

Anthony 'Tony' Soprano Sr.
"You know where I was yesterday when you called?...I was outside a whorehouse, while a guy that works for me was inside beating the shit out of a guy that owes me money. Broke his arm. Put a bullet in his kneecap."

Dr. Jennifer Melfi.
"How'd that make you feel?"

The Golden Age of Television

Words ~ Joshua Bullock

In 1997, a veteran writer-producer called David Chase made a pilot for the U.S cable channel HBO. The one series he had created - complex family drama Almost Grown - had been canned by its network CBS after only ten episodes, despite critical acclaim and an Emmy nomination. His new pilot told the story of a New Jersey mob boss in mid-life crisis and its fate hung in the balance. In desperation, Chase offered to shoot an extra 30 minutes and turn it into a feature film. Instead, HBO commissioned it and The Sopranos heralded a new golden age for television drama, cementing the form as the writer's medium and delighting wide audiences with the superb and ambitious series that followed.

The Sopranos © HBO/Sky Atlantic

Anthony 'Tony' Soprano Sr. Dr. Jennifer Melfi.
"Wished it was me in there." "Giving the beating or taking it?"



It is hugely ironic that a show that would come to stand for a new type of slow burning, exquisitely characterised drama so nearly became a genre mob film, whose very clichés and tired stereotypes it would drastically overhaul and reinvigorate. Superlative TV drama, like *Tony Soprano*, puts itself on the psychiatrist's couch and understands that it is lucky not to be film.

Vince Gilligan, creator of *Breaking Bad*, points to the simple philosophical difference between the two: "It comes down to the question that writers ask themselves when they embark upon a new project – is this two hours' worth of story or is this a hundred hours of story I have before me?"

The wonderful stroke of fortune for future audiences was that these ornate narratives found their way to cable networks like HBO that lacked a history or rulebook for producing drama. Today HBO is the final word in lavish and groundbreaking programming, from epics like *Boardwalk Empire* and *Game of Thrones* to more involved, intimate pieces like *The Newsroom*. But when the first season of *The Sopranos* aired in 1999, the Home Box Office was known for screening uncut films and boxing title fights and it was, as a result, only the second ever hour-long drama serial to air on the channel. David Chase remembers the pioneering, almost naïve spirit of those first few years as both the network and its show tried to work out what it was they had in their grasp: "When *The Sopranos* started, there really was no model. For example there was a very limited DVD market for television shows - with *The Sopranos* we actually had to convince them to release it."

The Sopranos had found a home deserving of its explicit and at times dense subject matter. HBO was and is a subscription channel for which viewers pay between \$10-15 a month extra in their cable package. Instead of running adverts, HBO shows trailers, behind-the-scenes featurettes and promotions for upcoming programming. Un beholden to sponsors, HBO executives aren't compelled to tone down their content. In return, the commercial and critical success delivered by *The Sopranos* at the first roll of the dice fostered an economic as well as aesthetic incentive for commissioning innovative drama. It was like a farmer becoming a racehorse trainer and turning Red Rum out of his stables a year into the job. And my, how it flew. Across its six seasons, *The Sopranos* won 21 Emmy awards and five Golden Globes.



HBO viewers began to have the sense of being part of a cultural shift, rather than being units sold to advertisers. A brand and philosophy were born. Jeff Bewkes, head of Time Warner, HBO's parent company said: "If you're not paying for television you're not the customer, you're the product."

It wasn't just HBO that saw the riches on these new horizons. A similarly stunning change of fortunes befell AMC, home to the superlative *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. Rather than helping helm the new era of television, AMC had been broadcasting black and white movies from Hollywood's Golden Age. Despite David Chase's personal recommendation that it should be HBO's next series, Matthew Weiner, a staff writer on *The Sopranos*, had his script on the advertising world of 1960s Madison Avenue turned down by the network. AMC had made a decision to turn its hand to original programming, saw its potential and commissioned it in 2007. The result was Don Draper, and the slew of critical and commercial successes that followed, including *The Walking Dead* and *The Killing*, made AMC another stable for groundbreaking drama. Charlie Collier, President of AMC notes: "My head of programming's job is to focus our disciplines on never being distracted by trying to create something that's for everybody." As with HBO, at first AMC had little grasp of how to manage their success. Vince Gilligan asserts: "The network was so new to scripted television they didn't even have a preferred act structure! It was so very liberating. I cribbed *Breaking Bad*'s structure of having four acts and a teaser from my time on *The X-Files*."

Therein lies the goldrush. The first wave of pioneering producer-creators had already sharpened their nibs on definitive drama. This Golden Age doesn't mean that only after *The Sopranos* did TV drama become great, it is rather that the last decade has seen the unprecedentedly prolific results of shrewd, well-financed commissioning meeting refined storytelling. The latter - the ability to create six seasons of 13 episodes of 47 minute brilliance - is not a natural gift inherited by chance in the manner of comic timing. It is a craft forged through the experience of staff writing in teams of five or six on complex shows. A study of the last decade's defining series reveals a lattice of inter-connecting masters and apprenticeships. *Boyz n the City* creator Terrence Winter, like Matthew Weiner, worked under David Chase on *The Sopranos*: Chase himself had honed his skills on a superior, long-running detective show of

the 70s - *The Rockford Files*. David Simon had finessed *The Wire*'s template of a top-down dissection of urban decay in microcosm through his 90s mini-series *The Corner*.

Not only that, but many of the writers and producers of the first and second wave of the Golden Age had a peculiar immersion in their subject matter, which was rewarded in the naturalism and superior rendering of character and context. *Breaking Bad*'s story editor George Mastras worked as a criminal investigator and defence litigator, adding unique insight into the police procedural aspects of the show. Famously, David Simon was a police reporter for thirteen years and had

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written two bestselling books on the crime ridden neighbourhoods of his adoptive city, Baltimore. Ed Burns, his co-writer on *The Wire* - a former homicide detective - helped him colour a narrative so vivid in tone, the show seemed the most intimate and tragic documentary ever witnessed on television. *Deadwood*, perhaps the most literary TV drama of the last decade, had its lyrical nineteenth century dialogue written in the main by creator David Milch, a former Yale professor of fiction and poetry. He plumbed the history of the Wild West to academic depths for over two years before even putting pen to paper.

To conceive of a Golden Age might suggest to some there is a formula to be pursued in the creation of these

miraculous stories. Perhaps there is no unifying trait other than risk-taking, an awareness of the possibilities and a responsibility to the heady ambitions it can sustain. David Chase explains his innovative approach to scripting:

"I would come back with what you would call the novelisation part of it - thirteen episodes of the adventures of Tony Soprano, separate adventures. I wasn't that crazy about doing serialised stuff as I wanted to make each one a movie, so all the serialised work I had done by myself could in theory be thrown out of the window, but it was there on the wall if we needed it."

One such card on David Simon's wall became a scene in the third series of *The Wire*. In it, an ex-con called Cutty finds himself unable to shoot a rival gangster in a gunfight. He tells gang leader Avon Barksdale that he's done. Avon tries to talk him round, but Cutty is adamant he's not right for the game anymore and walks out. Slim Charles, Avon's other lieutenant, turns to him shaking his head at the turn of events. "He was a man in his time," he says. Avon stares at the door through which one of his most trusted men has left, a man who served a fourteen year stretch without flipping on his friends. He replies, "He a man today."

We can all point to a defining scene that sums up the complexity and naturalism of a storyline that unfolds with a poetic charge, the distillation of a beautifully wrought narrative. They are the small details that satisfy the whole. For this writer, that scene encapsulates not only the beauty of *The Wire*, but also the brilliance that this Golden Age of shows has brought to television. They have pulled audiences into the room with their characterisation, yet hold over them the possibility of whiplash; that major protagonists genuinely aren't safe, nor is so much of television's dramatic lore that has come before. There continues to be a sense in series like *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, that the format of long-running drama provides the ultimate test for elevated storytelling and consummate characterisation. It is the writers' medium. Gilligan says popular genre drama like *Bones* and *CSI* rely on "character stasis" and instead recognises a common commitment to evolution in the shows of the Golden Age. Action is given weight by a genuine jeopardy for those in the crucible of a series' premise. No one is safe, not even Omar in *The Wire*. The leads in series like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* are all troubling anti-heroes: lurching from sadism to profound acts of empathy, collapsing archetypes.

The ambitious and experimental tone of these complex screen novellas was once the preserve of art-house cinema or fringe theatre, but now it tempts global audiences and major Hollywood players like Glenn Close and Kate Winslet. Perhaps they recognise an ambition currently lacking in Hollywood cinema, which endlessly looks to other mediums for its stories: the latest bestseller, a comic book hero, a sequel so quickly repackaged it still wears the label. Ambition for David Simon meant that *The Wire* and post-Hurricane Katrina *Treme* had to have an impact missing from the journalism he had come to see as ineffectual. For Gilligan it was to see his protagonist unravel and become an antagonist, for Chase it was pruning old Mafia myths for deeper psychological truths about family in a character who compelled and repelled in equal measure. For *Mad Men* creator Weiner it was a chance to use history to dissect the greatest religion of the last century, marketing, through the life or non-life of a coreless adman.

At its most paradoxical, great TV mirrors the novel in the depth and scope of its characters, pushing the boundaries of story to encompass more secondary characters and subplots than the average two-hour film can render. Some TV writers balk at the comparison, some agree, yet all are affected by being held in literary esteem. You have only to look at episodes like 'The Dickensian Aspect' in *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad's* 'Kafkaesque' to gauge the Golden Age's perception of its literary leanings. *Deadwood's* Al Swearengen even addresses his monologues to the severed head of a Sioux Indian like a whisky-soaked Hamlet.

The slogan 'It's Not TV, It's HBO' is true. The Golden Age aspires to be great art, not just great television. Now an episode can be a sliver of a greater narrative that in isolation may move the action along very little. Or it can be Chase's concept of a series being 13 self-contained mini-movies that still add up to a story arc. *24* was a story told in real time and *Lost* held Russian doll realities that seemed never-ending. *In Treatment*, Gabriel Byrne's series, opened in 2008 as the first half-hour drama, airing five nights a week with the same patient returning on the same day each week to continue their story. TV's ambitions have become so vaunted they have left the story and invaded the form.

The revolution started by cable has also spread to the mainstream networks in America with shows like *24*, *Lost* and *Howlowlaw* – benchmarks for thrilling drama that find huge audiences. This



"Pain or damage don't end the world. Or despair or fucking beatings. The world ends when you're dead. Until then, you got more punishment in store. Stand it like a man... and give some back."

revolution could only happen in the US, where economies of scale meant a demanding series like *Six Feet Under* could survive on a weekly domestic audience of just one million to the lasting benefit of future audiences worldwide. The huge success of HBO is a warning. If all empires fall, then the end of this incredible dramatic workshop might come from trying to compete with film. The scale of series like *Boardwalk Empire* and *Game of Thrones*, accomplished as they are, is unlike anything that has come before. Will these genre pieces wrench resources away from drama that works on a more intimate register? Ironically, AMC's *Mad Men* accrues modest ad revenue and modest ratings – its critical glow makes it a flagship for the brand rather than an economic pillar. Gilligan

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fears this Golden Age may fall prey to the banalising forces currently besetting Hollywood, as the pressures of market forces exert themselves. A disenchanted David Chase has mostly left the frustration of network TV for film, warning of "truffle hound" network executives, unerringly rooting out the core of what's good about a show.

How to conclude? A Golden Age is necessarily comparative, suggesting an excellence in excess of all others. It seems right therefore, that where opinion is king, your writer must lay his cards on the table. A top five – but not all can be aces. Do with it what you will, shuffle and replace as you see fit. The deck is deep enough. Therein lies the glory of the times we live, watch and thrill in.

1. *The Wire* 2. *The Sopranos* 3. *Deadwood* 4. *Breaking Bad* 5. *Mad Men*