation and Distinction in American Cable Dramas

by

Christina Grillo

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Introduction: Television, Art, and Distinction

“It’s Not TV It’s HBO.” The slogan identifies premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO) as different from and superior to “commercial” television. The phrase alludes to the fact that HBO was at one time known for providing feature films, sports, and other live entertainment, but when the slogan was designed in the 1990s, it referred specifically to the original series on which HBO based a new brand identity. HBO original series are famous for and consistently marked as examples of what is considered to be good television, so much so that they are considered by some to be “not TV”.

In his essay “Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television,” Christopher Anderson analyzes HBO’s branding strategy; in reference to the critical reception of HBO’s products, he notes the surprising fact that some of them have been received as works of art. In previous decades, television was thought of not as an art form worthy of critical analysis, but rather as a commercial vehicle for advertisers. In his analysis of HBO, Anderson draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological model of cultural production:

Bourdieu claims that cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, and awards, supported by networks of critics, scholars, and other independent cultural intermediaries, provide the validation that transfigures artifacts, converting them into works of art. The routine practices of the artworld serve as acts of cultural consecration that create and sustain a belief in the distinctive value of art.¹

Anderson’s point is that, until recently, television was not considered to be a part of the artworld. Anderson goes on to observe that television lacked critics who were

sufficiently independent of the industry to maintain cultural authority to claim that television texts should be evaluated as art.²

Horace Newcomb noted a lack of intellectual discourse on the aesthetic aspects of television in the introduction his book, *TV: The Most Popular Art*. But rather than assimilating television to high artworks associated with other media, Newcomb’s project was to identify and explore its distinctive aesthetic dimensions. He wrote: “In all of the analysis generated by the existence of television, however, little has been paid to television as a form of popular art, as mass entertainment. Television criticism in daily or weekly form comments on television drama, and there are numerous shorter studies of various artistic aspects of the medium. But the lack of a full study of television in those terms is the stimulus for this book.”³ Newcomb’s work took the perspective of analyzing television texts through the various formulas employed, but more importantly, he evaluated the aesthetic dimensions of television texts, as critics routinely do with respect to legitimated works of literature and painting.

While we explore the sense of cultural significance, it is also possibly to define a set of artistic techniques, aesthetic devices that contribute to some unique capabilities on the part of television. The things that television does best are directly related to the most formulaic and popular works. They are developed in various ways by the various formulas we examine and build to a set of possibilities that allow television, like other media, to go beyond the popular and into works of great artistic complexity and cultural significance.⁴

Television, in Newcomb’s analysis, was a form of art designed for mass appeal through the use of familiar formulas and conventions, an art form with its own

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² Ibid., 27.
⁴ Ibid., 23-24.
conventions and criteria for evaluation, distinct from those used in the evaluation of what Bourdieu would call legitimated art forms.

Noël Carroll pursues a similar project in his theory of what he calls mass art. Using art as a descriptive rather than a normative category, Carroll defines mass art as works produced and distributed on a mass scale, designed for the widest audience possible.

But, on the other hand, what is called ‘mass art’ has not existed everywhere throughout human history. The kind of art-of which movies photography, and rock and roll recordings provide ready examples-that surfeits contemporary culture has a certain historical specificity. It is the art of a particular type of culture. It has arisen in the context of modern industrial mass society and it is expressly designed for use by that society, employing, as it does, the characteristic productive forces of that society-namely, mass technologies of production and distribution- in order to deliver art to enormous consuming populations-populations that are ‘mass’ in the sense that they cross national, class, religious, political, ethnic, racial, and gender boundaries.5

Carroll juxtaposes the concept of mass art to modernist art. In Carroll’s opinion, mass art, like Newcomb’s perception of popular art, is meant to be as accessible as possible. On the other hand, modernist art, the “restricted art” in Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field, is purposefully created to be esoteric.

Newcomb’s and Carroll’s models of formulaic, accessible works are best exemplified by the mass appeal characteristic of programming from the network era of the American television industry. However, as new competitors fragmented the mass audience, both the original networks and the newcomers experimented with a variety of programming strategies for targeting narrower audiences. One of these niche audiences, known within the industry as the quality audience, became

particularly valuable to both broadcast and cable networks. The quality audience of educated and affluent viewers, was imagined as having a taste for aesthetically challenging works; one way of appealing to such viewers was to incorporate modernist techniques into programs. This strategy became associated with HBO in its attempt to brand itself as “not TV”.

The influx of new and differentiated programming, which began on the networks and subsequently continued on cable channels, has stimulated aesthetic criticism. Much of the recent academic scholarship in television studies parallels work in film studies in its emphasis on narrative structure and genre conventions. However, my concern lies with literature that evaluates the distinctive qualities of television programs. This is not say that I am concerned with what qualities these programs have that make them “better”, but with the qualities that designate these programs as different from regular TV.

There are some who perceive a hierarchy among television programs, specifically, that some television programs are better than others based on a specific set of traits. This viewpoint is best embodied through Robert J. Thompson’s work *Television’s Second Golden Age* in which he coined the term “quality TV.”

Thompson defines quality television while tracing its history through a specific focus on the television of the early eighties. Thompson makes a point of presenting quality television as a genre in and of itself with specific markers:

1. Quality TV is defined by what it is not. It is not “regular” TV.
2. Quality TV usually has a quality pedigree. Shows made by other artists were made in other, classier media, like film, are prime candidates.
3. Quality TV attracts an audience with blue-chip demographics.
4. Desirable demographics notwithstanding, quality television shows
must undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences.

5. Quality TV tends to have a large ensemble cast.

6. Quality TV has a memory. Though it may or may not be serialized in continuing story lines, these shows tend to refer back to previous episodes.

7. Quality TV creates new genres by mixing old ones.

8. Quality TV tends to be literary and writer based. The writing is usually more complex than in other types of programming.

9. Quality TV is self-conscious. Oblique allusions are made to both high and popular culture, but mostly TV itself.

10. The subject matter of quality TV tends towards the controversial.

11. Quality TV aspires towards “realism.”

12. Series which exhibit the eleven characteristics above are usually enthusiastically showered with awards and critical acclaim. ⁶

Thompson’s definition of quality television is fairly comprehensive and accurate in terms of it’s reflection of the traits of the quality television of the era, such as Hill Street Blues and St. Elsewhere, and the fact that many of these traits are present today in programs considered to be aesthetically superior such as The Sopranos. However, Thompson’s analysis is problematic inasmuch as it arguably associated “quality” television with “good” television. Jason Mittell elaborates on this in his work Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television, in which he discusses his own criteria for differentiated television, which he defines as complex TV.

In writing about complex television series, many of which I find highly compelling and successful works of popular art, I have consciously avoided using the label “quality television.” This term is most useful when understood as a discursive category used to elevate certain programs over others, with such programs united less by formal or thematic elements than a mark of prestige that reflects well on sophisticated viewers who embrace such quality programming. The field of television studies splits on the term with one strand (based mostly in Europe) using the term quality to demarcate a legitimated object of study and the corpus of programming, while the more common American tradition regards the

emphasis on quality with skepticism and outright hostility toward the notion that television might be regarded as an aesthetic object.\textsuperscript{7}

Mittell’s argument is that aesthetic judgments should be made at the level of individual programs, rather than that of an entire mode, such as “complex narrative”. Mittell’s conception of complex TV is centered in what he describes as a new mode of storytelling. He is concerned with the story itself and the process by which it is told. His perception of storytelling is much broader than that described by Thompson.

A television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time. I am most interested in exploring how this fictional world is told via serial television, highlighting the distinction between fictional story and its telling via narrative discourse, a distinction established by narrative theorists across media. The bulk of the book considers the different storytelling strategies used by serial television to create engaging storyworlds through a range of complex techniques of narrative discourse, including playing with temporality, constructing characters, and incorporating transmedia.\textsuperscript{8}

From Mittell’s perspective, what makes a television program complex is tied to its methods of storytelling, not its relationship to other mediums. He characterizes his approach as what he refers to as historical poetics, which situates aesthetic developments in television in relationship to historical contexts of production, circulation and reception.

Both Thompson and Mittell’s work illustrate two different perspectives on what I refer to as differentiated television, or television that actively differentiates itself from so-called regular television. Each work delineates a method by which to


judge and determine how a particular program distinguishes itself from what is considered to be formulaic or cliché. In turn, these works have served as a foundation for asking myself the questions that eventually led to me writing this very thesis. These questions include what changes took place in order to enable this trend of distinctive television, what qualities does a specific program have in order to mark itself as “different”, and how does a text present these qualities.

In this thesis, I will evaluate three television programs that I feel embody practices of differentiation and distinction, namely *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Mad Men*. I evaluate each text individually, as each has its own way of marking itself, rather than adhering to a set of common traits. My method for determining how these programs differentiate themselves is based on my own viewing experiences, coupled with additional discourse surrounding the programs. My criterion for differentiation includes the concepts of autorial background, interactions and associations with other forms of media, and manipulation of genre.

My first chapter will provide an industrial history in order to better illustrate how differentiation and distinction among television programs became profitable for the commercial broadcast networks. I will start tracing the commercial roots of network television, specifically how the Big Three networks ABC, NBC, and CBS, came to dominate the industry. I will then discuss the advent of cable television and the fourth network, FOX, and the subsequent industrial crisis of network television. I will also discuss examples of the attempts to meet the need for differentiated television, namely the programs of MTM Enterprises. Finally, I will discuss the rise of premium cable channel HBO and its eventual foray into original programming.
My second chapter will focus on *The Sopranos*, a flagship program for HBO and one of the most discussed television programs in television studies. More specifically I want to look at the background of David Chase, and how his discontent with his career in network television was translated into *The Sopranos*. Additionally, I want to look at *The Sopranos*’ ties to art cinema, particularly in its treatment of the character psychology of Tony Soprano, both in his therapy sessions and his dreams. Finally, I want to look at *The Sopranos*’ complicated relationship with the gangster film genre, specifically looking at Tony as a domesticated gangster.

In chapter three I turn to *The Wire*. I will again look at the background of the creator of show, but instead of focusing on creator David Simon’s attitude towards television, I seek to examine his and executive producer Ed Burn’s backgrounds before they began producing television, specifically their work as a journalist and police officer. I will also look at *The Wire*’s use of realism in two ways. First, I will look at its characters and how they are more than simply influenced by real residents of the show’s setting of Baltimore, Maryland. Secondly, I will look at how realism plays itself out within *The Wire*’s depiction of police procedures, specifically the realistic process by which the cases unfold. Additionally, I look at *The Wire*’s interpretation of characters and how they are defined not by their personality traits, but by the institutions that they are a part of. I also seek to evaluate *The Wire*’s social commentary in contrast to the methods used on network procedural *Law and Order*.

My final chapter will look at *Mad Men*. I feel that it is necessary to look at creator Matthew Weiner’s background, both as a showrunner\(^9\) who worked under

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\(^9\) Showrunner is a colloquial term used in the television industry for somebody who is responsible for the day to day operations of a television program.
David Chase, but also as one whose attitude towards television is very different from that of his mentor. Additionally, I will evaluate how *Mad Men* situates itself as a period drama, particularly as to how it presents itself in terms of its storyline and its depiction of specific historical events. Furthermore, I will look at how *Mad Men* situates itself within history outside of its story, specifically its influence from popular media in the 1960’s.

In this profile of differentiation in contemporary television series, both in terms of industrial discourse and aesthetic qualities, I seek to look at the text in depth, drawing selectively on previous scholarship to pursue my own interpretation. I explore the various methods by which particular television programs seek to differentiate and define themselves, as a contribution to the evaluation of television as an industrial art form.
Chapter One: Industrial Contexts For Differentiation

Commercial network broadcasting is based on a dynamic in which a network will sell airtime to advertisers. The commercial spots become more valuable with the more viewers that a particular program attracts. As a result of their reliance on advertising revenues, television networks are under serious pressure to create content that is popular, regardless of how much critical acclaim a program may receive. The commercial aspect of network television did not result from the creation of the medium; instead network television’s commercial component can be traced back to its roots in radio.

Commercial broadcasting had been present on radio since the early 1920’s, and very early on the motivation to create content that attracted as many listeners as possible gave commercial content a large advantage over alternative forms of broadcasting such as educational and amateur content. This was intensified by the fact that reliance on advertising revenues provided a simple and systematic method of financing programming, and hence, allowed for a consistent flow of high value programming for the radio stations. Additionally, there were no efforts by the government to regulate radio broadcasting in the interest of the public, such the establishment of the BBC in Britain. This is not to say that there was no governing body over the radio industry, the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) was established with the passage of the Radio Act of 1927 with the purpose of regulating the radio industry as needed.

By the time the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) replaced the FRC, television as a technology was in its developmental stages. That same year, the
Wagner-Hatfield Act was present as a potential amendment to the Communications Act of 1934. The amendment was designed to curtail the domination of commercial radio by allocating one fourth of broadcast facilities to not for profit material. It was met with stark opposition from the Network lobby and eventually did not pass.\textsuperscript{10} Eventually, it was defeated in the Senate and set a precedent for the commercial based funding that would carry over into television.

The domination of the three major networks in television, NBC, CBS, and ABC, was a result of the debate over the use of Ultra High Frequency (UHF) television and Very High Frequency (VHF) for broadcast television. VHF was limited to channels 2 through 13 while UHF could be broadcast on channels 14-83. It was clear that UHF would allow for increased competition and more diversity in programming. However because UHF was still in development, defenders of diversity argued that television should not be implemented until UHF was ready. This factor would eventually lead to UHF’s downfall and allow for the commercial networks to carry their monopoly over the radio industry into television.

The first factor in the commercial takeover and the temporary shelving of UHF is due to the FCC “freeze” on station licensing imposed in 1948. In an effort to regulate interference issues, the FCC refused to grant any new licenses for what was supposed to be a six-month period. That six-month period turned into four years and effectively froze out any new television stations from forming. Most of the licensed stations were the affiliates of the major networks. By the time the freeze was lifted, new stations were forced to compete with networks that were well established and

had significant and consistent funding.

With the freeze underway, the question of UHF or VHF television was put on hold. Additionally, during the period of the freeze, roughly 17 million television sets were sold, however none of them were equipped with UHF. The FCC could not force a recall on all of the television sets, as that would not only overstep their boundaries but it would be immensely unpopular with the public. Between the technological lockout and policy, UHF was considered to be inferior technology until 1964, when it became required to incorporate UHF into receivers.

Once the space to build had been created due to the regulations (or lack thereof) by the FCC, the Big Three networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) were able to maintain their monopoly. Not unlike their counterparts in the film industry, the Big Three followed a concept of centralized production and distribution. Telecommunications scholar Barry Litman elaborates on the economic philosophy of the major networks in the following.

…(The networks) economic origins arises from their ability to reduces costs to broadcasters (by offering higher production value programming more cheaply than local production), to national advertisers (by diminishing the number of transactions required to broker a national market) and to program suppliers (by central dealing and long term commitments).\(^\text{11}\)

The economic philosophy presented by Litman allowed the major networks to gain more profits and, hence, more power over the television industry. The networks had the advantage and were able to negotiate beneficial terms when working with advertisers, broadcasters, and producers and further secure their influence and authority.

It is important to note that the early years of television were significant in terms of content as well as economics. The period from approximately 1947 to 1960 has been characterized as the first “Golden Age of Television”. For some critics, the era was a high point of the medium in terms of the quality of programming; in particular, critics celebrated the live televised anthology dramas of the era as bringing the high culture of the theater to viewers.

The anthology drama is one of the more famous products of the First Golden Age of Television. The anthology drama was a form of theater television, produced in New York City with stage-trained actors. In the anthology format, a different play was broadcast each week, with new actors and new sets. Anthology dramas became critical darlings not only because of their ties to high culture, but also because of their emphasis on narrative realism. In Make Room for TV, Lynn Spigel describes the anthology dramas’ commitment to a realist aesthetic. According to Spigel “the anthology drama favored classical story construction, character development, and acting styles that minimized artifice so that audiences might better suspend disbelief and enter into the world of the story.”

Most of the anthology dramas were single sponsored, and while they did not attract a very large audience, they brought prestige to the sponsors.

The anthology drama carried an aura of prestige, but they were soon rendered obsolete when production shifted from New York to Hollywood. Due to the tremendous costs of producing television and the fact that the film industry was taking notice of television as major rival, production shifted from live telecasts in New York to telefilm production in Hollywood. Telefilm production was not only

\[12\] Lynn Spigel, Make Room For TV, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 143.
cheaper, but the finished recorded product could be sold to other stations after the network finished broadcasting them. This practice later became known as syndication. This industrial shift gave way to what we know today as the episodic series. Programs were recorded with incorporated breaks for advertisers in addition to the use of tropes and formulas, some of which, like the soap opera, carried over from radio. These formulas, as Horace Newcomb touches on in *TV: The Most Popular Art*, came to form their own genres such as the domestic comedy, the western, and the mystery.

While network television dominated the first three decades of television history, new and subsequently influential technologies were being developed. While it is now fairly present in the American television landscape, cable television had very humble beginnings. The first cable television systems were developed in rural areas that could not be reached through a terrestrial broadcast signal. Much of the programming available at the time on the fledgling cable channels was small scale, localized productions. Patrick Parsons describes the local nature of early cable programming in his account of the history of cable television.

The period from 1952 to 1955 was one of rapid development in the new industry. The concept of community television, once it received its initial dose of national publicity, took root and was made read by local entrepreneurs in a matter of months, sometimes a matter of weeks...Even though CATV had received a measure of national publicity and launched what would eventually become a national lobbying organization, the industry during this period was still intensely local. This was the age of the true “Mom and Pop” community television company. It was fueled by small-town entrepreneurs and small-town entrepreneurial spirit.13

Parsons’s observations point to an underlying philosophy of the cable television industry: a drive for the creation of alternative programming tailored towards a specific audience. This underlying notion would be further expanded as an economic strategy once cable television was able to fully operate on a nationwide level.

Up until the early 60’s, the FCC did not consider cable television technology a threat to the existing system. However, the cable industry began to grow rapidly, even gaining the ability to retransmit distant broadcast signals. Once the FCC became aware of cable television’s potential, it promptly enacted several pieces of legislation to curtail growth.\textsuperscript{14} In 1962 the FCC enacted a law that required cable systems to contain a specific carrier that would limit the ability to receive distant signals. The most restrictive legislation however, came in 1966 when the FCC created a series of restrictions on cable television technology, the most significant of which was that one of the systems in the largest markets could import distant signals unless it was in the interest of the public. This made sure that cable television had severely limited programming options and was restricted to creating localized content.

It can be said that cable television was finally recognized as a legitimate addition to the medium, rather than a threat or adjacent to the networks, in 1972. The FCC’s Third Report and Order on Cable Television ensured that all local stations with significant viewership be carried on cable systems, the creation of public access channels, and ability to import distant signals. Cable television now had a clear platform by which to expand its programming options and eventually established itself as a clear rival to the major networks.

Cable channels were not the only competition faced by The Big Three, FOX was not launched until 1986, but, despite its late arrival, it nevertheless contributed to the ongoing crisis of network television. FOX began as a result of parent company New Corporation taking notice of the fact that the networks were struggling and that ownership regulations had been greatly relaxed. Today, FOX seems surprisingly similar to its major network counterparts, but when it first arrived on the airwaves, its branding strategy was exceedingly targeted. Catherine Johnson describes FOX’s strategy as such:

The attempt to differentiate itself from the national networks also emerged in the promotional activities surrounding Fox. Initially the network was going to be named the ‘Fox Broadcasting Company’ (FBC) copying the acronyms of the big three networks NBC, CBS, and ABC. However, Chiat/Day, the advertising house that Fox hired to oversee the initial launch and promotion of the network, argued that this name played down one of the network’s biggest assets – the 20th Century Fox brand. Chiat/Day advised the network to take advantage of the audiences knowledge of the Fox brand and to use the iconic searchlights from 20th Century Fox as its logo. The Fox network can thus be understood as a brand extension, utilizing the audiences long standing association with 20th Century Fox as a producer of content for both television and cinema.\textsuperscript{15}

Fox was clearly attempting to situate itself in competition with the Big Three networks, but it did so by going as far as to associate itself with something that was both a familiar sight to viewers and a separate medium. This, however, is not the sole reason that FOX was able to situate itself among the major networks, but it is a rather significant one. Johnson also mentions FOX’s popularity among youth and the emphasis the network put on targeted marketing, a viable if not shrewd approach to generating revenue. Eventually, FOX was able to mark itself as a major threat to the Big Three’s share of viewship.

\textsuperscript{15} Catherine Johnson, \textit{Branding Television} (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2012), 22-23.
While the Big Three had established what was thought to be a nearly foolproof system in terms of its set of formulas for programs and its economic structure in television’s early days, its hold on the industry did not last for long. By 1980, The Big Three networks were undergoing what John Caldwell refers to as the crisis of network television. Over the network era, when the Big Three networks controlled distribution, the Big Three had created a system that was self-sustaining in terms of programming, content, and profit. The economic structure guaranteed circulation of funds, and content had an advantage of higher production values over the competition. However, the advent of cable television and fledgling network FOX created new competition by providing new programming choices that appealed to the tastes of narrower audience segments. In his book *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, John Caldwell discusses the changing television landscape.

No longer could CBS, NBC, and ABC-protected by the government as near monopolies since the late 1940’s and early 1950’s-assume the level of cash flow that they enjoyed up until the late seventies. Although the networks faced the first cable players in 1980 and 1981 with a smug self-confident public face, this façade began to crack as each year took its toll on corporate profits. CNN and MTV were merely the first in a line of very profitable challengers to sign on to cable for the long haul. The trades gave blow-by-blow accounts of the precipitous decline in network primetime viewing. The networks had enjoyed complete dominance—an incredible 90 share—during the 1979-1980 season, but saw this figure plummet to a mere 64/65 share by 1990.16

The Big Three networks were no longer guaranteed exclusive control over viewership and were thrown into upheaval as a result. They were now forced to look for new options to differentiate themselves from their new competition. They could

no longer rely on mass appeal programming alone to carry the network, which allowed for a bout of experimentation. While the networks consistently attempting to create alternative and competitive programming, production companies were able to take these needs into account. In 1969, one of the most significant players in modern television came into being. MTM Enterprises was started by Mary Tyler Moore and her then husband Grant Tinker, a former network executive. At the core of MTM Enterprises’ philosophy was the concept that creative staff should be left to their own devices. With the writers and producers somewhat removed from the restrictions of the networks, MTM initiated a cycle of innovative programming.

Robert J. Thompson divides MTM’s influence in television into four distinct phases, the first three of which made MTM its name in innovative quality television. MTM’s first phase started with well-known sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show*. MTM then moved into hour-long socially conscious dramas such as *Mary Tyler Moore* spinoff, *Lou Grant*, a show that would rip stories right from the headlines and retell them in it fictional universe. In the early nineteen eighties MTM diversified into dramas with such programs as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*. While these programs were drastically different in terms of their generic affiliations, what is significant is the fact that many of these programs brought new characteristics to the standing formulas of television and set the programs apart from the standard lineup.

MTM’s first program, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* provided an innovative manipulation of popular television formulas and provided a framework for future
programming. The family sitcom was already a firmly established genre with its emphasis on the nuclear domestic unit. *Mary Tyler Moore* took the concept of the family and placed it within the context of the workplace. Its protagonist, Mary did not have children, a boyfriend, or even a pet; most of the action of the series took place at her job at local TV station WJM. The supporting characters were united by their ties to WJM, including Mary’s boss Lou Grant, newswriter Murray Slaughter, and news anchor Ted Baxter. The action revolved around Mary and her workplace family while they were dealt the daily trails of working in a newsroom. The device of the workplace family eventually became a model for future programming. The concept of the family could now be outside of the home whether it was a police station, an office, or a hospital.

MTM continued its run of commercial and critical successes throughout the 1970. However it was not until 1981 that its next big breakthrough came about. Created by Stephen Bochco, *Hill Street Blues* was one of the frontrunners in serialized dramas. Through its format as a cop show, *Hill Street* broke from various norms that were in place for dramas. *Hill Street* was not ordinary Hollywood produced television. Every episode of *Hill Street* began with a morning roll call scene. The look of the *Hill Street Blues* police station was gritty and unrefined in addition to the unsteady camerawork and layered audio effects. Robert J. Thompson notes that unlike the glossy fantasy worlds of previous network cop shows, *Hill Street Blues* was designed to evoke the feel of a real police station.

In addition to the realistic qualities of *Hill Street*’s atmosphere, the program provided an alternative take on cop show characters. Previous cop shows were based
on a good vs. evil dichotomy where the cops were always morally upstanding
individuals attempting to stop whichever evil villain was the subject of a particular
episode. The cops of *Hill Street* on the other hand, were not so simply characterized.
Many of the characters were, if not immoral, at least partially unlikable, including
raging alcoholic Officer J.D. LaRue, the reclusive and unstable Detective Mick
Belker, and Phil Esterhaus, an older cop who at one point, dated a high school
student. The captain of the Hill Street Station, Frank Furillo, was not like traditional
television heroes. His ability to prevent crime was limited by societal and
bureaucratic issues beyond his control, yet he still remained dedicated to his line of
work.

Further building on its innovations in terms of genre and character, *Hill Street
Blues* broke away from the idea that a television program has to tell its story from
beginning to end in a single episode. Over the course of its seven season run, *Hill
Street* wove dozens of storylines, characters had to live with their individual burdens
and grew over time. With its large ensemble cast, *Hill Street* regularly dealt with
several different storylines, only some of which were solved within the episode. Other
storylines would be played out across a number of episodes, or they would be
shelved, only to be revisited later in the season. For the viewer, *Hill Street Blues*
provided a multifaceted, layered experience.

*Hill Street Blues* also broke ground with its use of graphic content over the
course of its run. An average episode of *Hill Street* would contain any number of
sexual or scatological jokes and references. Visual and verbal references to bodily
functions were not uncommon. Characters were seen actually using the bathroom
instead of just talking about it, and there were consistent instances of characters being urinated and puked on. According to Robert J. Thompson, Steven Bochco used graphic content to directly challenge the regulations of the broadcast networks but the references also added to the sense of realism that Hill Street consistently aspired to evoke.

*Hill Street Blues* was not the only source of innovation within the MTM Enterprises catalogue. In 1982, *St. Elsewhere* premiered on NBC. Set in decaying Boston teaching hospital St. Eligius, *St. Elsewhere* documented the daily professional and personal struggles of the staff at an under-equipped teaching hospital. The program paralleled *Hill Street* in various ways including the idea of the run-down and broken institution where the day’s work unfolds against seemingly impossible odds. This is not to say that *St. Elsewhere* was the medical version of *Hill Street Blues*, however it is safe to say that they came from the same basic tenants of quality television.

Instead of focusing on a single main center of authority in the fashion of Captain Furillo, *St. Elsewhere*’s central authority figures were three imperfect doctors; administrative head and cancer patient Daniel Aushlander, chief of staff Donald Wesphall, who served as a father figure not only to the residents but to a teenaged daughter and an autistic son, and Mark Craig, a brilliant but abusive surgeon who had no problem tormenting his colleagues and family. In addition to the main authority figures, much of *St. Elsewhere*’s ensemble cast was made up of various hospital staff, including residents, nurses, and additional hospital staff.

In addition to its elaboration on the ensemble cast, *St. Elsewhere* broke what
was then an essential rule in primetime television. Main characters were no longer safe from death. Previously, most prime time television writers would only write in a character death upon the exit or actual death of an actor on the show, but in the storyworld of *St. Elsewhere* every character was vulnerable. Over the course of *St. Elsewhere*’s six season run there were multiple character deaths, including a resident who committed suicide, a doctor who died from AIDS, and another doctor who disconnected himself from life support following surgery. As Robert J. Thompson phrased it (paraphrasing cast member Howie Mandel) on *St. Elsewhere* “the lives of the characters of the show were as tenuous and vulnerable as the lives of real people.”

The fact that *St. Elsewhere* took place within the medical profession allowed for a vast expansion on the graphic visuals and language shown on *Hill Street Blues*. The medical procedures and ailments depicted include AIDS, prostate cancer, hemorrhoids, and premature ejaculation, just to name a few. These depictions of bodily functions were used for various purposes; sometimes they were intended to be dirty jokes, other times they had serious thematic implications. The graphic nature of *St. Elsewhere* further pushed the notion of what was considered acceptable for network television and enhanced the realism of the show.

While its innovative character garnered critical acclaim, *St. Elsewhere* had very low ratings throughout its six-seasons. It was not renewed for a second season until the very last minute and never ranked above forty-nine out of about one hundred series in the Nielsen ratings. However, despite its low ratings, the show generated a

great deal of revenue for NBC. *St. Elsewhere* did not attract many viewers, but those who did watch were generally from a relatively wealthy group of television viewers. This allowed for a small niche audience for advertisers, and, regardless of its ratings, *advertisers coveted St. Elsewhere’s commercial spots*. The show’s popularity with advertisers showed that going after a small audience could prove to be beneficial for the networks.

While the networks were enacting their own methods of differentiation, premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO) was attempting to find its place in the competitive television landscape. HBO was created in November of 1972. It was designed on a differed economic model from network television and basic cable in that HBO was dependent on customer subscription fees (in addition to the basic cable fee) rather than advertiser revenue. Today, HBO has a very different reputation in terms of its content, but what is now a cable television powerhouse did not start out with such prestige. Toby Miller describes in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, “…while HBO is primarily thought of today in terms of Tony Soprano’s post-modern mélange of masculinity meltdowns or Al Swearengen’s particular linguistic patois, the first program that ever aired on the pay channel was, in fact, a hockey game between the New York Rangers and the Vancouver Canunks.”

The broadcast of the hockey game was followed by a movie. Sporting events and rebroadcast films would become HBO’s calling card for the next few years, but their content offerings would not remain sustainable for long. Viewers would subscribe for a few months and then, after the preferred sports season ending or becoming tired of...

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the same loop of movies, they would cancel their subscription. As a result, HBO began to struggle to find its brand identity and entered an era of experimentation.

By the early nineties, HBO’s subscription count began to fall due to the advent of technologies such as the VCR. With these new innovations that allowed viewers watch rented movies, many households did not see the need to subscribe to HBO. In an effort to gain back subscriptions, HBO began to experiment with original programming. HBO’s programming choices were rather diverse in terms of genre. Some of the programming selections included *Arliss* (sometimes styled as *Arli$$*), a situation comedy about a sports agent and his associate staff, *Tales From the Crypt* a horror anthology series, and sketch comedy shows such as *Tracy Takes On*... The early experimentation with programming on HBO never obtained high ratings, but the shows did gain some critical acclaim and awards.

HBO had its first success in original programming with the premiere of *The Larry Sanders Show*. *Larry Sanders* centered on a self-centered talk show host and all of his antics behind the scenes of the titular fictional program. In particular, *Larry Sanders* broke away from some of the traditional formulas of comedy by taking a more documentary like angle in its presentation of the stories. For example, the show featured a mixture of videotaped footage of the fictional *Larry Sanders Show* with the “behind the scenes” footage shot on film. *The Larry Sanders Show* gained multiple accolades over the course of its six season run on HBO, including three Golden Globes, three Primetime Emmy Awards, and five Directors Guild of America Awards. While *The Larry Sanders Show* never became one of the programs that defined HBO’s roster of quality original programming, it certainly served as a
platform for what which HBO is now famous.

1997 brought about HBO’s first definitive original drama. *Oz* took place in the fictional maximum-security prison Oswald State Penitentiary. The series focused on the various people who struggle to survive inside the wall of “Oz,” including both prisoners and staff. *Oz* was the first one-hour original drama to be shown on HBO and contained many of the traits seen in *Hill Street* and *St. Elsewhere*, particularly in the case of psychologically complex characters, willingness to let lead characters die, and the gritty, graphic, visuals and language (*Oz* depicted multiple scenes of violence including but not limited to stabbings and rape). *Oz* also contained increasingly layered storylines. For example in the case of inmate Tobias Beecher, we see his moral decline, his rivalry with fellow inmate Vern Schillinger, and his increasingly complicated romantic/sexual relationship with inmate Chris Keller. *Oz* marked the first foray into hour-long quality drama that would eventually become HBO’s trademark.

Before it became known for its original content, HBO advertised itself under the tagline “HBO brings it home” referencing it’s trademark of broadcasting films and sporting events, but by the mid 90’s, HBO had formally changed its tagline to “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” The new phrase still highlighted HBO’s reputation of airing content that was literally “not TV”, but the phrase soon came to include its original content as well. Catherine Johnson further discusses HBO’s new branding slogan in relation to its developing original content.

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20 Beecher is a point of view character. He is a white middle class lawyer convicted of vehicular homicide while under the influence of alcohol. Throughout the course of the series he was surrounded by more hardened criminals such as the white supremacist Vern Schillinger.
By 2001, HBO’s original programming had come to stand in for the brand, so that *The Sopranos* itself embodied the slogan ‘It’s not TV. It’s HBO”. The tying of HBO’s original programming to its brand identity was reinforced through the coverage that HBO received in the press over the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. Much of the rhetoric of the critical reception towards HBO’s programming in this period saw the channel itself as central to the success of the programmes in four ways. First because the channel produces fewer programmes than the national networks, it can afford to spend more on production budgets. Second, HBO is seen as a risk taker, prepared to take a chance on programmes that other networks would flee from. Third, HBO is seen to give its writers and directors a free rein to develop their material without commercial interference. Fourth, the channel is freed from having to pander to the demands of the advertiser or worry too extensively about ratings, allowing it to develop content directly for its audience.\(^{21}\)

What Johnson’s observations can tell us is that between the economic, programming, and creative conditions, in addition to the publicity generated from the press, HBO was able to establish itself as a premiere source for quality content and, eventually, one of the leading providers of what is referred to as quality TV.

What we have seen is that changes in technology, economics, and legislation layered together to create ideal industrial conditions for differentiation and distinction in television content. The commercial nature of television carried over from the commercial aspects of the radio industry and, in turn, created a systematic method of funding which, in turn, created a trope-based method of producing content. However, the rise of cable television and the FOX network skewed the system in two ways, first via technology creating an alternative method for programming, and then by creating competition for the networks and, hence, created a platform for the creation of actively differentiated television.

Chapter Two: The Sopranos, David Chase, and Intersections of Genre

By the late 1990’s HBO had reconfigured its brand, modifying its previous role as a provider of feature films by a new emphasis on the development of original programming. The premiere of Oz was a major milestone for the network as its first original drama series, but HBO had yet to have a definitive commercial success. That came with the premiere of The Sopranos in 1999. At the most basic level, the show documents the troubles of mafia boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) as he navigates his two families, his domestic family and the DiMeo (later Soprano) crime family. As a result of his rather tumultuous double life, Tony sees a psychotherapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco). Upon its premiere, the Sopranos was universally well received by critics, one of whom went so far as to assert that The Sopranos “just might be the greatest work of American popular culture in the last quarter century.”22 Critical acclaim was nothing new to HBO’s roster of programs such as The Larry Sanders Show, but The Sopranos received praise beyond that of previous HBO original programs, in addition to the success it was able to provide in the form of new subscribers. The Sopranos debuted with roughly 7.5 million viewers,23 a large number for a subscriber-based channel. That number grew exponentially with the premiere of the second and third seasons, and the show eventually placed in the top ten for all programs cable and broadcast.24 The show was able to garner HBO mass popularity to go along with their critical acclaim. The

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24 Ibid, 12.
*Sopranos* served as the flagship program for HBO’s new brand identity as a provider of distinctive original programming, an identity encapsulated in the slogan “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO.” Additionally, *The Sopranos* set a precedent for further HBO original programming, including *The Wire, Six Feet Under*, and *Boardwalk Empire*.

*The Sopranos* has also been the focus of a significant amount of academic criticism. Numerous books and articles have been written about the show, which range in topics from the role of psychology and psychotherapy, to cinematic influences and depictions of Italian Americans from authors such as Dana Polan, Maurice Yacowar, and Glen Gabbard. Such scholarly analyses further imbue *The Sopranos* with a sense of cultural legitimacy and further solidify its artistic value as a television series.

*The Sopranos* is hardly the first television series to receive great reviews, however what is important to note about the critical evaluation it received is the fact that it was consistently compared with other forms of media. In other words, it was evaluated as an artistic exception to television programs. One *New York Times* critic accurately depicts television elitist critical sentiment towards *The Sopranos* as such “Today’s audiences have been conditioned…Pop theatrical movies and television dramas are essentially the same; a dependence on close-ups, on shock effects and on pacing of narratives to bridge commercial interruptions…When there are exceptions they usually come from independent and foreign film makers, seldom from television sources.”

25 We can see the critic’s disdain for modern media, as well as his surprise that a television show could be a work of art. What is clear is that *The Sopranos* was

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received as an exceptional work within a medium that (in the mind of the critic) has
not produced exceptional or worthy material. It could be said that for many critics,
The Sopranos was not considered a television series at all, but is rather situated within
the frame of other media such as cinema or literature

Between its role as a flagship original program for HBO, its significant
presence in the academy, and critical praise it received, there was no doubt that The
Sopranos would be an essential text for my evaluation of distinctive television.
However, while the above examples are pertinent to the question of why I should
study The Sopranos, they do not answer the question as to how or why the show
should be seen as a work that actively attempts to differentiate itself from the very
medium that it is grouped with. In other words, how does The Sopranos claim
distinction? Over the course of my study of the show, I noticed several significant
features, all of which were rooted in the way that The Sopranos consistently
associates itself with forms of media that are considered culturally legitimate, in
addition to its televisual influences. Some manifestations include The Sopranos clear
association with art cinema and its complicated relationship with the gangster genre
and the domestic comedy. What must be noted first and foremost is that The
Sopranos was created by a man with a vocal if not enthusiastic hatred of television.

David Chase grew up in a household that discouraged watching television.
This, however, did not stop him from frequenting the movies as a child, where he
would watch the weekly western film at the Saturday matinee. Additionally, Chase
described himself as being an avid viewer of Million Dollar Movie,26 a program that

26 Mark Lawson, “Mark Lawson Talks to David Chase”, Quality TV: Contemporary
would run the same film five nights a week, giving the viewer an opportunity to watch and re-watch. Chase mentions in the same interview that while he was too young to study the films in depth, it did give him the opportunity to be exposed more heavily to film.

David Chase’s love of film did not surface until he was a student at Wake Forest University. Chase describes his decision to attend the very conservative, Baptist University as a mistake.\textsuperscript{27} Despite his overall negative experience at Wake Forest, Chase took solace in the Friday night film program. There, he was exposed to the various works of famous film directors such as Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Stanley Kubrick, and Roman Polanski. These films led Chase to think of films as authored and to attribute authorship to the director. As he describes his experience: “So I went to those, and you’re confronted with this thing called, this is a Fellini film. Wow this is a Stanly Kubrick film. Oh. So some guy did this. It didn't come out of a factory. There’s some single person who is the chief of all this.”\textsuperscript{28}

After two years at Wake Forest University, Chase transferred to New York University (NYU) where he continued to enjoy auteurist films. Yet, it was not until Chase attended a screening of Roman Polanski’s \textit{Cul-De-Sac} that he decided to pursue filmmaking as a career, as he recounts in the interview with Mark Lawson. “And it really struck me when I went to see \textit{Cul-De-Sac}, this Polanski film…And I walked out of there thinking ‘Okay that's a Polanski film. That means maybe it's a job I could do. Maybe that's a career for me.’”\textsuperscript{29} Much to the dismay of his parents, he

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Taurus & Co Ltd. 2007), 192.}
\footnote{Ibid., 193.}
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began to pursue film studies and eventually gained a full scholarship to Stanford University’s MFA program.

Despite the fact that Stanford University is the top choice for an education in many different fields, the situation was not the same in regards to David Chase’s career. According to Chase, due to its location and the lack of prestige of its film department, Stanford could not provide the professional networking opportunities that its film students needed. As a result, Chase had to forgo his dream of creating feature films in favor of a job in television that would allow him to pay the bills.

...What happened was that I’d written feature screenplays and the reason I got into television was because if I had been to UCLA or USC, it might have been different. But we were up in Palo Alto. At Stanford, the number of visiting people from the business was not at great as some of those other schools would have. And so one of the guys that came up there was this guy named Roy Huggins. And I don't know why Stanford had a relationship with Roy Huggins but Roy Huggins was a TV producer and he had produced Maverick and The Fugitive. Pretty good stuff. All the shows I had really liked, but I wasn't interested in TV at all. However because there was a relationship there, when I wrote a screenplay, Roy Huggins was someone that I sent it to. And Roy Huggins hired me to do my first TV job. Chase had no desire to work in television, but due to the fact that he had not worked in two years and was considering forgoing a career in Hollywood altogether, it seemed ill-advised to not take the opportunity to establish himself. Chase took the job writing a series on spec with Huggins and thus came Chase’s first significant television credits working on *The Rockford Files*.

David Chase may have technically gotten his “big break,” but his success did not come in the way he had planned. His work on *The Rockford Files* received much acclaim and boosted his reputation, and as a result, Chase was in high demand in the

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30 Ibid, 197.
television industry. Chase went on to write and produce for multiple programs, some of which were critical successes and others that left more to be desired. However, despite the fact that by any measure he would be considered to have a successful career, Chase’s career frustrations only mounted, due to his inability to break into the film industry. Chase had spent most of his time in film school writing feature scripts and he saw his time in the television industry as a way to provide for himself and his wife rather than an actual career path. He continued to write feature scripts while working (including an early version of *The Sopranos*), but none of them were ever produced. As a result, Chase continued to work in the television industry as his resentment and unproduced projects increased.

Over the years, David Chase developed a severe dislike for network television. It seems only natural that he would eventually come to hate the industry that had technically been very accommodating to him, considering that Chase’s entire purpose for entering his chosen field was so that he could have creative control. As Chase described in the interview with Lawson: “I’d write a pilot. Then I’d also be writing a feature at the same time. And my hope always was that one of those features would happen and I would be transported magically out of this television hell into the wonderful world of motion pictures. But it never did.”\(^{31}\) As his years in the television industry increased and his feature film scripts continually went unproduced, Chase’s dissatisfaction turned into utter loathing. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* regarding the final season of *The Sopranos*, Chase bluntly articulated his feelings “Television,” he declared, “is really an outgrowth of radio. And radio is just all yak-yak-yak-yak. And that's what television is: yak-yak-yak-yak. It's a prisoner of dialogue, a film of

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\(^{31}\) Ibid, 206.
people talking, flashy words.” With his career not necessarily advancing (in Chase’s opinion) and his resentment for television growing with each passing year, Chase began to channel his frustrations into his work.

Over the course of his career, David Chase developed a penchant for creating television that did not necessarily follow the rules of network television. Chase’s newfound reputation seemed both beneficial and detrimental to his career in that while he was often considered by some as being too dark for network television, he also gained various accolades for his work. Chase has stated in the Lawson interview: “because I won that Emmy (for The Rockford Files) I began to be seen as the type of person that people at the networks wanted to have meetings with.” Still, Chase consistently questioned his success and began to wonder if he would ever be successful on his own terms. When answering a question on the subject, Chase responded, “Yes, I sort of think that. Yeah. Because I had a bad reputation. A reputation was always…you know ‘He’s very talented but he’s too dark. His material is too dark’. And that was both in movies and TV…And so even though I had deal after deal after deal in which nothing happened, I still kept getting hired because something had happened once.”

In terms of the development of The Sopranos, David Chase was by no means exempt from the difficulties that many writers run into when trying to exercise creative freedom. Unsurprisingly, he originally wanted to develop the script as a feature film about a mobster in therapy due to problems with his mother. However

34 Ibid, 207.
despite Chase’s best efforts, nobody he approached would pick up the script for development. Chase recalls, “So I pitched this when I changed agencies. And they said “Mob comedies. Mob movies. Never gonna happen.”35 The production company Brillstein-Grey approached David Chase in 1995 to develop a new television series with him. Yet Chase was ever reluctant to produce another work of television, stating in an interview that he “did not give a fuck”36. Yet Brillstein-Grey did not necessarily approach him unknowing of Chase’s hatred for television; in fact, it is that very reason that they wanted to develop a new show with him. They did not want to develop a typical network show. They approached Chase about possibly writing, as they phrased it, “The Godfather for television.”37 to which Chase was originally somewhat skeptical. However he remembered his feature script and decided to pursue the opportunity. The idea was pitched to the major networks but unsurprisingly, they all passed considering the premise and content. However at the last minute, The Sopranos was pitched to HBO and the show finally took shape.

With The Sopranos, David Chase came to a point in his career that many television writers, producers, and directors would consider a great and prestigious opportunity. And while Chase did not consider The Sopranos another obstacle to his dream of filmmaking, he undoubtedly channeled his desire for filmmaking into The Sopranos. More specifically, Chase drew influence from different forms of cinema, particularly the European art cinema that he had come to love as a young college student. Through the manipulation of his fondness for art cinema, Chase was not only

35 Ibid, 211.
able to channel his individual taste into *The Sopranos*, but also to create a program that played directly into HBO’s branding strategy.

Many of the films that David Chase so greatly enjoyed fall under the rather broad category of art cinema. Born out of the post-war intellectual revival and fostered through the rejection of Hollywood standards, the mere mention of European art cinema carries a sense of prestige and high culture in addition to its alternative perspective on characters and reality. While it is not typical to utilize art cinema in television programs, its alternative nature has made it an attractive influence for experimental programming, with *Twin Peaks* and *Northern Exposure* serving as two examples. In the case of *The Sopranos*, traits of art cinema are used throughout the series, further distinguishing the show from standard network fare.

David Chase did not attempt to create *The Sopranos* as an art film for television. He did, however, utilize one of art cinema’s most salient traits in his use of character psychology. In his essay “Art Cinema as a Mode of Practice”, David Bordwell elaborates on the significant emphasis on the complexities of the human psyche in art cinema.

The art cinema is classical in its reliance on psychological causation; characters and their effects on one another remain central. But whereas characters of the classical narrative have clear-cut traits and objectives, the characters of the art cinema lack defined desires and goals. Characters may act for inconsistent reasons or may question themselves about their goals. Choices are vague or non-existent.  

According to Bordwell, while characters in both classical and art cinema have psychological motivations, the character psychology of art cinema is less clear and much more nuanced. In the context of *The Sopranos*, not only does Tony meet many

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of the criteria set out by Bordwell, but his psychology is essential to knowing him as a character. David Chase chose to carry out the convention of character psychology in two distinct ways, one through Tony’s sessions with his psychiatrist, Jennifer Melfi, and through his various dreams represented over the course of the series. It is through these methods of presentation that The Sopranos finds itself in accordance with the convention of character psychology in European art cinema.

Jennifer Melfi, Tony Soprano’s psychiatrist, is possibly the most important secondary character in The Sopranos’ storyworld. Over the course of the series her complicated relationship with Tony provides a link between Tony’s professional life and his family life. They have a rather turbulent on-again-off-again relationship as Tony suffers from uneasiness, as he is violating the mafia code by speaking to anybody about his criminal activities, an uneasiness which reinforces his resistance to confronting his internal problems. Melfi, nevertheless, continues to attempt to help Tony, despite the risk that his mafia ties pose to her and his multiple moral ambiguities as a person.

While Melfi holds a significant presence in The Sopranos outside of her sessions with Tony, in terms of the show’s connections with art films, Melfi has a very specific role. As Tony’s therapist she serves as a gateway into his mind and hence as a pathway to the character psychology. Throughout the series we see Tony struggle within his two lives, but only though his sessions with Melfi does his inner conflict truly come to the surface. We can see this through three key sessions between Tony and Dr. Melfi, their first session, a session at the end of the second season, and their final session.
The pilot for *The Sopranos* depicts Tony’s first three sessions with Dr. Melfi. The episode begins with Tony in Melfi’s office waiting room, staring at the female statue, before she calls him in, and as the session goes on we learn more and more about Tony’s life. Over the course of the episode, Tony’s confessions to Dr. Melfi double as narration, as he obliquely tells her about his power struggle with his Uncle Junior (Dominic Chianese), daily life at his “job” (including twisting the truth regarding an incident when he and Christopher Moltisanti assault a debtor regarding a late payment). Additionally Tony’s confession/narration chronicles his attempt to place his mother into a retirement community, an event that leads to his second panic attack. By their third session at the end of the episode we see Tony’s truly vulnerable side, as he confesses his fears about losing his family and ends up crying in the process.

The pilot serves as a prime example of Melfi’s function as the gateway to Tony’s mind inasmuch as the episode is structured in such a way that the audience is literally inside Tony’s head. As Tony’s confessions overlap the establishing events of the pilot, the viewer is given the sense of watching the events not as they happen, but as Tony recalls them while speaking with Melfi. Much like Melfi, the viewer does not know anything about Tony Soprano, much less why he is in therapy. It is through his confessions and his memories that the viewer is able to recognize him as a father and mafia capo, and see him on a psychological level as a conflicted man.

Melfi continues to serve as a passageway into Tony’s mind throughout the course of the series. In the second season finale, “Funhouse”, we see Tony’s mental turmoil following his participation in the execution of his friend and business
associate Sal “Big Pussy” Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore). Contrary to the narrated events of the pilot, we see the murder as it happens rather than through Tony’s memory. We see the pain in Tony’s face after he dumps Pussy’s body in the ocean but we see a different side of his suffering during his appointment with Melfi. During the appointment Tony goes on an angry rant about Indian people (triggered by food poisoning depicted earlier in the episode) and his mother. Melfi knows that there is something else that Tony is not telling her, however Tony refuses to speak about what is truly bothering him and continues to try and distract her. His behavior reaches its peak when he bluntly describes a sexual dream he had about Dr. Melfi a few nights before and struts out of her office while singing.39

Not all of Tony Soprano’s sessions with Dr. Melfi are as direct as the session in the pilot. On the contrary, some of their sessions serve as a mechanism for introducing Tony’s problems, this particular appointment is a more abstract way of getting inside Tony’s mind. This time the viewer has seen the catalyst for Tony’s psychological problem (in this case the murder) and is now viewing how he attempts to cope thereafter. In this case, Melfi’s ignorance of the actual event combined with the fact that the viewer has seen the murder enhances the viewer’s understanding of Tony’s psychological struggles. We know why Tony is struggling, but the following session with Melfi gives a better illustration as to how he is struggling.

One of the most significant interactions between Tony and Dr. Melfi occurs during their final session in “The Blue Comet.” Prior to their final meeting, Melfi’s colleagues (who include her psychiatrist Dr. Elliot Kupferberg) discuss a study that stated that sociopaths do not actually benefit from standard therapy sessions and may

in turn use it to justify their sociopathic behavior. Later that night Melfi is shown reading the study while the key words appear on the screen. While Tony waits for his session to start, he tears out a page from one of the magazines in Melfi’s office.

During the session Tony nonchalantly talks about his family troubles. As Tony speaks, we see Melfi’s face hardens and her responses become more and more curt. Finally, Melfi declares that she can no longer help Tony and despite his protests, Melfi figuratively and literally shows him the door.  

40 In Tony’s closing therapy session the viewer sees a culmination of the last six years, in addition to finally receiving answers in regards to Tony’s condition. Melfi’s open rejection shows us that Tony Soprano cannot be treated. Not only does the audience finally receive closure as to what is occurring in Tony Sopranos mind, but we also finally realize that Tony will never change and that he really does not want to change, he simply wants to feel better about what he is doing.

In addition to his therapy sessions The Sopranos relies heavily on dreams to illustrate elements of Tony’s psyche in coherence with the story. Cynthia Burkhead describes the use of dreams as such “Witnessing Tony’s dreams visually more fully unfolds for viewers the extend of Tony’s psychological conflict, thus enhancing the potential for character development.”  

41 Complementing the therapy sessions, the use of dreams in The Sopranos lets the viewer see Tony’s struggles from a more surreal and subconscious standpoint.

Throughout the series Tony has various extended dreams that generally

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parallel his current difficulties. The presence and significance of Tony’s dreams come to a head in the season five episode “The Test Dream,” in which Tony has an extended dream that occurs throughout most of the episode. Throughout the course of the twenty-three minute dream sequence Tony is confronted with various characters that have affected his life, all the while confronting them in what most would say is a rather abstract manner. For example, a few highlights of his dream include a session with Dr. Melfi who turns out to be Gloria Trillo, Tony’s late mistress and former patient of Dr. Melfi, and a scene of him traveling with several people who died on his orders, such as Big Pussy Bonpensiero. Another part of the sequence shows Tony having wild sex with childhood friend Artie Bucco’s wife Charmaine while Artie is coaching him on. In another scene, Tony is confronted by his old high school coach and attempts to kill him, only for his gun to malfunction.

Unlike the sessions with Melfi, “The Test Dream” serves as an increasingly surreal method of reading Tony as a character, as several different aspects of his dream have parallels in his real life. For one, Tony realizes that he must kill his cousin Tony B. Tony also deals with his crippling issues with loneliness, as reflected when he interacts with Carmela while sitting atop his beloved deceased race horse Pie-O-My. Finally, Tony is forced to deal with his feelings of inadequacy in every sense of the word when he is confronted by his high school football coach, who reminisces about how Tony failed to live up to his potential. Tony attempts to shoot his coach but in a distinctly oedipal turn of events his gun jams and the bullets

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42 The significance of her presence is increasingly complicated given that Gloria committed suicide after Tony broke up with her.
44 This is the result of Tony B. murdering Billy Leotardo, a soldier in the Brooklyn based Lupertazzi crime family. This inevitably leads to tension and a war between the two crime families.
crumble in his hands. The audience is not unfamiliar with Tony psychological problems, but here we see them presented in a different format. Instead of Melfi providing a more direct pathway, we see Tony subconsciously confront the various issues that his double life presents him with.

One cannot discuss *The Sopranos* without discussing the cinematic heritage from which it came, the gangster genre. Brillstein-Grey may have approached David Chase with the idea of creating “*The Godfather* for TV,”45 it is safe to say that David Chase did not intend to make a carbon copy of *The Godfather* for the television screen. *The Sopranos* pays homage to its famous predecessors such as *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* on a regular basis throughout the series. However, there are still some drastic differences that must be identified. And while it does not forget its cinematic predecessors, *The Sopranos* can by no means be written off as simply a form of the gangster genre on the television screen.

The subjects of the gangster film genre carry two main traits; they are usually male, and they are usually ruthless in their crime sphere. This includes gangster characters that descend into ruthlessness such as the legendary Micheal Corleone in *The Godfather* trilogy. At the start of the saga, Michael is very much against the idea of having anything to do with the family business. However, he is eventually thrust into the world of the New York Cosa Nostra and becomes arguably more ruthless than his father, even mercilessly killing his brother. This is not to say that Tony Soprano is a merciful mafia boss, but unlike Michael, we repeatedly see his vulnerable side, such as when he decides to murder Big Pussy. In watching *The

*Godfather* we see the moral descent of Michael Corleone, as he changes from good to evil, whereas Tony can be seen as both. He is neither fully good nor fully evil. It is clear from the very first episode of *The Sopranos* that Tony, while invested in his mafia family, clearly cares about his wife and children. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that Tony is often overpowered by his domestic family.

In addition to the central point of action of the gangster genre surrounding the crime families, we can see that in many gangster films, the women involved are powerless at the hands of their husbands. We can see this in the case of Kay Adams in *The Godfather*. Carlos Clarens briefly discusses Kay’s role (or lack thereof) in *The Godfather* trilogy. Characterized as “a yankee princess” representing the outside world, Kay continually pushes Michael to make his crime family legitimate. Unsurprisingly this puts a strain on their marriage and eventually leads to Michael completely rejecting her. As Clarens describes “When Michael slammed the door in her face…audiences were bound to accept and even applaud it. Kay had no place in the cinematic saga of the Corleones.”

While Tony Soprano shares some traits with the famed Michael Corleone it is clear that he is a gangster cut from a different cloth. While the women of *The Godfather* are very much powerless against the men in their lives, the women in Tony Soprano’s life are often the main source of his troubles. Tony may not always address the grievances of the women in his life, such as his wife Carmela’s anger regarding his constant infidelity, but it is clear that Tony is at the least emotionally invested. He attempts to be a good and protective father for his children Meadow and A.J., and a

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loving, providing husband to Carmela. As a result of his clear emotional investment in his family, Tony often finds himself struggling to fulfill his obligations to and desires. Additionally, we cannot disregard how his mother Livia Soprano has managed to emotionally cripple her son through a variety of melodramatic and belligerent behaviors. Ingrid Walker further illustrates the contrasting family dynamics in *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*.

In *The Godfather*, misogyny and ruthless violence control inner family life. By contrast, in *The Sopranos* troublesome strong female characters (Tony’s mother, wife, sister, and daughter) upset the balance of power and enhance the anxiety Tony experiences moving from the murderous world of his business Family to the unsympathetic family of his suburban home. Tony knows he wields no authoritarian power…In many domestic scenes we see Tony’s inability to lead as a Don, husband, or father, a characterization far from Puzo’s image of a Don.47

Using Walker’s observation we can see that despite the fact that he is undoubtedly a very dangerous man, Tony Soprano is essentially rendered inept and powerless by the domestic aspects of his life, Tony Soprano, a man who is willing to kill indiscriminately for the sake of his mafia family, is completely helpless when confronted with an issue regarding his family, which to say the least is a far cry from Don Corleone.

One of the best examples of Tony as a domesticated gangster is in the season one episode “College”. Tony takes Meadow on a trip through New England to look at colleges. To his surprise, Meadow asks him if he is in the mafia during the car ride. While attempting to spend quality time with his daughter, Tony spots a former member of the DiMeo crime family, Fabian Petrulio, who went into the Witness

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Protection Program after becoming an FBI informant. While Meadow is interviewing at Colby College, Tony tracks down the informant and murders him. While Tony is in the process of strangling Fabian with a wire, Fabian begs for his life, he mentions that he could have killed Tony the previous night but didn't because “He’s taking his little girl to college.” Tony disregards Fabian’s words and proceeds to choke him to death in a focused and borderline sociopathic manner. In the following scene, when Tony is driving Meadow from Colby to Bowdoin, Meadow continually questions him about where he has been, even pointing out that Tony’s hand is bleeding. Tony comes up with a halfway decent lie, but the look on Meadow’s face shows that she has realized what her father’s actual profession is. Unable to do anything, she leans back in her seat and says, “I love you.” In this particular episode we see Tony’s role as a father and mafia boss come to a clash. He attempts to cope with the fact that his daughter is aware of his morally reprehensible mafia actions, while still attempting to faithfully carry out his agenda for the DiMeo Crime family.

In the process, while he fulfills his duties as a mafia capo, he fails miserably in terms of his role as a father. Dana Polan points out that despite being involved in different kinds of “work,” Tony Soprano actually very much parallels many of the fathers of the domestic sitcom, particularly Ralph Kramden of The Honeymooners. Much like Kramden, Tony finds his ambitions (in the case of “College”, to be a good father) constantly thwarted and fails miserably. Tony may have an atypical career to say the least, but at the end of the day, he still very much reflects the bumbling dads of the domestic comedy.

The Sopranos was meant to be a television show that marks itself as atypical. 

48The Sopranos, “College,” (originally aired February 7, 1999).
Despite coming from the mind of a creator with a distinct hatred for the very medium that it is a part of, it contains various elements both associated with and completely separate from what is considered to be typical television. While it does not seek to situate itself purely within the cinematic, *The Sopranos* deliberately draws on elements from two highly respected genres of film, and combines them with the standard television trope of the domestic comedy, as well as serialized relationship drama reminiscent of soap opera, resulting in a unique and different television experience. It may have come from a source of frustration, but by the time the series ended, it had proved itself as a work of television art.
Chapter Three: Realism, Social Commentary, and *The Wire*

Police work is far from unfamiliar to the American television screen. The police procedural has taken on a variety of different forms. In some cases, a show will focus more on the cops who run the precinct and their internal problems; others such as *Law and Order*, will focus on the “crime of the week” and the investigatory legal procedures surrounding it. In the case of network television, cases will often be embellished with various twists, turns, and appropriate cliffhangers in order to keep the audience interested and advertisers content. Though many would say that it falls under the category of “police procedural” HBO’s *The Wire* does not follow any of the standard conventions in coherence with the genre. In fact, I argue that the only thing that The Wire has in common with the cop show in the generic sense is there are police involved in the story.

As opposed to a generic, version of New York City or Boston, *The Wire* is set in Baltimore, Maryland, a city that is overrun with problems such as the drug trade, poverty, and violence. Each of the five seasons of *The Wire* details a different facet of Baltimore’s institutions while continually layering storylines from the previous seasons. These are the street\(^{49}\), the police, the dockworkers, the politicians, the school system, and the press respectively. While each season focuses on a single institution, all of the institutions depicted in *The Wire* intertwine and interact as the story moves forward.

With regard to the narrative protagonists, in my view, there is no true main

\(^{49}\) This is a somewhat loose term used to define the drug addicts, dealers, and kingpins of the streets of Baltimore.
character in *The Wire.* The *Wire* has a very large ensemble cast, and while some characters are clearly more significant than others, it is almost impossible to pinpoint who is the true “star” of the show. This task would be somewhat easier if each institution had a single main character to serve as a representative and for viewers to see how that individual interacts with other characters within that institution. In *The Wire* this is not the case, as each institution has at least several characters (some more significant than others) and their interactions almost always occur within the context of the institution that they are a part of rather than personal interactions.

Much of the focus in *The Wire* is not on the crimes themselves but on institutional dysfunction. Each of the institutions in *The Wire* is plagued with its own brand of corruption that somehow inhibits the accomplishment of its goals. In *The Wire*, the police are more concerned with reducing crime statistics than enforcing an effective drug policy, the dockworkers resort to organized crime when local politicians refuse to provide the funds for the financially crippled docks, the politicians enact lackluster reform policies, the public school system is essentially broken, and the local newspaper pursues profit over quality journalism. Over the course of the series, the institutional dysfunction is central to the show in terms of its narrative and overall message.

As to why I chose *The Wire* for a detailed study, I have two prominent reasons for such a decision. First, there is the fact that *The Wire* has been consistently praised as one of the best television shows on television (and of all time in some circles). Several major publications have carried lengthy articles proclaiming *The Wire’s*
value, in addition to the fact that it has been placed on several top ten lists over the years. Such wide critical praise makes The Wire stand out.

While The Wire, like The Sopranos has received critical acclaim, it has not had the same level of commercial success and lacks the wide fan base that The Sopranos had. This is not to say, however, that The Wire was a complete commercial failure. Throughout its run on HBO, The Wire developed a fan base that while small had an obsessive love for and dedication to the show. Almost everybody I have spoken to about The Wire, whether in passing or deep conversation, has displayed an intense appreciation. Such an obsession on the part of its fans piqued my interest and reinforced my opinion as to The Wire’s significance in my study of differentiated television.

In addition to its fandom and critical praise, The Wire also has a significant presence in academia. As with many television shows deemed to be quality TV, there have been various books and articles published about The Wire. Furthermore, many universities have offered courses based on The Wire, with a wide variety of perspectives including television studies, law, literary studies, and sociology. The academic discourse surrounding The Wire adds a certain amount of legitimacy. Additionally, The Wire’s academic presence makes me question what traits it possesses to make it worthy of academic study.

The Wire contains various elements that differentiate it. Firstly, The Wire takes the notion of realism in quality television to a new level of intensity, with many of its characters designed after the real life cops and criminals of Baltimore, and strongly realist depiction of the processes of the surrounding institutions.
Additionally, *The Wire* makes much use of social commentary; however while the commentary can be described as clearly liberal, it is neither moralistic nor does it attempt to persuade its viewers. But in regards to *The Wire*’s points of differentiation from television, I would first note that like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* comes from a distinct creative heritage. However, in the case of *The Sopranos*, the heritage was a creator who did not have a high regard for television; the influences of *The Wire* are rooted in the backgrounds of creator David Simon and executive producer Ed Burns.

While many well-known television showrunners start their careers in the television industry, such is not the case for David Simon and Ed Burns. As opposed to working as a staff writer, David Simon worked as a journalist writing for the *Baltimore Sun*. Simon has stated that he started at the *Sun* as a fifth year senior in college and, upon impressing his editor, was offered a permanent position at the paper. Despite being one of the youngest and least experienced reporters on staff, Simon spent his days at the *Sun* reporting on crime stories. Simon describes his experiences in an essay for *Esquire* in the following.

> At twenty-three, I was the youngest reporter on staff, covering ghetto murders, drug raids, and four car fatalities. And while *The Baltimore Sun* might not be the greatest name in major dailies, it was a solid and serious enterprise, a second tier paper with a national presence…And here was the thing in 1983: *The Sun* was going to get better.**51**

Simon took his work at *The Sun* very seriously and thoroughly enjoyed what he did. And, despite the fact that *The Sun* was nowhere near *The New York Times* in terms of prestige, he was dedicated to making his work for *The Sun* the best journalism that it

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could be.

As a young reporter, Simon thoroughly enjoyed his work, but like many of the institutions in *The Wire, The Baltimore Sun* was wracked with corruption that contradicted its greater purpose. Simon’s true love for journalism came from the fact that he was able to report on the pressing issues of his city, in the hope that said issues would one day be addressed. Yet *The Sun* had numerous problems that prevented it from serving a greater purpose. Simon recalls a few of the major problems within the walls of the cash strapped *Baltimore Sun*, including the paper’s habit of buying out reporters in order to increase shareholder profits, and forgoing or ignoring specific stories in favor of the scandal of the week. Seeing as he was a dedicated journalist, it is no surprise that Simon became disheartened by the world around him, as he describes in the following:

In the unraveling of my career as a newspaperman, there was no small measure of personal conflict, but the ultimate unstated charge was that I cared more about personal ambition (a reduction of caring only for the stories I wanted to tell) than work deemed “good for the paper”. I found this a curious distinction believing that what was good for readers-Baltimore natives, their offspring, and their neighbors whom I knew better than my carpet bagging bosses-was indisputably best for the paper. In the end, my preferred narratives were those with no newspeg and sometimes without reason, stories that have proved durable in a way that the scandal du jour does not.\(^\text{52}\)

Simon was caught in a rather harsh predicament. Despite the fact that Baltimore was (and still is) wracked with problems, one of the only methods of telling these stories and hence, potentially fixing the city’s problems, was being sacrificed for the sake of the local paper. And, despite his best efforts, his voice was being silenced.

One of the more interesting parallels in David Simon’s past is, that in addition

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to the fact that he was unable to tell the stories that he wanted to tell, he was also
rendered powerless within one of Baltimore’s more significant institutions, not unlike
most of the characters in *The Wire*. He has directly experienced the dysfunction of
institutional Baltimore. And while at the time it may have seemed as if there was no
other place to turn, we know that a combined set of circumstances would pave the
way for *The Wire*’s alternative storytelling form.

While Simon did serve as both creator and showrunner for *The Wire*, he was
by no means the only person whose experienced shaped the way the program told its
stories. Like Simon, Edward (Ed) Burns did not begin his career with the ultimate
goal of working in television. In fact, Burns served in the Vietnam War before
becoming an officer in the Baltimore Police department. Upon joining, he was
assigned to the Western District of Baltimore, a portion of the city with a significant
presence on *The Wire*. And, much like David Simon in his early days reporting for
*The Baltimore Sun*, Burns was enthralled with his work. In *The Wire: Truth Be Told*,
a companion anthology to the series, David Simon provides an accurate description of
Burns’ experience in the police department.

The idea (for *The Corner*) appealed to Ed who had spend 20 years
watching the city police department win battle after battle with
individual drug traffickers, yet continue to lose the war. As a
patrolman in the Western District, a plainclothesman assigned to the
escape squad, and finally a homicide detective, Burns was impressed
by the organizational ethos of the West Baltimore drug trade.53

Like Simon, Burns was clearly dedicated to his work in addition to his fascination
with the problems of Baltimore. Through his time with the Baltimore police, Burns
tried his best to be, as they say on *The Wire* “good po-lice.” However despite his best

efforts, Burns eventually met with the same difficulties as David Simon.

Much like Simon’s clash with *The Baltimore Sun* over which stories should be reported, Ed Burns came to resent the Baltimore Police due to their lack of progress in terms of crime prevention and unwillingness to change. A *New York Times* article discussing Burns’ life after *The Wire* describes his experience with the department saying “…he was struck by the inability of the homicide unit to solve cases which he blamed on old-fashioned, one-case-at-a-time investigation techniques.” Burns continued to try and solve cases in new ways, including authorizing the public wiretaps for which the show is named after, but there was no significant change. As Burns described the situation “It was painfully clear that they were not going to change the way they were doing things… The Police Department was into the numbers game. We were going in different directions.” Much like David Simon, he was unable to make a difference in Baltimore and do his job due to an ineffective institution. And it was this sense of powerlessness that finally led him to retire from the force after twenty years.

With both men thoroughly disillusioned by the inability of their respective institutions to effect real change, it stands to reason that the two would have a significant amount to talk about if they ever happened to cross paths. The chance meeting happened in 1985 at a branch of the Baltimore County library while David Simon was on an assignment for *The Sun*. Seven years later when Ed Burns decided to quit the police force, Simon talked him into delaying his retirement for a year and a

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55 Ibid.
half in order to co-author a book about the drug culture that had poisoned a significant part of Baltimore. At the suggestion of their book editor, Simon and Burns decided to focus their investigation on a single corner in Baltimore. They spent the next three years observing the daily activities that occurred at the intersection of Fayette and Monroe streets, an investigation that led to the publishing of *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, a detailed exploration of drug addiction, the drug trade, and the war on drugs in urban Baltimore. For Simon, it was a way to finally tell the stories that he felt needed to be told. For Burns, it served as an opportunity to expose the fact that the actions of law enforcement were actually doing more harm than good.

In addition to serving as an outlet for Simon and Burns, *The Corner* served as a part of the foundation for *The Wire*. In particular, *The Corner* as a work of investigative journalism shows the basis for the method of storytelling seen in *The Wire*. Much like *The Wire*, *The Corner* focused on depicting its characters in the most honest and realistic way possible. *The Corner* never sensationalized or embellished on the lives of the people involved and it was completely raw in its portrayal of the presence of drugs in urban America.

David Simon’s intersections of journalism and television did not start with *The Wire*. His two careers collided when his book *Homicide: Life on the Killing Streets* became a television show (abbreviated as *Homicide: Life on the Streets*). On the show, Simon was both a producer and a consultant who was very much concerned with creating an atypical police procedural. Instead of portraying the detectives as noble heroes, Simon wanted to depict detectives that accepted daily violence as a part
of the job. For additional realism, the show was shot on location with handheld cameras. *Homicide* is particularly interesting because it shows us a point in which David Simon’s journalism career and television career intersect. And most importantly, *Homicide* serves as an indirect precursor to *The Wire* as it is David Simon’s first experience in the television industry.

Realism is one of the more consistently cited characteristics of good, complex, or quality television, and *The Wire* is no exception in terms of the critical praise it has received in regards to its realism. Many television shows will strive to be realistic in storytelling and some are more successful than others. However, while realism is most definitely a prominent characteristic of *The Wire*, its realism seems to reach an entirely new level of intensity. With its extreme attention to detail in terms of character portrayal, and the blunt portrayal of institutional processes, the realism of *The Wire* goes beyond accuracy in details and seeks to portray urban America in the most raw and comprehensive way possible.

One of the most prominent features of *The Wire*’s realism comes from the use of real Baltimore figures as characters. This is not to say that *The Wire* was the first television program to use real people as inspiration for characters. However, what marks *The Wire*’s novel use of a common device in television is the fact that David Simon and Ed Burns maintained extensive attention to detail when creating these characters. *The Wire*’s characters are not simply inspired by the real cops, criminals, and politicians of Baltimore, but are modeled after them.

In *The Wire*’s Baltimore, Reginald “Bubbles” Cousins serves as one of the key players in the ongoing struggle between the police and the drug organizations.
Bubbles has an extremely detailed knowledge of the streets of Baltimore and acts as an essential informant for the police over the course of the show. Additionally, Bubbles is a struggling heroin addict and his desire to get clean serves as a significant subplot. The fictional Bubbles (played by Andre Royo) was based off of a real Baltimore police informant who went by the same name.\(^5^6\) According to David Simon, the real Bubbles “…was the best police informant in Baltimore, working on commission for the Feds, state authorities, and street cops. He is the con who perfected the red hat trick that his cinematic alter ego…would perform with élan on The Wire.”\(^5^7\) The real Bubbles, not unlike the fictional one had extensive knowledge of the streets and took pride in what he did. “I can watch people and tell things about them. I can look at a face and remember it. I would go round a-rabbing, or in my truck, or I’d ride my bicycle even, and all the time I’d be seeing what’s up.”\(^5^8\)

While some of the characters were modeled on real life Baltimore figures, other characters on The Wire were played by Baltimore residents who were actually involved in the drug trade. One of the prime examples is The Deacon, a local church figure who acts as a mentor to reformed criminal Dennis “Cutty” Wise, and discredited police lieutenant Howard “Bunny” Colvin. In the show The Deacon is a very involved, dedicated, and moralistic man, traits that are fairly well summed up when he utters the phrase “A good church man is always up in everybody’s shit.”\(^5^9\)

While The Deacon is probably one of the most morally sound characters in The Wire, it should be known that while the fictional Bubbles was portrayed rather truthfully in The Wire, there is a major difference in that the real Bubbles died from AIDS related complications while the fictional Bubbles was able to get clean.

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\(^{59}\) The Wire “Refugees,” (originally aired October 1, 2006).
the actor who portrays him is anything but. The Deacon is played by Melvin Williams, a Baltimore native who gained notoriety as a drug kingpin in the sixties and seventies. Not only was he notorious during his tenure as a drug kingpin, but Melvin Williams was investigated by none other than Ed Burns in a federal wiretap case not unlike the ones seen in *The Wire*. During his tenure in the Baltimore drug trade, Melvin Williams was not only infamous but elusive, so much so the Ed Burns has expressed his (and the police department’s) intense desire to finally bring him to justice not because it would bring crime down, but because Williams was that famous of a figure.

*The Wire’s* realism does not reside only in its casting and character portrayals; one of its key features lies in the process by which the stories unfold throughout the course of the show. Though not all plot lines in *The Wire* revolve around police work, one of the clearest examples of its storytelling can be seen in the way the cases unfold. Many programs that depict police work, both on network and cable television, have a very fast paced depiction of cases. In the case of popular police procedural and legal drama *Law and Order* all of the cases featured are resolved over the course of a single episode. In *The Wire*, this could not be further from the case.

One of the biggest of the many storylines that arise in *The Wire* is the ongoing battle between the police and the Barksdale Drug Organization. The case does start out as a direct attack against the drug culture of Baltimore, but from homicide detective Jimmy McNulty’s observations in a courtroom after a witness changes his story while on the stand. What ensues over the course of the first three seasons is an ongoing police investigation with multiple twists and turns.
The struggle to bring down the Barksdale Organization rests on a wiretap on the various public pay phones that are used by Barksdale’s various lieutenants, soldiers and dealers. However what separates the procedures of *The Wire* from network television in terms of realism is that it is ongoing over the course of three seasons. In addition to the wiretaps, the newly formed major crimes unit in the Baltimore Police comes across various obstacles in their quest to bring down Avon Barksdale and his drug ring. While the major crimes unit is attempting to build its case, the higher ups in the department continually attempt to shut down the investigation, as they intend it to be a charade to please the judge. After a season’s worth of surveillance, the major crimes unit is finally able to bring down Avon Barksdale, but his second in command, Stringer Bell is able to evade prosecution and hence, able to continue running the organization.

The Barksdale Organization carries over into the second season, acting as a secondary layer to the season’s main focus on the local dockworkers. In this season, the angle is not so much on the police department’s pursuit of the Barksdale Organization, but more on the organization’s internal struggles. Here we see now leader Stringer Bell losing customers due to bad product, ordering a murder on Avon’s nephew and low-level drug dealer D’Angelo Barksdale, and making a deal with Eastside projects dealer Proposition Joe.

The role of the Barksdale Organization in *The Wire* does not end with the second season. The third season, in addition to the show’s focus on local politicians, returns to the prolonged investigation of the Barksdale Organization along with the struggles of the organization itself. More specifically, one storyline involves the
police investigation’s further attempts to build a case, while another involves an ongoing drug war with rival drug kingpin Marlo Stanfield. Additionally, we see Stringer Bell attempt to expand the organization by going into the more legitimate arena of real estate development. The Barksdale Organization finally collapses at the end of the third season, with most of its members dead or convicted. However, it is worth noting that the role of the War on Drugs does not stop with the demise of the Barksdale Organization, which adds an additional layer to the complexity of the storyline.

We can see from the example of the Barksdale Organization that The Wire’s storytelling places an emphasis on realism in terms of the parallels between the process by which the story unfolds and the way cases actually unfold in real life. Many television shows that even begin to touch on the topic of the War on Drugs and police work often resolve such issues over the course of a single episode. However, in The Wire we see the slow and ongoing process by which these events unfold, almost as if they were occurring in real time. The way the events unfold is not based in a desire to entertain the audience. David Simon most likely did not decide to tell these stories in such a manner with the entertainment of the audience in mind, but more with the intention of creating a realistic representation of the criminal justice process.

In its portrayal of Baltimore, The Wire takes an alternative route in terms of characterization. What is curious about the characters of The Wire as opposed to other television shows, both on broadcast and cable, lies in the role and portrayal of institutions. Many of the characters in The Wire are, in fact, defined by the institutions that they are a part of; indeed, the institutions of The Wire can be viewed
as characters in and of themselves.

Baltimore is home to many institutions, both in reality and in the fictional world of *The Wire*; the dockworker unions, the police department and the government being a few of them. However, one of the more salient examples in *The Wire* of institutions as characters lies in the more informally structured drug organizations. The organizations of both Avon Barksdale and Marlo Stanfield, while not legally sanctioned or structured in any official capacity, continue to define those who participate in them. Examples can be seen throughout the course of the series, starting with Wallace in the first season. At the start of the season, Wallace is a low-level drug dealer working with D’Angelo Barksdale, Bodie Broadus, and Poot Carr. As viewers, we get to see a few more details about Wallace, including signs of a partially finished education and the fact that he takes care of other children in the projects by squatting in an abandoned house, feeding them, and helping them with their schoolwork. After Omar Little and his crew rob the Barksdale Organization, Wallace identifies one of the accomplices (and Omar’s current boyfriend) Brandon. Stringer Bell then has Brandon brutally tortured and then killed. Upon seeing this, Wallace attempts to get out of “the game.” Wallace becomes an informant for the major case squad, but he is eventually found out and killed by his friends Bodie and Poot under the orders of Stringer Bell. Despite Wallace’s efforts he was never able to escape the Barksdale Organization, so much so that the only way out was death. Wallace’s brief run on the show illustrates the fact that none of the characters are independent from the institutions that they are a part of. While it is true that we got to see some additional parts of Wallace’s life outside of the Barksdale Organization, those opportunities are
few and far between, and we rarely see Wallace develop as a character outside of his work with the Barksdale Organization.

Additionally, Wallace is not the only person within the Barksdale Organization to be defined by it. We can also see this sense of powerlessness through one of the leaders of the Barksdale Organization, Stringer Bell. During the third season, Stringer attempts to make more legitimate investments with the Barksdale Organizations profits. While he is attempting to do this, the imprisoned Avon Barksdale makes it increasingly hard to make the business legitimate by starting a war with Marlo Stanfield and thereby attracting more police attention. Stringer continues the struggle, trying to play “the game”, while also attempting to play by the rules of corporate America. Ultimately, his efforts fail when a double-crossing that he orchestrated in the second season eventually leads to his death. As television scholar Jason Mittell describes the situation: “Ultimately, Bell is brought down by trying to play two games at once, and gets caught when the rules of the drug game conflict with the corporate political game.”60 It is easy to see why Wallace was eventually brought down by the rules of the Barksdale Organization, as he was a low-level drug dealer. What is striking is that even as a leader of an organization Stringer Bell is not immune to the rules of “the game”. He was able to stay on top when he was playing by the rules, which included ordering Wallace’s death among various other acts. And yet the moment he tried to break away and make his own rules, his reign as a leader was viciously brought down. Stringer’s downfall makes it clear that in The Wire

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nobody, not even the leaders of Baltimore’s institutions, are able to escape the roles that the institutions give them.

The idea that the institutions of Baltimore can be seen as characters in *The Wire* does receive a certain amount of disagreement. Many have argued that Detective Jimmy McNulty acts as the protagonist of *The Wire*. This is only partially true at best. It is more accurate to say that McNulty acts as a passageway into the institutionally based world of The Wire, but to give him the label of central protagonist would be to overestimate his role in the show. Like many of the characters we know a few things about McNulty, the most salient of which would be his issues with alcohol and his rampant womanizing. Yet it is clear that McNulty is defined just as much by his role in the police department as any other character in *The Wire*. Jason Mittell aptly describes the situation in his essay “All in The Game: The Wire, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic.” “Certainly Jimmy McNulty is a central point of access to understand police bureaucracy and functions nominally as the shows main character, but by season four he is in the margins while characters like Cedric Daniels, ‘Bunny Colvin’, and Bunk Moreland provide alternate entry points to explore the police system.”  

61 This is especially true in the case of Bunny Colvin, whose retirement is thwarted after he successfully creates a “free zone,” where dealers can sell drugs without persecution by the police, and drastically reduces drug related crime in the city. McNulty himself is not immune to the struggles of the Baltimore Police Department as his efforts to be “good po-lice” are continually foiled and often result in some sort of punishment from his superiors. McNulty’s good-willed and consistent insubordination eventually renders him unable

61 Ibid.
to do any real police work at the closing of the series. Once again we see the individual powerless against the institution. Despite the fact that we do get to know McNulty, his traits as an individual are miniscule in comparison to his role as a character in the context of the Baltimore Police Department. Above all else, McNulty is known as a good cop trapped in the bureaucracy of the department. He is not the only character driving the narrative and his stories within *The Wire* are one of many. While he may act as the viewer’s passageway into the story world of *The Wire*, McNulty is by no means an exception to the rules of *The Wire* and its institutions.

*The Wire* is clearly attempting to paint a picture of urban America. Its depiction of the war on drugs, poverty in America and the fact that many local institutions end up doing more harm than good to the people they serve clearly makes a statement about urban society. And yet, despite the fact that *The Wire* is clearly offering commentary about contemporary urban America, it does not seek to convince the audience to align with its viewpoint, nor does the commentary take a moralistic approach. Instead of clearly demarcating urban problems and what is right and wrong, *The Wire* takes a complicated and nuanced approach to its presentation of societal problems and how to solve them.

*The Wire’s* method of depicting urban societal problems can be better illustrated by looking at previous approaches towards depicting similar circumstances in television. One of the more popular network police procedurals; *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* has attempted to do the same over the course of its run. It can be said that *SVU* makes an attempt to be realistic in its depiction of a number of social issues. An example is an episode from the sixth season, entitled “Debt” (aired
September 28, 2004), in which the SVU detectives discover a prostitution ring that preys upon immigrant women who are at risk of being deported. The episode is fairly straightforward about the ongoing issue of immigrant women being exploited and sold for sex and their additional vulnerability due to poverty and language barriers. The women who are being sold are depicted as vulnerable women, who have good morals. The men who run the ring are seen as purely evil, manipulative, and borderline sociopathic. At the end of the day, the detectives are able to find the brothel and bring the pimps to justice. In the SVU story world, the problem is pointed out, there are good guys and bad guys, and the problem is solved by the end of the episode. While the societal issue is depicted in a somewhat realistic manner, there is a clear demarcation of right and wrong and how to go about solving the social issue at hand.

The Wire has touched on a number of subjects in terms of its depiction of the struggles of urban America, but unlike many crime dramas before it, the show takes an approach to presenting these problems that is anything but simple. The Wire most definitely presents social problems both national and specific to Baltimore, but it does not illustrate a clear method as to how to solve them or maintain a clear moral stance. One of the most salient examples of this takes place in the third season when Bunny Colvin creates a social experiment in trying to quell crime in Baltimore. Colvin and his unit create a “free zone” on an abandoned corner where drug dealers and drug addicts can conduct their business peacefully. The free zone becomes known as Hamsterdam, and the area ends up drastically reducing the number of drug related
murders in the city.\textsuperscript{62} It also creates a healthier environment for the addicts and sex workers who frequent the area, as aid workers begin to arrive and distribute clean needles and condoms. Though a radical solution to say the least, Hamsterdam frees the Baltimore street corners from much of the violence and unhealthy conditions that had previously prevailed. The experiment continues successfully, with local politicians turning a blind eye, until the Baltimore press gets wind of it. Once Mayor Royce became aware that public opinion did not support the Hamsterdam experiment, in addition to knowing that it might harm is campaign for re-election, he decided to shut it down. The montage that takes place when Hamsterdam is shut down is a jarring and violent scene, where addicts and dealers alike are arrested in droves while Deputy Commissioner William Rawls blasts “Ride of The Valkyries” from his car.\textsuperscript{63} In one fell swoop, the one productive attempt to curb the violence of the Baltimore drug scene ceases to exist, and the relationship between the Baltimore drug scene and the police returns to the old status quo. The issue of the Hamsterdam experiment is a very large grey area in and of itself. However, what is less obvious and even more curious is that the show represents the situation without taking any specific stance or the show making any attempt to moralize the issue. Amanda Ann Klien makes this point in her essay “‘The Dickensian Aspect’: Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text.”

Had the season ended with this chaotic scene, the viewer could unambiguously mourn the end of Hamsterdam and its pathetic, seemingly unjust destruction…\textit{The Wire} subverts the conventional,

\textsuperscript{62} The Baltimore Police Department made it clear throughout the series that the main reason as to why they were pursuing drug activity in the city was because of the murders and violence that the drug trade caused.

\textsuperscript{63} This is a nod to the 1979 film \textit{Apocalypse Now} where “Ride of The Valkyries” is played while American soldiers take an almost delight in bombing a civilian village in Vietnam.
black and white melodramatic morality by refusing to tell the audience whether the loss of Hamsterdam is something to be mourned or celebrated... Then the shot fades to black without a clear demarcation of right and wrong. This finale lacks an explicit articulation of moral compass leaving the viewer lost in a thicket of values that they may parse on their own.\(^{64}\)

According to Klien’s interpretations of the end of Hamsterdam, The Wire leaves the viewer conflicted as to what to make of Hamsterdam in the context of the War on Drugs in Baltimore. The viewer is made aware that there is a problem, but in terms of actually solving it, the viewer is left with more questions than answers. Questions range in level of complexity, including how to stop drug addiction and violence from affecting communities without chastising the very people that the laws are trying to help, to how to eliminate the demand for drugs in impoverished communities or if such a thing is even possible. In the end, The Wire does not take it upon itself to educate or convince its audience. It’s coverage of social problems, while both raw and critical, does not maintain a clear moral stance or a set of solutions.

Even taken at face value, The Wire is undoubtedly an interesting television program, to say the least. It takes the well-established genre of the crime drama and proceeds to create an in-depth look at urban contemporary Baltimore and all of the troubles associated with the city. Over the course of its five seasons it developed a near cult following, with many dedicated fans considering any sort of negative criticism to be borderline sacrilegious. It has been continuously hailed as one of the best television shows of all time and is consistently placed in top ten lists in various publications.

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As a television show, *The Wire* has quite a bit to bring to the table. Its background does not come from television or entertainment, but from one of an alternative, more unembellished form of storytelling. Fostered by this form of storytelling and cultivated by institutional dysfunction on the parts of both David Simon and Ed Burns’ careers, *The Wire* was able to become a truly unique television program; so much so that many of its traits, like its more popular predecessor *The Sopranos*, can be seen as a clear strategy of differentiation from the standard aspects of the medium. In addition to its background, *The Wire* maintained a consistent level of realism, both in terms of its characters with their roots lying in the real residents of Baltimore, both criminals and civilians alike. While slow paced and not necessarily entertaining to some, the sense of realism continued with *The Wire* continually unfolding its stories almost as if they were in real time through its illustrations of how the operations of local institutions. Finally, its unique take on characters and distinctive form of social commentary create a final and powerful statement on *The Wire*’s differentiated form of television.
Chapter Four: Televisualizing History in *Mad Men*

AMC, a basic cable channel, uses a different revenue model than HBO, but it has been more than able to hold its own in terms of the creativity of its original program offerings. In terms of programming, the channel began somewhat like HBO, by rebroadcasting feature films, with its name standing for American Movie Classics.

AMC is now known for a number of original dramas, including *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Killing*. However, it is safe to say that AMC’s current lineup would not be what it is today without its flagship series, *Mad Men*. Like the shows I have discussed, *Mad Men* has an unconventional premise for its storytelling. It is centered on Donald “Don” Draper, his family, and coworkers at a Madison Avenue advertising agency, in the 1960’s. Over the course of the show’s five seasons (with a sixth soon to begin) we see Don and the other characters grapple with the shifting cultural currents of the 60’s, including racism, divorce, women’s rights, and homophobia. The characters of *Mad Men* also witness several major historical events over the course of the show, including developments in the Civil Rights Movement and the assassination of JFK.

Period dramas are generally very risky projects. They are very expensive to produce, due to the elevated costs of costume and set design, and they run a high risk of not being popular with viewers. The American television industry has a rather complicated relationship with the period drama, with some successes, such as *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* and *The Tudors* and some significant flops such as *Oliver Beene*. Despite being a big risk for AMC as both its first original series and a period drama, *Mad Men* premiered with immense success. It received a significant amount
of critical acclaim, particularly for its realist depictions and critiques of 1960’s America. As one critic from *The New York Times* pointed out “This new drama, set in the golden age of Madison Avenue serves as a bridge to a faded and now forbidden world.”65 In addition to its acclaim in the press, *Mad Men* has garnered various other accolades, including being put on the American Film Institute’s list of the top ten television series for four years in a row.66 In terms of accolades, *Mad Men* has also received several major awards, including fifteen Emmys, four Golden Globes, and a number of awards from major creative organizations such as the Writers Guild of America, The Directors Guild of America, and the Producers Guild of America. In addition to the sheer number of awards, *Mad Men* won awards in a variety of different categories including best overall drama series, writing, and acting.

Similar to both *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, *Mad Men* deployed various methods of differentiation with its ensemble cast and complex narrative. To begin with, *Mad Men* does not come from the same economic model as its HBO counterparts. As Anthony Smith notes in his article, “Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC’s Original Drama Series,” network television is dependent on advertising revenue, which the networks receive in return for selling airtime to sponsors. Basic cable channels are also supported by advertisements, but also receive additional funding from cable operators, who pay fees to the networks in order to include the channel in their cable packages. Generally, cable shows are briskly paced, like network programs, a

technique to hold viewer attention across commercial breaks, but *Mad Men* proved to be an exception to the rule. AMC agreed in early seasons to reduce advertising slots in order, and the extra running time allowed the show to pace itself in a slower fashion, much like its premium cable counterparts. *Mad Men*’s ability to parallel premium cable dramas tailored AMC’s brand image to a quality audience. And while *Mad Men* only provides about 1.5% of AMC’s advertising income, ad revenue for the network has increased by 23% since the series premiered.\(^67\)

In terms of its narrative, *Mad Men* has a distinctive method for depicting history and telling stories. This is mainly due to the fact that the pacing of the series is designed to make viewers feel as if they are watching a yearly survey of American history. Secondly *Mad Men* develops a very unique visual style. In particular, it borrows from cinematic achievements of the 1960’s in its unique use of color. However, before I turn to the program itself, I will first look into the creative background of the showrunner, Matthew Weiner.

In the case of both *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*, both programs draw on sources external to television. *The Wire*’s creative roots rested in journalism and police work as well as television, while *The Sopranos* came from the mind of a man with a deep resentment towards the television industry. In the case of *Mad Men*, its creator Matthew Weiner, not only had considerable experience in network television, as did David Chase, but also brought an appreciation for it.

Matthew Weiner started his television career when he received his master’s

degree from the University of Southern California’s School of Cinema and Television. Upon graduating, he got a job working as a writer for a FOX sitcom called *Party Girl*. After the cancellation of *Party Girl*, Weiner wrote for a few more television programs until he got a spot as a screenwriter on the popular sitcom *Becker*. While working there, he wrote a spec script that would eventually become the pilot for *Mad Men*. Upon finishing the script in 2001, Weiner convinced his agent to send the pilot script “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” to David Chase, who was so impressed that he personally called Weiner back to express his appreciation for Weiner’s work. According to Weiner, within a week of Chase receiving the script he was in New York working as a writer for *The Sopranos*.  

Wiener spent four years working on *The Sopranos*, working his way up the ladder from a supervising producer to co-executive producer in the final season.

Although Matthew Weiner never held television in the same low regard as did David Chase, he also had his problems with the industry. In Gary Edgerton’s production history of *Mad Men*, he describes the pilot, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes,” as a work that was “born out of Matt Weiner’s deep ‘dissatisfaction’ with the assembly line storytelling and endless recycling of canned jokes that went along with being a staff writer on CBS’s *Becker*.” In the same article, Weiner gives a first-hand account of his irritation with network television: “I was 35 years old…I had a job on a network sitcom. It was rated number nine, which means I was basically in major league baseball for my job. There’s 300 people in this country that currently have this job…I was like, what is wrong with me? Why am I so unhappy?”

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69 Ibid., 3.
The transition from broadcast to a premium cable network proved to be a good choice for Weiner. Working on *The Sopranos* allowed him to contribute to the kind of television that he wanted to create. In the words of Gary Edgerton, “More importantly, he was no longer being pressured to either dumb down or sweeten up his writing as he had been during his seven-year tenure at the broadcast networks…Chase encouraged the entire writing team to trust their imaginations and be as realistic as possible with their storyline and characters.”⁷⁰ With his work on *The Sopranos*, Matthew Weiner was not only able to take the creative path that he wanted, but he was also able to cultivate his storytelling skills.

While Weiner was able to further develop his writing skills at HBO, David Chase was certainly a significant influence on him. As previously discussed, Chase did not want to create “typical” television. After seeing Matthew Weiner’s potential when he read “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”, Chase imparted some of his creative perspectives to him over the course of Weiner’s tenure on *The Sopranos*. In an interview discussing his perspectives on storytelling, Weiner shows that his time with Chase influenced him.

And I can only do that because the audience is (seeing a lot of this world). It goes to the pace you were talking about- there are a lot of private moments on the show. They cost more to shoot, its 30 seconds of silence, it could be five or six shots, it costs the same as five pages. But those private moments inform (everything else). One of the scenes I am most proud of is when (Betty tells Don she’s quitting the modeling job.) We know what Don knows, and we know what Betty knows, nothing is said.⁷¹

Weiner’s perspective on his own work clearly reflects the work that David Chase did.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.
for The Sopranos. As discussed earlier, Chase has consistently expressed feelings that, if he had to write for television, he was going to write unique television programs.

While it is clear that David Chase served as an important mentor for Matthew Weiner, there are some major differences in their perspectives on television and its value. Chase harbored a strong resentment of and hatred for television, and it was those emotions that eventually prompted him to write atypical television for HBO. Matthew Weiner, by contrast, had a great appreciation for television as a whole, whether on network or premium cable. Where Chase has been known to say different variations of “I loathe television and despise every second of (network television),” Weiner has been adamant that he very much appreciates all types of television, such as in an interview with The Chicago Tribune. “I am not bashing TV. I have every kind of Law and Order on my TiVo.” He even had a feature film in the works, but in the words of David Lavery, “Unlike Chase, however, Weiner would blasphemously choose TV, where in sharp contrast to Chase, he finds a natural home.”

What is clear about Mad Men’s creative background is that while many a critically acclaimed television show comes from a heritage that more often than not, eschews television, Mad Men comes from an appreciation for complex television. Where The Sopranos and The Wire clearly are rooted in efforts to be adjacent to the medium altogether, Mad Men comes from efforts to enhance and highlight television’s existing features. Essentially, while it’s counterparts reflect a desire to

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72 Ibid., 21.
73 Ibid., 21.
74 Ibid., 21.
break away from what television has previously provided, *Mad Men* seeks to do more with the conditions that it has been given. As a result, *Mad Men* takes a different angle when it comes to its methods of differentiation and distinction.

As a drama about 1960’s America, *Mad Men* attempts to be as accurate as possible in its depiction of period details. It has managed to achieve a sense of verisimilitude, based to a great extent on its set design, costumes, and overall mise-en-scene. However, what further enhances *Mad Men*’s realism lies in the way it weaves historical events and progression into the story. The period drama is not unfamiliar with detailed depictions of history, but the way many have gone about doing so greatly differs from the presentation of history in *Mad Men*.

One period drama that could be considered a network predecessor to *Mad Men, American Dreams* (2002-2005, NBC) takes a very different approach in its depiction of the 1960’s. Like *Mad Men*, it begins in the early sixties and promises to depict the major historical moments and cultural shifts of the era. While the first scene of *Mad Men*’s pilot introduces us to its storyworld by showing Don Draper drinking in a crowded bar, *American Dreams* first scene contains a montage of cultural imagery associated with the era, including a vintage radio, a slew of period accurate cars, and the front of the studio for *American Bandstand*. Clear difference can also be seen in the title sequences of each show, with *American Dreams* showing every possible image associated with the sixties, both historical and cultural, accompanied by the not so subtle theme song called “Generation”. *Mad Men* by contrast, simply shows a falling silhouette of a businessman surrounded by period accurate advertisements.
In its depiction of history and its progression of time, \textit{Mad Men} has two distinct methods of presentation. At its most basic level, each season of \textit{Mad Men} shows a detailed progression, focusing on each year of the 1960’s. The first season starts in March of 1960 and ends around Thanksgiving of the same year. Each subsequent season follows the same model, which over the course of time, ends up providing a television-based historical review of the 1960’s. Within individual seasons, \textit{Mad Men} contains a slow moving, but detailed, method of storytelling, allowing the viewer to further delve into the show’s particular way of representing the epoch. Monique Migglebrink takes note of this in her discussion on \textit{Mad Men} and its intertwining television storytelling and historical narration.

As the pilot opens, in the year 1960, the television drama captures the epoch-making transition between the 1950’s and 1960’s, and therefore illustrates how difficult social norms and ideals collide…On the basis of this shift, \textit{Mad Men} portrays an epoch transition marked by social dissonances and visualizes emerging political turmoil and social change. Its characters exemplify climaxes and turning points in the history of the era as they live through them in their everyday lives. Their feelings are captured in the midst of historical change…On the inside, underneath their sleek appearances, they feel frustrated about the social restrictions that they have to cope with.\textsuperscript{75}

Migglebrink’s analysis of \textit{Mad Men}’s representation of change within the show can shed some light on how we see historical shifts in \textit{Mad Men}. As viewers, we know what changes are coming and are seeing the characters live through them firsthand and, in turn, experience the history as they did. The show is able to portray an authentic and raw form of history because the characters are actually living through it onscreen. Their lives, and hence, the narrative of \textit{Mad Men}, are history unfolding.

In terms of the pacing of its stories, _Mad Men_ is not the first television program to utilize a slow-burn narrative. Individual episodes are often seem unhurried in their progression, forgoing quickly passed dialogue for a focus on character’s physical reactions. Anthony Smith discusses the concept of slow-burn in the following:

…Weiner set about importing such devices…nuancing the pace at which events unfold within AMC’s flagship series. For example a dialogue delivery within _Mad Men_ scenes is, as mandated by Weiner, often unhurried, allowing time to pause and for performers’ subtle physical reactions to manifest within such edits…As such, while many made men storylines, such as those concerning pregnancy, marital infidelity, and workplace feuds, are redolent of 1980’s network supersoaps such as _Dallas_ (1978-1991), _Mad Men_ characters often meet these hoary narrative developments with uncommonly subtle responses.76

A clear example of the slow-burn narrative occurs in the second season finale, “Meditations in an Emergency,” in which Don’s wife, Betty Draper finds herself in a local bar. Preceding the scene, the viewer knows that Betty has been unhappy with Don and is aware of his infidelity. The scene shows Betty with her nearly trademark icy expression on her face, strolling through Manhattan and arriving at the bar and sitting down, which in and of itself takes roughly twenty seconds before the bartender asks her what she would like to order. It takes about a minute for what would surely be considered a quick exchange when the bartender gives Betty her drink, tells her that a man at the end of the bar sent it, and warns her about talking to him. Betty’s expression turns stern as she says, “We’ll see about that.” There is a long pause as

Betty sips her drink and takes a puff of her cigarette before the man approaches her. They have an exchange and Betty rebuffs him, however the exchange while minimal in terms dialogue proceeds for about forty seconds. After the man goes away, there is a long pause where Betty simply sips her gimlet, and her face illustrates that her thoughts are obviously troubling her. There is another long pause as Betty walks down the bar and looks at man, and continues on to the restroom. There is another pause as Betty tries to open the bathroom door. We hear someone speak, and the camera cuts to the man standing in the doorway at the end of the hall. Betty responds, and there is another pause before they kiss. After they kiss for roughly thirty seconds, the man unlocks the bathroom door. Betty’s eyes linger on him as she leans against the wall, she drags herself into the bathroom, tells the man that she is married, and they both go inside. There is no more dialogue as they proceed to have sex on a couch in the bathroom.

With as little dialogue as possible, we see all of Betty’s concerns and worries regarding her marriage come to a head. She and Don are currently separated, and she has just been told at the beginning of the episode that she is pregnant. She barely speaks, but as viewers, we get a very detailed look at her psychological turmoil. The slow pacing of the scene allows the viewer to catch the emotional nuances of the scene, such as when she gives a brief nervous look when she puts down her drink. The scene’s depiction of Betty’s struggle illustrates the creative effort to pace the drama in a less hurried manner. Though it is not particular to the period drama, slow-burn narratives often go unutilized in network television, due to the fear that they may alienate viewers, imagined as susceptible to distraction. It is clear from this scene that
quite a bit of action, both physical and psychological, has occurred, but the difference between the drama of *Mad Men* and drama in many network television shows, is the unhurried pace by which the action unfolds. *Mad Men* clearly makes an effort to strategically pace its stories, which is significant in the context of its presentation of history.

It may seem that *Mad Men*’s slow-burn narrative and its method of illustrating history are completely separate. However, the slow-burn narrative is essential to *Mad Men* in its relationship with history. Essentially, it is *Mad Men*’s slow scene progression that allows the viewer to see the emotional ramifications of the history presented. It is true that *Mad Men* evokes a sense of a historical past through mise-en-scene and costume design. Nevertheless, in terms of narrative, it is *Mad Men*’s slow-burn that allows it to show a slow progression of time and its psychological ramifications, its psychological effects as they relate to the unfolding history of the 1960’s. The slow scene progression allows for the viewer to experience the history that *Mad Men* is trying to portray almost as if it were in real time. Season by season, the viewer watches *Mad Men*, and ends up with a comprehensive depiction of 1960’s America; all in part due to the slow-burn narrative.

*Mad Men* also takes a unique perspective in its presentation of individual historic events. Over the course of the show’s duration, *Mad Men* depicts a variety of historical events. *Mad Men* is not the first show to attempt to represent a major historical event, but in my view, it does so without any sort of nostalgia or spectacle. If anything, *Mad Men* treats these historical events with a clear sense of authenticity.

One of the primary examples of historical events unfolding on *Mad Men* takes
place in the third season with the death of Medgar Evers. His assassination is mentioned at the beginning of the episode, but we do not really see the real conflict until we see Pete Campbell attempt to conduct some informal market research for a television set company using Hollis, an elevator attendant in Sterling Cooper’s Building. When Pete mentions that, “A lot of Negros prefer Admiral televisions,” we immediately see Hollis’ face sour. Hollis then evades Pete’s questions, prompting Pete to stop the elevator and scold him. After further pressuring Hollis proclaims that he does not watch TV because “weve got bigger things to worry about. Okay?” Pete still does not understand why Hollis is getting upset, and while he does not say anything, Hollis visibly gives up on trying to explain the situation he is in to Pete. Although very nuanced, we can see Hollis’ anger and resentment that Pete is being so oblivious and crass during a time that is obviously important to him and (while they may not know it) the rest of the company. Hollis is clearly struggling to tell Pete just how inappropriate his questions are at the current time, but can’t, because it would more than likely put his job in jeopardy. It is in this interaction that we not only see the significance of Medgar Evers’ death to people of color, but also the prevailing racist climate and how it comes into play in the context of the event.

Perhaps the most memorable portrayal of a historic event in Mad Men comes at the end of season three, when the characters witness the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The first time we hear about the shooting, it is very much in the background. Harry Crane and Pete Campbell are having a conversation about a promotion that Pete recently lost when the news first breaks. Neither of them notices. The camera cuts to Duck Phillips’ hotel room where he is waiting for Peggy Olsen, he

77 Mad Men, “The Fog” (originally aired September 20, 2009).
is watching the news, but, upon hearing Peggy knock, he unplugs the television. Back at the office, the Sterling Cooper Employees barge into Harry’s office to watch the news story. We also see the reactions of Peggy, Betty Draper, and Roger Sterling’s daughter, Margaret as the assassination took place on her wedding day. Margaret’s wedding is overshadowed by the assassination; everybody who was invited contemplates whether or not they should go. At the wedding, the assassination is the only thing being discussed at the reception. Finally, we see Betty watch the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald broadcast live, culminating her yelling, “What is going on?!”? It is clear that while John F. Kennedy’s assassination is very much a major event in the eyes of the characters of Mad Men, it is still dealt with in a very muted way. When we first hear about it, it is little more than background noise, almost unnoticeable. People have different reactions from shock, to disbelief, to apathy. Not only that, but Margaret’s wedding is not only completely disrupted as a result, but serves as a feeble attempts to continue on with normal life in the wake of a tragedy.

In the portrayal of specific historical events, Mad Men does not seek to take an angle of nostalgia, nor does it attempt to sensationalize the events that it is trying to depict. Mad Men seeks to present history as it was lived by relatively privileged white professional middleclass people. In both examples, we see a very emotionally raw take on history. What we are seeing are individual, very personal reactions to events that are often characterized in terms of their macro level implications. Such is the case with Mad Men’s particular mode of depicting historical events.

In addition to its method of storytelling, Mad Men’s visual components also lend it distinctiveness. Mad Men has been praised for its overall look, including its

78 Mad Men, “The Grown-Ups” (originally aired November 1, 2009).
costumes and mise-en-scene, but its visual style extends far below the surface. In terms of visuals, *Mad Men* goes far beyond evoking period authenticity and shows consistent associations with the visual media of the 1960’s. To be more specific, *Mad Men* draws upon much of the visual media of the era. This is most clear when we see that *Mad Men* borrows certain visual elements from the cinema of the 1960’s. In addition, *Mad Men*’s color scheme shows a steady progression that mimics much of the visual media of the era.

Further enhancing the history that is so integral to the show, *Mad Men* continually borrows from iconic 1960’s films. However, *Mad Men*, rather than borrowing from these films in order to pay tribute, the show actually integrates these components very subtly to the point where the parallels cannot be easily seen. With its subtlety taken into account, *Mad Men*’s parallels with 1960’s media serves as a way to further enhance its historical verisimilitude as a period drama.

*Mad Men* draws from multiple famous films of the 60’s including *How to Succeed in Business Without Even Trying* (1967), and *Bye, Bye, Birdie* (1963). However, its most prominent example comes from the parallels with *The Apartment* (1960), a film that is particularly significant for *Mad Men* as both works deal with the corporate culture of the era. *Mad Men* and *The Apartment* have a clear point of intersection within their respective set designs. In *Mad Men*, the lighting grid in Sterling Cooper is surprisingly similar to protagonist C.C. Baxter’s office in *The Apartment*. Both offices have a bright and unforgiving fluorescent lighting grid, as television studies scholar Jeremy Butler points out in his essay on *Mad Men*’s visual

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The most striking element of Mad Men’s large, elaborate, Sterling Cooper set, is its ceiling—a oppressive lighting grid of fluorescent lights, Billy Wilder recognized this lighting fixture’s oppressiveness when he conceived the visual design for The Apartment…positioning C.C. (Baxter) as a rat in a maze designed to crush nonconformity, individuality and the human spirit…Mad Men continues this tradition of the workplace as a scene of naked ambition, rigid conformity, despair, alienation, and ennui.\textsuperscript{80}

Through Butler’s observation, we are seeing two distinct points of intersection between the two. First, we are seeing the clear inspiration and associated with films of the era, but within this allusion we are seeing Mad Men attempting to visually center itself in the context of the history that it is trying to portray.

Mad Men’s associations with 1960’s cinema are not the only significant visual component. Its method of signifying the historical period can also be seen the color scheme employed over the course of the show. As the seasons progress, Mad Men’s color scheme changes from a rather subdued palette to a vibrant and borderline jarring arrangement of colors by about season four. The changing color scheme seems a bit inconsistent at first, but it becomes clear that through its use of color, Mad Men is clearly centering itself in the context of visual media of its era. Looking at Mad Men’s use of color in the context of its progression of time, we can see that the changing color scheme very much parallels the shift from black and white to color in visual media in the 1960’s.

Mad Men’s pilot, “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” (aired July 19, 2007) contains a color scheme that can best be described as a mere few steps above grayscale. The episode begins with Don in a bar, and, while the set itself is very much colorful, the

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 60-61.
overall coloring is rather dark. The black and white components of the color scheme become even more apparent when the viewer gets their first look at Sterling Cooper. The first shot of the Sterling Cooper building is a bird’s eye view, in which all that is seen is the grey building in conjunction with a grey sidewalk. The inside contains little to no difference from the outside. We see a revolving door with grey figures filing in one by one. Next, the audience sees junior employees Harry Crane, Ken Cosgrove, and Paul Kinsey enter the elevator with new secretary Peggy Olson. In the elevator scene, viewers see nothing but grey walls, various shades of grey and black in the costumes of all four of the characters, and the scene is overwhelmingly dim in terms of lighting. The only color the audience can see is Peggy’s yellow hat and blouse, which are both severely dimmed by the aforementioned lighting. As the three men walk through the office, we see almost no color; the two most prominent features of the Sterling Cooper office are the seemingly endless grey walls and the whiteness of the lighting grid. Additionally, despite the rows and rows of lights, the office is surprisingly dim.

By season four we see a drastic change in the use of color. On the surface, there is more color to be seen, both in terms of costumes and set design. Additionally, colors are extensively saturated and deliberately contrasted with one another. Essentially, the color scheme is bolder and brighter, to the point where it is almost jarring. Moments in the season four premiere illustrate all of these characteristics. After finishing a meeting with a potential client, Don, Roger, Pete, and Bert walk through the halls of Sterling Cooper Draper Price, just as the junior employees did in “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”. The office is very similar in terms of decoration to the
Sterling Cooper office building, but there are some key differences. While the four men walk down the hallway, the walls adjacent to them are in alternating shades of light grey, white, and a light shade of robins egg blue. The fluorescent lighting grid is still present, but instead of enhancing the grayscale tone of season 1, the whiteness creates a contrast and enhances the surrounding colors, including the suits of Bert, Roger, Don, and Pete. Another example takes place in another office in the Sterling Cooper Draper Price office, where Peggy Olson, Pete, and hired freelance artist Joey Baird are discussing a campaign. In the scene we see several varieties of color mashed together in a single frame. Peggy’s blouse, the couch, the walls, and the wall decorations all offer vibrant, saturated colors of yellow, burnt orange, blue, jade green, and red all crammed into a single shot. The scene is a bright medley of colors that are so vibrant as to seem almost aggressive. Additionally the way that all of the different characteristics of the shot are set up does not lend anything to the conversation between Pete, Peggy, and Joey. If anything, it serves as a blatant way to exhibit all of the different colors.

The process mimics the progression of color in visual media in the 1960’s. Paralleling season 1, much of the popular films and television programs of 1960 such as *Oceans 11*, and *The Apartment* were filmed in black and white. Color films of the era, such as *Imitation of Life* and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* parallel the scenes of Sterling Cooper as well, with a somewhat grey tinge to the colors that are present in the scenes. However, by 1964, certain films were fairly enthusiastic about their use of color. One of the prime examples would be the 1964 blockbuster *Viva Las Vegas*. Throughout the film, the viewer is constantly bombarded with vibrant and
oversaturated colors. The most significant of which comes during a scene where
Rusty (Ann-Margaret) is dressed in a pale yellow outfit in direct opposition to the
lavender sky. The film clearly attempts to make a statement and jar the viewer.

Again Mad Men attempts to center itself in the era that it is representing.
Throughout the course of the show, its use of color not only enhances a sense of
historical authenticity, but also makes the viewer feel as if they were watching a
media product of the 1960’s. By drawing direct influence from the films of the era
that it is attempting to replicate, Mad Men further advances its claim to authenticity
by actually attempting to be the work that it is trying to replicate.

In terms of its status as quality television, Mad Men occupies a distinct space.
Unlike its counterparts on HBO, it aired on a channel based on a different economic
model and its creator had a different background than many of the other HBO show
runners. Unlike David Simon and David Chase, Matthew Weiner came from a career
that was based in the entertainment industry and he had a deep appreciation for
television. Working under Chase at HBO partially allowed for him to foster his
creative skills and tell the type of stories that we wanted to tell. The end result, Mad
Men took the genre of the period drama and expanded it81 in terms of his method of
depicting history. Its slow-burn narrative gives a realistic progression of time as the
years of the 1960’s unfold, and the now infamous historical events are portrayed with
honesty and normalcy. Mad Men further extends its sense of historical authenticity
through its visuals, where it draws from media conventions of the era in order to
further center itself within the historical context of the era. While Mad Men may not

81 It should be noted that network attempts to parallel Mad Men’s success, such as Pan Am
and The Playboy Club have failed.
come form the same school of thought or background as its premium cable counterparts, it more than proves itself in terms of its methods of differentiation.
Conclusion: Differentiation In Old and New Contexts

In this thesis I have examined in depth three television programs that I feel embody the idea of differentiated television, in addition to delineating the industrial conditions that encouraged these strategies and enabled these programs to be produced and circulated. The network era of television saw the formation of an economic model for producing programs, one that marginalized the live anthology dramas that were the industry’s first prestige offerings. The network system, consolidated over the 1960’s continued to dominate until the development of cable television through a series of technological and legislative changes. Cable television may have been based originally around localized production in its early days, but it developed through branches of media conglomerates that produced and distributed alternative programming to a national audience and would pose a significant threat to the Big Three networks. Along with the creation of a fourth broadcast network, FOX, these factors came into place to form the crisis of network television, which created incentive for the networks to target specific audiences and experiment with programming choices.

The crisis of network television created prime conditions for independent production companies to fulfill the needs for differentiated programming. MTM Enterprises serves as a prime example, creating differentiated programs such as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere*. While both of these programs are a small fraction of MTM’s repertoire, their layered storytelling, morally ambiguous characters and genre mixing laid a basic foundation for differentiated television, and would eventually be used in other television series attempting to distinguish themselves.
One of the more significant products of these industrial changes, HBO, expanded the concept of differentiated television to brand itself as a channel that produces television shows that are linked with high art. As part of its branding strategy, HBO had a penchant for attracting creative personnel with interests in producing differentiated television series, using strategies that would be discouraged on network television. As a result, HBO has provided an influx of differentiated programming that has reinforced its brand.

HBO’s most successful series, *The Sopranos*, not only served as one of the flagship original series for the network, but is also one of the definitive programs when one thinks of quality or differentiated TV. *The Sopranos* can be seen as a product of a complicated relationship with television on part of creator David Chase, a man with a hatred for television, preference for films, and lengthy career in the television industry. In addition to its authorial roots, *The Sopranos* contains modernist art elements, particularly borrowing from the character psychology elements of European art cinema. These influences, plus its hybrid relationship with the gangster genre and the domestic comedy, make *The Sopranos* a clearly distinctive work.

At first glance, *The Wire* appears to be a generic police procedural, but by the middle of the first season it becomes clear that this assumption is wrong. David Simon and Ed Burns drew on their experiences to create a television program that actively manipulates the genre of the police procedural, in terms of its characters, both as institutions and people, and its incorporation of realism in terms of the process by which the various cases unfold. In addition to its manipulation of genre, *The Wire* situates itself as socially conscious, but not moralistic.
Of the three television programs that I chose to analyze, *Mad Men* appears to be the outlier in terms of the economic model of AMC. However, Anthony Smith’s analysis shows how *Mad Men* has been able to incorporate similar methods of pacing to HBO, while still bringing in revenue for AMC through bringing prestige to the channel brand. This same method, coined the slow burn narrative by Smith, allows for the viewers to see emotional nuances within scenes, particularly in terms of how the characters witness history as it unfolds. Additionally, *Mad Men* takes events that are defined by the fact that they were witnessed by the masses, and makes them personal, as I illustrated with the death of John F. Kennedy. Finally, *Mad Men* differentiates itself as a period drama not only through costumes and set design, but also by situating itself within history by visually paralleling the popular media of the 1960’s.

While the industrial shifts that I previously discussed created the conditions for differentiated television, further research on this topic should consider how continuing technological and economic shifts will affect television content. Recently, popular on-demand website Netflix released their first original series, *House of Cards*, with every episode of the season available for streaming. Adding to their list of original content, Netflix will release a highly anticipated fourth season of popular comedy *Arrested Development*. In the next few years it will be interesting to see how consuming original content through streaming websites as opposed to television networks affects the television industry in addition to how it will translate into texts.

Strategies of differentiation and distinction are and continue to be an effective method for networks. A television program that marks itself as different increases its
chances of securing an audience, elevating the brand of the network, and winning awards. These strategies manifest themselves in different ways, depending on a number of factors, including network economic models, genre, and authorial influence. However these programs choose to mark themselves as different, what remains clear is that each program seeks to create a definitively unique television experience.
Bibliography


