

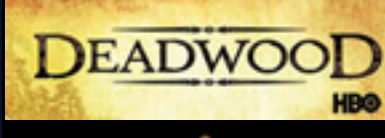
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Lured In

HBO's slick series flicks and tele-elitism?
by Laurel Wypkema



[SYNOPTIQUE \[HOME\]](#)

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Written by :
Laurel Wypkema

Editor :
Lisa Fotheringham

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There's no keeping up. As an only recently initiated member of HBO's fiercely loyal entourage of over-involved intellectuals and steadfast fans, I attribute my prior ignorance to silent protest of the idea of HBO and its pay cable cousins since my first introduction in 1999 to its violent, stylish programming for the financially able. To my mind, the AOL Time Warner-owned pay cable cluster of channels was part of a soulless conglomerate pandering to a well-heeled, discerning and implicitly more deserving audience. But my non-involvement wasn't so much a principled objection to exclusive elitist television as much as my inability to pay for the channel (or a Canadian equivalent that simulcast its featured programming).

Wonder of wonders, though, the television section at my local video store—previously perused only for dusty TWIN PEAKS, SEINFELD and MARY TYLER MOORE covers—has boomed in recent months, making most of these formerly unavailable series deliciously accessible to me and the rest of the section faithfuls who earnestly pick the TV shelves clean every weekend of all the best volumes of FREAKS AND GEEKS, THE OFFICE, THE L WORD, SIX FEET UNDER, THE WIRE, CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM, SEX AND THE CITY, CARNIVALE—the latter five being HBO series. I have a feeling this is all part of the plan. DVD sales, domestic syndication and series merchandise owe their success to the HBO shtick of letting their terrifyingly well-written, slick shows speak for themselves. Word-of-mouth creates demand based on merit and relative quality so that a dedicated and faithful audience follows behind to eagerly sop up hundred-dollar box sets and contribute to a sprawling online community of forums and message boards. Of course, dozens of network television shows are also available for rent, brightly packaged with their own slew of makings-of and behind the scenes features—ALIAS, FUTURAMA, and GILMORE GIRLS to name a few—following in the footsteps of their HBO and Showtime counterparts. Somehow—although it is admittedly not all that opaque—the series behind the HBO brand are the standards by which the mere mortals of network television measure themselves against and at the epicenter of which is the notion of quality. And with all the inherent advantages at pay cable's disposal it's no wonder specialty channels define the television industry's cutting edge—and perhaps always will.

American communications scholar Deborah L. Jaramillo, in her examination of the pay cable channel's construction of a "quality brand" explains that HBO has more leeway in the area of explicit content and no commercial interruptions:

...[It] does not have to fill an entire weeklong primetime schedule with programming [...] HBO's original series producers are not bound by the broadcast standard of a season of twenty to twenty-five episodes; one season on HBO is thirteen episodes [...] Fewer episodes ordered means more money to spend and more production time in which to spend it... Without the financial constraints under which the networks function, HBO can target narrowly segmented niche markets, a concept essential to its branding. (63)

With all these advantages building towards HBO's current roster of completely compelling, beautifully executed series engaging HBO and HBO On Demand audiences, as well as a growing crowd of "second run" viewers who rent or purchase the DVDs and struggle weekly just to keep up, it's no wonder these shows have found their way into my DVD player, all but erasing my previous ill-founded boycott of the entertainment behemoth and its cluster of life-changing television series. It was just a matter of time before I realized my place (as a film student) within their niche market. Now that I am deeply embroiled in this game of catch up, 2005 has become the year of the Johnny-come-lately and these expanded—and usually ransacked—rental shelves in the TV section tell me that I am not alone. Ever since discussions of CARNIVALE and the fourth season of SIX FEET UNDER became the standard subject of small talk on the subway platform after class, it has been dawning on me that there's something going on here. How else to explain the relative neglect of movies among certain committed cinephiles in favor of what are, after all, "only" television series?



It's not TV, it's HBO.

Two of HBO's newest series—and its only two shows not set in contemporary (usually urban) America —DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE, take as their subject real-life characters plucked from American history and mixed in with fictional characters in plots that center, respectively, on an illegal settlement in the West in the mid-1800s and a traveling carnival snaking its way through the Dustbowl in the South during the Depression. These are series for television that appropriate cinematic language and genres and are backed by an interconnected group of mostly male, often ivy-league educated writing and producing geniuses with long lists of accolades for their work in both television and film. David Milch left his post as a lecturer in English Literature at Yale to create NYPD BLUE before masterminding DEADWOOD for HBO. One of the show's producers and sometimes-director, Davis Guggenheim, received the Peabody Award—broadcast television's embodiment of prestige—in 2002 for his documentary THE FIRST YEAR. CARNIVALE's team of writers and directors are a Rubik's Cube of Writer's Guild award winners and independent filmmakers. All of this is to say that at the innovative core of these series is a long list of industry notables participating in creative webs for the production of single episodes and within ingenious combinations of people the likes of which single films never have at their disposal. To date, seven people have directed episodes for DEADWOOD; eleven for CARNIVALE. The result of this unique creative arena is a thematically similar duo of brilliant shows.

I single out DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE because of their break with HBO's traditional line-up as, shall we say, period pieces. Both center on burgeoning American nation building within autonomous, lawless communities with their own codes of hierarchy and procedures of ritualized justice and discipline. Dusty, often squalid transient life provide the backdrop to both shows as themes of decadence, lawlessness, sexual tension and religious alienation play out among the paradigm of good and evil. These shows, particularly CARNIVALE, portray themselves as epic and the realization of destiny, fate and identity within the community loom large among a cast of characters whose players are providing the best performances of the year, in film or television. Ian McShane as Al Swearngen and Robin Weigert as Calamity Jane in DEADWOOD, and Clancy Brown as



Brother Justin Crowe in CARNIVALE are completely captivating in their respective roles. McShane and Brown are DEADWOOD and CARNIVALE's villains and, as villains are wont to do, provide each series with its most riveting dialogue. On the brighter side of the morality spectrum—or at least hovering somewhere in between—Michael J. Anderson's role as carnie ringleader, Samson, is filling out in subtle and fascinating ways in season two where his unfortunately vacuous dialogue left off in season one. Sudden plot twists in the opening few weeks of CARNIVALE's sophomore season hint at an onslaught of female character development, guaranteeing my continued dedication to the show if for nothing more than my anticipation of the reveal played out between Clea Duval, Adrienne Barbeau and the ever-creepy Diane Salinger.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that these shows are so thematically alike, focusing in particular on destiny-fulfillment of their reluctant male leads and the roots of American national identity. CARNIVALE, in particular, enters territory in season two that teeters precariously between cheesy and brilliantly allegorical. With DEADWOOD's second season still in development, one can only hope the critical dynamic between McShane's Swearngen and Timothy Olyphant's noble Seth Bullock continues as intelligently as in its first season.

Investment in these two series demands a different kind of patience than movies require. But I live and die by the creep of character development and the ritualized hour I now devote to each show, so it's that much sweeter when the camera pans left every week across a big southern sky and the CARNIVALE caravan rides off into the frisculating dusklight. Movies, the end.



Works Cited

Jaramillo, Deborah L. "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, the Sopranos and the Construction of a Quality Brand." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 26:1(January 2002): 59-75.

COMMENTS:

Well done. It is clear that a forum operating outside much of the constraints which the Michael Powell-era FCC has imposed on basic cable has a distinct advantage. Citing immensely less original and less impressive shows like *Alias* and *Gilmore Girls* as the best examples of network shows with similar amounts of success relative to their HBO counterparts further shows the tremendous chasm in quality between the two forums. As you point out, HBO has effectually created a new type of artistic forum, a sort of moviemaking chain letter where the same cast with more resources than your average network show are tweaked by the influence of new directors on a sometimes week to week basis.

By JW on 2005 03 21

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