“I Only Had a Week”: TV Creativity and Quality Television

> New organs or perception come into being as a result of necessity.
> Therefore, increase your necessity so that you may increase your perception.
> Jalaal al-Din Rumi

> Entertainment gives us what we want. Art gives us what we don't know we want.
> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*

In Damian Pettigrew’s mesmerizing documentary *Fellini: I’m a Born Liar* the late, great Italian director ruminates on how his movies came to be:

> My films happen because I sign a contract. I get an advance I don’t want to repay so I have to make the film. I’ll say it again; you may think I’m being factitious, but it’s absolutely true. I don’t believe in total creative freedom. A creator, if he is given total creative freedom, would tend, I think, to do nothing at all. The greatest danger for an artist is total freedom, to be able to wait for inspiration, that whole romantic discourse. Psychologically, the artist is an offender. He has a childish need to offend, and to be able to offend, you need parents, a headmaster, a high priest, the police. . . . I need opposition, someone who annoys me, someone who opposes me, to work up the energy that I need to fight for what I’m doing. I need an enemy.

Television, including Quality Television, happens because contracts are signed, advances are given, new episodes must be locked down. No television “prime time prime mover,” not even those making Quality Television, has “total creative freedom.” None, under the extreme pressure of debilitating, enervating, incapacitating, intimidating, inspiring deadlines, can afford to do nothing, to languish in creative despair, or indulge in writer’s block, or editor’s block, or composer’s block, or dolly grip’s block, or show-runner’s block. None have the leisure to wait for the light bulb to light, the apple to fall. None can luxuriate in a bath tub anticipating Eureka or coddle romantic notions of the creative imagination at work. The “new perception” television so often offers is born of necessity, sometime radical necessity.

"Quality television"—in Youngblood's terms, presumably television that not only gives us what we want but what we didn't know we want—is problematic and more than a little defensive. If we apply what in science fiction circles is sometimes deemed the [Theodore] Sturgeon principle—"Nine tenths of science fiction is crap. Of course, nine tenths of everything is crap"—to television, we might not feel the need to distinguish it from run-of-the-mill TV. Why the compulsion to "disqualify" most of television? The American comic Fred Allen once quipped, back in the First Golden Age of Television, that television is called a medium because it is "rarely well done" (quoted by Bianculli, 59). The embrace of Quality Television, the recognition that excellence on this medium is anything but rare, is meant, of course, to counter such a prevalent assumption. But other motives may have governed its birth.

Quality Television, as Lynn Spigel has argued, may be, to some extent—perhaps a great extent—a necessary fiction created by academics: "the institutionalization of 'quality' TV," she writes in "The Making of a TV Literate Elite," "was intertwined with the parallel construction of 'quality' TV criticism" (69). After all, as Bob Thompson notes in *Television's Second Golden Age,* Quality Television is roughly equivalent to that seemingly amorphous phenomenon known as the "Art Film," the advent of which cinema critics, theorists, and audiences once also felt the need to construct as a replacement for the usual markers of genre. "Art cinema addresses its audience," Pam Cook writes, paraphrasing David Bordwell, in *The Cinema Book,* "as one of knowledgeable cinemagoers who will recognize the characteristic stylistic touches of the author's oeuvre" (116). Perhaps auteurism in all its forms, as Matt Hills insists in *Fan Cultures,* "brings with it an ideology of quality" (133).

An often anonymous medium in which the question of authorship has been suspect from the beginning, and the serious study of which over the last two decades has transpired contemporaneously with the seeming death (or was it murder?) of movie autuerism, American television seems only now ready to encourage serious investigation into its now emergent, now identifiable, alas mostly male, creative individuals: Joss Whedon, David Chase, Aaron Sorkin, Alan Ball, Matt Groening, J. J. Abrams, Winnie Holzman, Marta Kaufman, David Kelley, Diane English, Tom Fontana, Steven Bochco, Joel Surnow, David Milch, Darren Star, Chris Carter, Larry David, Glen Gordon Caron, Dick Wolf, Marshall Herskowitz, Ed Zwick. The list is long and growing and I do not mean mine to be more than a sample.

Do Quality Television artists exhibit the other according to-Fellini defining traits: are they offenders? Do they require opposition? Do they need enemies? Working in a medium in which the vaunted, mythic American freedom of speech may not actually exist, in which censorship. both institutional and self, certainly curtails if not straitjackets expression, television creators need not look far to find parents, police, headmasters, gatekeepers with which to do battle. “Desirable demographics notwithstanding,” Bob Thompson reminds, “quality shows must often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences” (14).

Long before a Wardrobe Malfunction unleashed the attack dogs of the political right in America, prior to the second-most-duplicitous member of the Powell family’s rallying of a Federal Communication Commission previously preoccupied only with making the world safer for Rupert Murdoch and Clear Channel to become expeditiously appalled by the degradation of American media standards, network television executives, while simultaneously embracing and promulgating a kind of neo-Least Objectionable Programming strategy, were already complaining vociferously of an unfair handicap in their clash with cable competition. Not TV, HBO can use nudity, profanity, and violence and get away with it. Though airing on an expensive subscription-required network, *The Sopranos* has often won its time-slot against network competition because it can be more adult. An old TV programming maxim has it that a show cannot be a true hit unless its night belongs to it; HBO now owns Sunday night in America. The Sabbath may start with a visit to church, but the evening takes us to the Bada Bing, to the Fisher Funeral Home, to Oz, to the Los Angeles of Larry David, the New York of Carrie Bradshaw and friends. In the current TV landscape, here’s the sort of thing against which the networks must compete. (If any children are present, they should perhaps leave the room.)

Show clip from “Crossroads” (*Six Feet Under* Season One).

The second clip is from *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on HBO, which, if you haven’t seen it, presents itself as a sort of faux documentary about the horrible life of *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David, who plays himself. *Curb’s* third season follows Larry’s misadventures as an investor in an about-to-open Los Angeles restaurant, and in the final episode of the season, the restaurant debuts with a hastily hired new chef Larry

thinks is a holocaust survivor and who suffers from Tourette's Syndrome, as the owners discover too late. Here are the last two minutes of "The Grand Opening," the season finale.

Show clip from "The Grand Opening" episode of *Curb* (2:05)

The third clip, of course, is from *The Sopranos,* from a Season Four Episode called "Whoever Did This." Mob boss Tony Soprano's beloved horse Pie-oh-My has just been killed in a stable fire that looks like arson, and Tony drops by Ralphie Cifaretto's house to confirm his suspicions.

Show clip of Tony killing Ralphie in "Whoever Did This"

In a recent interview on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air Sopranos* creator David Chase, a twenty five year, almost completely invisible veteran in his pre-HBO life, of network television, Chase reiterates his unhappiness with the current state of television.[1] Sick and tired of the complaints of network executives that HBO shows have an unfair advantage because of the sort of indelible moments we have just seen, Chase lists instead some of the freedoms network television fails to exercise:

> [A]ll of us have the freedom to do story lines that unfold slowly. We all have the freedom to create characters that are complex and contradictory. The FCC doesn't govern that. We all have the freedom to tell stupid, bad jokes that may actually turn out to be funny. And we all have the freedom to let the audience figure out what's going on rather than telling them what's going on.

- Stories that unfold slowly: Chewing Gum in *Twin Peaks*
- Characters that are complex and contradictory: A cut of Sloane from *Alias* Pilot 30:30
- Stupid, Bad Jokes: Marshall McLuhan in House Arrest 605
- Let the audience figure it out: the gang at the end of "Chosen"

"You get bored," Chase confessed several years ago to James Longworth, "and I don't know if you can tell it from looking at *The Sopranos,* but I had just had it up to here

with all the niceties of network television. I couldn't take it anymore. And I don't mean language and I don't mean violence. I just mean storytelling, inventiveness, something that really could entertain and surprise people. I just couldn't take it anymore" (34). On another occasion, Chase would tell Allen Rucker what he really thinks of network television: "I loathe and despise almost every second of it."

Network television fails, Chase goes on to say, because it has forgotten its first obligation as a story teller in order to pursue a not-so-hidden agenda.

> I think the first priority is to push a lifestyle. I think there's something they're trying to sell all the time. . . . I think what they're trying to sell is that everything's OK all the time, that this is just a great nation and a wonderful society, and everything's OK and it's OK to buy stuff. Let's just go buy some stuff. . . . There's some indefinable image of America that they're constantly trying to push as opposed to actually being entertaining.

It is this image, this world view, this ideology, is it not, that is incompatible with the production of American Quality television, not the extreme financial and production exigencies that face every one of the medium's creators.

For all his brilliance, Chase fails to disclose one undeniable, inequitable advantage working on HBO does offer him. A *Sopranos* season is only thirteen episodes, and HBO has acquiesced in Chase's ever-increasing demands for longer-than-customary hiatuses between seasons. *The Sopranos,* Season Four, returned in September 2002 after sixteen months to replenish the creative juices. Season Five began again last month after fifteen months off the air. Not surprisingly, the "Jesus Lady" of American television, Martha Williamson, creator of *Touched by an Angel,* speaks with envy of Chase's premium cable luxury in her interview with James Longworth and suggests she could produce a higher quality product under similar circumstances. (But then again she also proclaims in the same interview, far less believably, that, if put in charge of *Oz*, she would take the show in precisely the same direction as Tom Fontana.)

If enemies are needed to create, as Fellini suggests, even to create television, another suspect, ever-present and much more real than the FCC, is ready to hand, an enemy filmmakers like a Fellini (who made 24, or is it 23½?, films in forty years) or a Stanley Kubrick (who directed only twelve feature films in four decades) cannot be

said to have faced in any significant or decisive way—an enemy TV's makers know intimately: time.

In an interview Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Angel,* and the short-lived but amazing *Firefly,* makes the following observation:

> I think everybody who makes movies should be forced to do television. . . . Because you have to finish. You have to get it done, and there are not a lot of decisions made just for the sake of making decisions. You do something because it's efficient and because it gets the story told and it connects to the audience. And then you've got to do it right and do it fast. I worked in TV before I worked in movies, and I have a better track record at meeting deadlines than some movie writers because you get it done. . . . So TV is a good thing. Obviously it has certain pitfalls and rituals that you fall into, shortcuts and whatnot that when you make a movie you want to get out of. But I think the restriction of just having to tell a story to an audience every week is the best thing you could ask for. Ultimately, you want to move on from that. You just want to say, "Okay, now I want to do something where I have the time to create everything that's in the frame. Everything." And that's sort of where I'm starting to be. I'm getting to the point now where I'm like, "Okay, I've told a lot of stories. I've churned it out." I just feel like I want to step back and do something where I can't use the excuse of "I only had a week."' (*The Watcher's Guide,* Vol. 2 323)

Much of television is produced under time constraints that would make the creative work of novelists, painters, composers, filmmakers difficult if not impossible. One year's worth of an hour program—twenty two forty minute episodes, 880 minutes/14.7 hours, the equivalent of seven feature films)—is routinely generated in less than a year of frenzied collaborative enterprise. Whedon's lament—"I only had a week"—must be the frequent lament of TV writers, producers, set designers, composers, and directors. Even more miraculously, Quality Television is produced by the same system.

When Mim Udovitch visited the set of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* while writing a cover story on the show for *Rolling Stone*, she learned that the final episode of

season four, then only days away from production,[2] was not yet written. "Like, in a couple of days we start shooting the last episode of the season," Sarah Michelle Gellar would observe, "and no one has any idea what happens. But Joss just keeps saying, 'Don't worry. I have it right here'" (62). Whedon, we learn later in the article, had an emergency appendectomy earlier in the week, delaying his completion of the script for the season finale.

A few days later Whedon had evidently completed the script for "Restless" (4022),[3] and he would also direct, for the fourth consecutive year, the season's final episode, which would air on May 23. Confirming his injunction to his star not to worry, "Restless" turned out to be a truly extraordinary hour of television, a kind of TV *8½,*[4] a postmodern, self-referential, diegesis-bending, hour that would succeed in summing up *BtVS's* first four seasons and pointing to its future. I have compared it (in *Fighting the Forces*) to Fellini's *8½* (1963), a watershed film once condemned as "the death of public cinema as we know it" (Shickel).[5]

In his brilliant, polymathic, and maddening *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, John Thornton Caldwell insists that the "desperate intellectual attempt" (249) of television studies, far too enamored of Raymond Williams' notion of "flow," too focused on television texts, too ethnographic, far too verbal, is essentially misguided and inadequate, because of its segregation of theory and practice, to the task of understanding the stylistic excess of American television beginning in the 1980s. Jeremy Butler deems it "an audacious piece of agit-prop for the stylistic analysis of television images and the incorporation of industrial discourse into screen study" (380). Not surprisingly, Caldwell is completely suspicious of Quality Television, in his paranoid approach convinced that Quality is an industry invention, good for business.

Though Caldwell's call for less theory and more examination of actual television is refreshing, I find his monotonous discoveries a tad paranoid for my taste. A long, hard slog through *Televisuality's* 400 plus pages will discover virtually no awareness of the creativity that fuels television, no recognition that Quality Television, at least, is made by creative individuals. At this point in our fledgling understanding of television, we know very little about the nature of television creativity. What would it mean to study television creativity? I can't do much more today than offer a brief prolegomena to such an approach, identifying three key areas of investigation. (I should add here that when I was sharing my self-disclosures

earlier I failed to mention that the nature of the creative process is one of my other passionate intellectual interests. I wear several hats.)

Collaboration. To understand television creativity, we will first of all need to understand the function of collaboration. Perhaps the foremost investigator of the creative process, Columbia University's Howard Gruber, has suggested in an interview with Howard Gardner that collaboration is the last great frontier of the discipline. Recent books like Nora John-Steiner's *Creative Collaboration* help to fill the void, but she looks only at collaborative pairs, Anais Nin and Henry Miller, Picasso and Braque. What might we learn by an intensive/extensive examination of the astonishing collaborative effort involved as the multiple intelligences of television arts and sciences work together to make a television show? The advent and rapid proliferation of television on DVD and of commentaries by writers, directors, and actors will be a tremendous boon to those interested in understanding TV creation,[6] as are the periodic "making of" bonus features. To cite but two must-sees, *The Making of "The Telling"* on the Season Two DVD of *Alias* and *From Page to Screen* on *Angel's* Season Two DVD are both fascinating, though we need to remember that they are produced by capitalist stooges. Books like David Marc and Bob Thompson's *Prime Time, Prime Movers* and James Longworth's two *TV Creators* volumes offer many insights into the creative process in television, and *Small Screen, Big Universe: Star Trek as Television,* by Roberta Pearson and Máire Messenger Davies (both with us here today), a book, based on hundreds of hours of interviews with the all kinds of contributors to the Star Trek franchise, to be published next year by the University of California Press, should be of inestimable value for television creativity scholars.

The Television Auteur. When, drawing on the original insights of the French, the American critic Andrew Sarris translated the auteur theory into an American idiom, his goal was plain: converting "film history into directorial autobiography," American intellectuals interested in the movies began to think and talk and understand the movies through the specially-ground lenses provided by the auteur theory. We know now that those lenses were near sighted, leading auteur critics (I was one once) to make a bit of a spectacle of ourselves. I trust, as we embark on a new, Television Auteurism, that we have learned our lesson. It may well be true, as Robert C. Allen explains, that "because of the technological complexity of the medium and as a result of the application to most commercial television production of the principles of modern industrial organization . . . , it is very difficult to locate

the 'author' of a television program—if by that we mean the single individual who provides the unifying vision behind the program" (9). But should that stop us from trying, from harvesting the potential discovers of a rigorous investigation into the creative individuals who shape television? We need to know so much more, about the people who make Quality Television. Why is it that so many of them, like Chase, "loathe" the medium in which they excel? How is it that the necessities of television inspire new perceptions in creative individuals like a David Lynch or an Alan Ball, already successful in the promised land of the movies? How can someone like Larry David, the invisible behind-the-scenes force behind *Seinfeld,* step out of the shadows in front of the camera in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*? How can a J. J. Abrams make the seemingly impossible genre leap from *Felicity* to *Alias*? We need, too, to know much more about what these people know, their influences, their aspirations. A brief aside: for the upcoming *Slayage* Conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* we accepted an excellent proposal for a paper that would investigate Sartreian themes in *Buffy.* A month ago, watching listening to the DVD commentary of Joss Whedon on the *Firefly* episode "Objects in Space," I learned that the writer-director had read *Nausea* when he was a teenager and that he intended the episode in question to be a demonstration of its premises.

Serial Creativity. In an extraordinary essay in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, Mark Dolan outlines the need for a new understanding of the astonishing complexities of what he calls "serial creativity." The makers of a television series face narratological challenges unknown to the novelist or the filmmaker. They must open up the narrative enough to allow for the ungoing progress of a story, must reveal possibility sufficiently to allow things to happen, but must do so never knowing how long—how many episodes, how many seasons—the narrative will actually be. How does one create, sustain, open up, offer closure, to what Sarah Vowell calls "a long haul" show? Before we understand television creativity, we will need a much better grasp of the complexities, ambiguities, and practicalities of serial creativity.

Those subjected to, bored with, my constant chatter about my new love of television are no doubt sick-to-death of hearing me go on about what I have come to call "rooting for television." Jacques Barzun once suggested that critical terms should come into existence in a manner precisely analogous to pearls. "Critical terms are rare pearls born of the irritation that the mind feels at not being able to account

to itself for something it repeatedly encounters." Critical language, in other words, should be born out of the mind's need to find relief through the creation of a new, illuminating jewel of an idea. "Rooting for television," I fervently hope, as the oyster of record, will prove to be a gem. As an exemplary example of what Matt Hills has deemed a scholar-fan, I have monitored with interest my wholly non-objective, hardly disinterested, obsessive cheerleading for my favorite television programs. (Though the phenomenon is not wholly limited to series television—I often find myself genuflecting before *The Daily Show,* a beacon of satiric, soul-soothing sanity for residents of Bush's America—it is largely episodic television for which I am fanatic.) Watching original airings of *Buffy, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, Angel, Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Simpsons, Alias, 24,* I find myself happy, thrilled in fact, at brilliant character developments, at ingenious narratological developments, at tour-de-force action sequences and special effects, at delicious subversions of broadcasting codes, at getting-away-with-murder, wickedly risqué verbal and visual double entendres, at perfect, fertile, closureless endings. Though I may not come out of my chair with quite the zeal I exhibit at a Tennessee Titans' touchdown, I recognize the similarity of the emotion, though no doubt the neurons are firing at higher levels of the brain than those inspired by the accomplishments of a football player. What can I say: I root for creative achievement in all its forms and spheres and nowhere does it amaze me more than in television.

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[1] These remarks echo Chase observations in a "Foreword" to a volume collecting the best *Sopranos* screenplays, summarized in my chapter on *The Sopranos* in Glen Creeber's *Fifty Key Television Programmes*:

> Although the major American television networks, all of which passed on the show, have attributed the tremendous success of *The Sopranos* to HBO's cable TV freedom to air nudity and profanity, Chase finds that explanation superficial. It is not bare breasts and obscenities that have set *The Sopranos* apart but, according to its creator, a variety of other factors: the narrative possibilities granted by the absence of commercial interruption, the freedom to allow characters to develop slowly over time, the series' insistence on treating its audience as highly intelligent. (191)

[2] Udovitch's piece was published in the May 11, 2000 issue of the magazine, but we know from several references (she refers in the article to Gellar's on-set visible scar, acquired in Buffy's flight from Adam in "The Yoko Factor" [4021]; she watches the filming of a scene in which Buffy regrets having studied French instead of Sumerian) that her visit took place during the filming of "Primeval" (4021), the next to the last episode of season four.

[3] We should not find such rapid production in the world of television that surprising. In an interview with ET Online, Whedon had confessed that "When we fall behind, which tends to happen, I've been known to write a 'Buffy,' start to finish, in three days," and the incredibly prolific David E. Kelley, who at one point in the 1999-2000 season was writing scripts for *Ally McBeal, The Practice,* and *Snoops*, has been known to write more than one per week.

[4] During the filming of Fellini's masterpiece, the Italian director had also deflected the concerns of everyone from his producer to his star, Marcello Mastroianni, as to whether or not "the maestro" actually knew what *8½* was about. Fellini would, of course, incorporate these doubts into the film itself, making it in large part a movie about the inability of Guido Anselmi (Mastroianni—Fellini's alter ego) to make a movie.

[5] During the filming of the Fellini masterpiece, as I point out in *Fighting the Forces*, the Italian director had also deflected the concerns of everyone from his producer to his star,

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Marcello Mastroianni, as to whether or not "the maestro" actually knew what *8½* was about. Fellini would, of course, incorporate these doubts into the film itself, making it in large part a movie about the inability of Guido Anselmi (Mastroianni—Fellini's alter ego) to make a movie.

[6] See my "Emotional Resonance and Rocket Launchers': Joss Whedon's Commentaries on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* DVDs" in *Slayage.*