

# THE CEREBRUM OF CULTURE: A HISTORY OF AMERICA AND TELEVISION FROM 1980-PRESENT

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*ABSTRACT: What is the actual impact TV has had in this ever-evolving, modern entertainment landscape? Has this impact changed or lessened over the years? Television programming has made many cultural contributions from the small - like the hair and fashion trends inspired by “Friends” in the 1990s - to the more significant - like the growth in popularity of dark and dramatic TV (ex. “Breaking Bad,” “Game of Thrones”) corresponding with the death of the concept of the nuclear family and other similar cultural norms in the late 90s to early 00s. This is particularly important to demonstrate in an age in which television programming is considered to be a fairly unstable medium, torn completely between streaming and broadcast. TV has had strong influences over other mediums of culture; films, books, even future generations of TV, as well as influence over the American way of life. However, the reverse is also true; American culture, in many ways, has controlled the specific directions TV has gone in, with fan engagement being important to the future of a show in much deeper ways than any other medium. In fact, since shows like “Hill Street Blues” kicked off the redefinition of the drama in the 1980s, television and American culture have had an incomparable and crucial connection of immediate influence and imitation in ways both minute and great.*

## Introduction

Ask a hundred people for their thoughts on television, and you’ll get a hundred different opinions. Some may laud it for its ability to easily entertain, and others may criticise it for the same. TV has created trends and swayed opinions; it has the power both to unite and to divide. It is praised both for having a fresh, diverse range of programming, with plenty of representation for minorities and for having new, creative takes on storytelling concepts. And yet TV is still rebuked for being an “old hat” a dying art doomed to drag along in the footsteps of tried and true media like film and newer, showier ones like social media. In spite of this, especially in the U.S., TV has established a firm grasp on the culture in a way that other art forms have and—frankly—cannot. TV has had strong influences over its fellow media including films, books, even future generations of TV, as well as influence over the

American way of life. However, the reverse is also true; American culture, in many ways, has controlled the specific directions TV has gone in. In fact, since the redefinition of the drama in the 1980’s, television and American culture have had an incomparable and crucial connection of immediate influence and imitation in ways both minute and great.

“Culture” is a term that encompasses all behaviors, ideals, and intellectual and physical expressions that make up the social framework of a certain community. American culture is stereotypically stapled by imagery of flags, burgers, stars and stripes. But just as any other general public, it is much more intricate of a system than it is portrayed. Even with this in mind, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what can be identified as “culture,” and what’s more, what can be seen as distinctly “American.” This paper will utilize a rather broad definition of “culture” as a term representing the retrospective general

consensus of the American people on social norms and ideals during a certain time period. Adopting a broader idea of “culture” will also help to demonstrate the wide reaches of Television on various aspects of American life as a whole.

## The 1980s: A New Form of Television

When the 1980s began, TV was reaching horizons never seen before. After years of family-friendly comedies and westerns, the popularization of dramatic comedies such as

*M\*A\*S\*H* and action shows like *Charlie's Angels* in the 1970s began to give TV a new stylistic wind. By 1985, dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* were just as popular as the sitcoms that had previously dominated the airwaves (Holloway, 1989). Both daytime and primetime soaps gained major followings, and cable TV began to pick up steam as HBO introduced original content in the form of *Tales from the Crypt*. These major changes are what identified the decade as the “redefinition” of TV (Allen & Thompson, 2009).

## Influence of Culture on TV: Revolutionizing the TV Drama

In the 1950s and 1960s, TV programming was not designed with one particular audience demographic in mind. Families most often watched TV all together, meaning that content was made so that it could be consumed by anyone (Gay, 2001). In the 1970s going into the 1980's, programming styles began to shift, as a few shows specifically written for adults began to debut. These “adult” shows quickly boomed in popularity; *Hill Street Blues* is the most popular example of an 80's show with a premise that was distinctly adult-oriented. Additionally, shows such as ABC's *Moonlighting* and *Roseanne*, and CBS's *M\*A\*S\*H* directly utilized mature themes and content, addressing weighty existential concepts, or serious issues such as PTSD and morality (Gay, 1993; Patterson, 2017).

Jointly related to this shift in content, in the 1980s, networks began to pay more attention to ratings. While the Nielsen Company had been taking rating statistics for 30 years, the 1970s was when networks really began relying on this data to make renewal and cancellation decisions. It was then determined that 18-49 year-olds, as the most marketable demographic, were the only important demographic to produce for. It was at this point that “the demo,” as a concept, was born. This demographic soon became a more important factor in renewal decisions than actual ratings (VanDerWerff, 2018). The concept that “only viewership from younger adults matters” can be seen as both a result and proliferation of many societal problems prominent in the 80s, including American idealization of capitalism and the cultural invalidation of elders and minors. The birth of the demo also marked the high level of influence that Americans had on TV as a medium specifically; book and movie ticket sellers generally did not closely regard the particular demographic that purchased their product, but TV producers did. By the 80s, TV was much closer to the hearts and homes of the American public than any other medium, and the introduction of the demo cemented this.

The shift of attention to ratings and the demo is likely one of the single-most influential changes in the history of television programming, and the results of it were divisive. For the most part, the focus on pandering to one specific demographic allowed TV to quicken a process that diversified the types of content put on TV. With the change, shows began to address more serious matters, expand on their use of curse words, sexual content and violence. TV writers were, for the first time, able to break the mold pressed upon production because of the content's general audience. At the time, this expansion on content was not particularly welcomed by many critics; it was met with skepticism and even condemnation by some (Quill, 1989). However, in perspective, the use of the demo was the first major domino to fall that would turn TV into the distinct art form it is today.

Unfortunately, the effect culture has on TV is not always for the best, and the newfound centrality of the demo came with its downsides. Advertisers' focus on a specific demographic did open new avenues for TV to operate in, but it also forced it into a situation in which all programming was bridled by cash in more ways than before. TV was (and in many ways still is) the only artistic medium that cannot be distributed independently, and it is because the sole success measure for a television series is the producing network's cost vs. benefit, as opposed to quality, potential, or fan engagement. While the sudden import of the demo allowed 80's shows some creative freedoms, it also forced all content put on the air to fit with the wishes of the advertisers, whether or not those wishes actually matched with those of the public (Storey, 2009). This would remain a major issue for many years, especially as large fandoms grew around TV shows that did not necessarily meet advertisers' standards, causing a kind of impasse that would always result in the networks siding with advertisers over the viewers.

### **Influence of TV on Culture: Cult Followings and the Television Event**

Because the TV networks began to cater to a single demographic, the 1980s marked a major change in the style of programming. While a few had been introduced in the mid-to-late 70s, the 80s were when drama shows and "cult" shows (a general term here used mostly to refer to satires and dramedies with unique or fantastical elements, à la *Moonlighting*) burst onto the scene (Allen & Thompson, 2009). *Hill Street Blues*, in addition to being one of the first TV police procedurals, was widely praised for addressing sensitive cultural issues, especially those surrounding the police. *M\*A\*S\*H*, which ended in 1983, had been doing similar things as pertaining to the military, but the major distinction between the two was that *Hill Street* was not marketed as a comedy, but as a drama (O'Connor, 1981). On all avenues, TV was stretching its creative wings.

*Moonlighting*, when it debuted in 1985, was not pegged to be the show to forever change the TV landscape. However, the detective comedy, starring Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd, was so embrasive of the newfound creative liberties available to it that it ended up breaking almost every established rule and stereotype, and established new tropes still common today. *Moonlighting* prided itself on the meta; the characters often recognized that they were a part of a TV show and skimmed their fingers along the metaphorical fourth wall. In fact, *Moonlighting* is often attributed to influencing the institution of musical episodes, themed episodes, Black and White episodes, satire and parody episodes, and more (Clark, 1989). Because of this, most credit it as the origin of the modern concept of "cult" TV, as well as providing ample inspiration to the creators of many fantasy, sci-fi, and cult shows that would have their own cultural impact in the future. The major impact of cult shows would not be felt right away, but after the internet broadened the availability of the niche to the public, the genre would end up radically shifting cultural mindsets.

While *Moonlighting* exemplified the cult hit, the 80s were also a time for the major "television-event." From its inception, TV had always been the host for "events" that drew massive viewership. However, before the 80s, these were typically televised versions of live events, such as the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II or the Oscars. In 1980, *Dallas* changed that, when they aired an episode that concluded a previous season's cliffhanger, the now-famous resolution to "Who shot J.R.?" Adweek later claimed this episode attracted more than 80 million viewers (Patterson, 2017). *Dallas* and "Who Shot J.R.?" can still be recognized as one of the most historically significant events in television programming history. Years before television "fandom" and binge-watch culture became normalized, major TV events were fewer and further between, but had a much higher impact. "Who Shot J.R.?"— as the most

notable of these—proved that the stories on TV in themselves were worthy of “event” status in the same way as political or cultural events.

One year after *Dallas*, *General Hospital* perpetuated the TV-event, with their episode featuring the wedding of Luke and Laura, two of the most popular characters. This episode was estimated to have attracted upwards of 30 million viewers and is still regarded today as possibly the quintessential moment in soap opera history. Few TV programs afterward ever reached that level of engagement, but regardless, both of these episodes marked a specific moment in time when TV shows became important enough culturally to have an intrinsic sense of merit (Gillis & Jennings, 1999). Suddenly, television itself was remarkable enough to the general public that an event happening in a TV show was a cultural event in itself.

## Summary

The massive shifts in production and distribution decision-making that occurred in the 1980s changed the way TV was made and the way it was consumed. Many believe that the 80s was a “New Golden Age” for television content, and it is widely agreed that this decade is directly responsible for all programming that came after it. The 80s introduced the modern drama, popularized the “adultification” of TV content, and planted the seeds for many highly influential shows to come. It was the first decade in which TV became a medium recognizable for its own uniqueness, and it paved the way for TV shows to be seen as an art form on the level of traditional film.

### The 1990s: Something for Everyone

In the 1990s, the segmentation of TV genres that began in the 80s came to its fulfillment. The 90s was marked by the growing popularity of more niche shows, like *The X-Files*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Twin Peaks*. Shows marketed to teens such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* (at the beginning of the decade) and *Dawson’s*

*Creek* (near the end) gained large followings as well. With the exploding popularity of *Seinfeld*, live-audience sitcoms experienced a major renaissance, and shows like the aforementioned *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Sex and the City* honed a new subgenre: the “single friends living in the big city” comedy (*Standup to Sitcom*, 2014). In all, the reinterpretation of old genres and the growth of new ones made the 1990s an interesting transitional period in TV production as the landscape shifted from the formation and aesthetics of the 20th century to the ones we know today in the 21st.

### Influence of Culture on TV: Dysfunctional Families and Fragmental Genres

The same decade that the existence of dysfunctional families became a normalized occurrence in wider American culture, TV programs also began to break down the “perfect” family dynamic. Echoing this, the fragmentation of genres that emerged in the 1980s continued into the 90s, to the point that each family member had a different show to watch (“Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication,” 2016, p. 366). There were still family sitcoms, like *Full House* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but they now were geared towards younger audiences. “Teen” shows were generally very closely related to primetime soaps in that they used romance and shocking plot twists to uphold the main storyline of the show, but they still often featured elements of children’s programming such as episodic life lessons. “Adult” shows became the most radically distinct new genre of the era. 90s comedies began utilizing divisive jokes, dark humor, and - instead of upholding the ethical and politically correct - often glorified the morally disturbed protagonist. Similarly, dramas used a significant amount more of sex, drug use, and violence than was allowed in previous years (Allen & Thompson, 2009)

Family sitcoms in the 1990s were one of the greatest examples of the great dissonance

growing between different audiences – and Americans as individuals. What had once been portrayed as viable entertainment for any age group was now mainly marketed towards children and young families. The great majority of these shows tried to address common topics faced by younger viewers, such as bullying and peer pressure, and emphasized family unity and good morals as designed for an elementary to middle school-aged consumer. For example, *Saved by the Bell* often discussed dating and relationship issues, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* famously addressed dynamics of broken families.

One of the longest-staying of these 90's "kids" shows was *Full House*, an ABC sitcom that aired from 1987-1995. Surrounding a single father raising his three daughters with his best friend and brother-in-law, *Full House* was a major success in the 1990s but it is possibly remembered best for its family-oriented messages; the show seemed to understand its integral place in children's lives, and therefore much of the show was in some way positively messaged or educational. This not only benchmarked the divorce of "kids" programs from general programming, but also showed another result of the breakdown of the nuclear family; TV was not only an entertainment source for kids, but a new parent, a secondary or even primary source of information on how the world works (Endrst, 1994).

Unlike family shows and adult shows, teen shows essentially did not exist before the revolutionization of the drama. Then, in the late 80s and early 90s, shows began cropping up that were specifically marketed to high schoolers and college-aged adults, possibly in an attempt to pull in more of "the demo." In 1995, Warner Brothers launched The WB, a broadcast channel with a teen/young adult audience in mind. These teen shows were written as a kind of smorgasbord of elements borrowed from other genres already popular. They often had specific messages woven into episodes like kids' shows,

but they also tended to emulate primetime soap operas, in that they relied heavily on scandal, relationships, and left-field plot twists to engage viewers. This "middle-of-the-road" approach appealed to young adults, and teen shows grew quickly in popularity.

Consequently, by the late 90s, the TV market was flooded with shows marketed to teens and young adults (Thompson, 1999). Shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which blended the teen and cult aesthetics, represented an even greater change in TV's relationship with its viewers. Following a teenage girl attempting to balance high school life with her secret role as a force against various evils, it helped launch a "supernatural teen" subgenre that is still very popular to this day. In addition to being the model of the 1990's teen show and the blueprint for future teen programming, *Buffy* was also often singled out for representing the modern feminist movement in its earlier stages. Before representation in media was widely demanded, *Buffy* provided it, and the titular protagonist is still seen as a major feminist icon (Reid-Walsh & Walsh 1999). *Buffy*, and many shows like it, served as a way to generate respect for the TV genre, beginning in niche fan communities. Its devotees – among them, future *New Yorker* TV critic Emily Nussbaum, who said the show was "...[S]omething that I wanted to discuss with anyone, whether they liked it or not," (Nussbaum 2019, pg. 9) — considered it an art form worthy of analysis. Fans' viewership of the show was not so much a hobby as it was a distinct aspect of their life – TV fandom was seeping into viewers' personalities and becoming a legitimate part of their identities.

The speedy separations in youth versus adult content came at a time when family dynamics were rapidly changing as well. In the 1980s and going into the 1990s, adults were getting married less and later, divorcing more, and choosing to remain single in favor of career-building (Johnson, 2000). Children gained independence and teenagers gained autonomy;

hence, each group got their own type of show to consume. TV show characters also exemplified the concept of a “nontraditional” home; *Full House* showed a single father raising his kids on his own, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*’s main character had an absentee father. The many iterations of this cultural concept of familial diversity and independence would continue to grow in the 2000s and 2010s, as did its role on TV.

These new American values permeated all of TV in the 1990s. The “single friends in the city” premise in sitcoms was a perfect blending of the dreams and realities of the Gen X-ers reaching adulthood in this era. Various other genres of show that also began to gain steam in the 90s also echoed the interpersonal trends of the day. *The Simpsons* parodied the concept of the nuclear family, and comedy-dramas like *Ally McBeal* and *Murphy Brown* highlighted the “independent single businesswoman” in conjunction with the rapidly growing number of women in the workplace. *Buffy*, as well as similar teen shows like *Felicity*, also highlighted female independence, and shows like *Party of Five* also turned traditional family stereotypes on their heads.

## **Influence of TV on Culture: Influence on Everyday Life**

After the unexpected success of *Moonlighting*, more and more networks became interested in creating similar content: wacky, oddball and meta, and yet with strong elements of seriousness and drama. This new “cult” genre manifested in many different ways over the years. Although *Moonlighting* was a mystery show, its style mostly rubbed off on a different genre, helping in its revitalization: sci-fi and fantasy. *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess* all inherited the lighthearted, not-quite-serious tone of *Moonlighting*, and built upon it. This helped to lay the framework for nerd culture to become mainstream in the late 2000s, and later morph into the fandom culture of the 2010s.

The 1990s were also a notable time in which the fashion seen on TV began to break its way into the mainstream, especially among teenagers and young adults. Likely because TV-watching was becoming more routine for these younger generations, the source of many of these trends came from teen shows such as *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, the one show that most affected the culture and style of the 1990s was not a teen show, but *Friends*. The wardrobes of Phoebe, Monica and especially Rachel single-handedly drove many 90’s trends and today is still looked to when reflecting upon the 1990’s style aesthetic (Critchell, 2001).

The proliferation of TV in everyday style was not kept only to fashion, however. The 90s were also a major time when terminology and quotes from TV notably began to leak into American culture. Quotes that many considered funny, such as *Seinfeld*’s “No soup for you!” became popular references to make. Additionally, TV shows created phrases that became known outside of the “sphere” of popular culture. *Friends* alone is credited as either coining or popularizing the terms “BFF” and “the Friend Zone” (Buchler, 2014). The term “regift” can be traced back to a 1995 episode of *Seinfeld* (Abadi, 2018), and the popularization of the exclamation “Woah!” in its current most common context is often attributed to *Blossom* (Highfill, 2013).

## **Summary**

In the 1990s, Americans were beginning to accept television programming as a cultural mainstay. TV shows were no longer just engaging - they were educating people’s children, informing their opinions, and changing small but significant aspects of their everyday life. TV’s major role in domestic life continued on, even as the decade saw the breakdown of stereotypes regarding domesticity. TV has always been unlike any other medium of entertainment that preceded it because of its specific ability to adapt and change its method of storytelling to meet cultural desires. However,

in the 1990s, TV began to prove in many ways that it itself could be influential on the direction of popular culture.

### The 2000s: TV as Art

In the 1980s and 1990s, TV was becoming cemented as an entertainment form. Content diversified with the culture and watching TV habitually every night became common practice. The 2000s, though, was when TV changed in essence. With the dawn of cable TV programming, the TV show became not only an entertainment source, but an art form. Dramas evolved from the soapy, over-the-top style of the previous decades to structured, serialized stories with stronger ties to realism. The antihero protagonist boomed in popularity and audiences began to seek more “relatability” and emotional honesty in both their comedies and dramas.

### Influence of Culture on TV: Realism and Fanaticism

Much of the influence of American culture on TV in the 2000s is closely tied to the millennial generation. While not the first generation to grow up watching TV, those born in the 1980s to the 1990s were the first to grow up with the new, “revolutionized” form of television - after the mass introduction of cable. Additionally, as mentioned, children of the 90s grew up during the deterioration of the stereotype of the nuclear family, which often resulted in children consuming more TV on average. With this generation now reaching adulthood (and becoming a part of “the demo”), TV became more catered to their preferences. Having grown up with TV as such a large part of their life, and with many considering it more than just a source for mind-numbing entertainment, millennials called for a stronger reflection of reality on their TVs.

The resulting realism trend is apparent everywhere in 00’s programming. Looking at the most popular TV shows from 2000-2009 in comparison to those from 1990-1999, one

would find near opposites in terms of content. In the 90s, there was a proliferation of soap-like dramas such as *ER* and *Beverly Hills 90210*. These shows portrayed likable, charming leads dealing with highly exaggerated dramatic situations. However, as the world moved into the 21st century, most shows began to turn dark and gritty. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad*, three of the most popular programs of the era, all starred a morally questionable ensemble of characters, and featured many dark, graphic scenes and plotlines (Sohn-Rethel, 2015).

Interestingly enough, even comedies of the 2000s closely followed the “realism” trend. The general popularity of comedy in the new millennium plummeted down, especially compared to the sitcom-renaissance that occurred in the 90s. After *Friends* ended in 2004, the “live audience” genre of sitcom all but died off, with few other attempts breaking into the popular, besides the occasional *How I Met Your Mother* or *The Big Bang Theory* (Allen & Thompson, 2009). What replaced the “live audience” comedy was a brand of sitcom that had gone essentially unseen on American TV previously. The first of this new kind of sitcom aired in 2003, with FOX’s *Arrested Development*, a show that broke from the formulaic nature of most comedies of the day. While the show was majorly popular with critics and viewers, the network saw its very specific humor style and heavy use of inside jokes as polarizing to the casual audience, and cancelled it after only three seasons (Poniewozic, 2013). However, in 2005, NBC tried their hand at a similar format to *Arrested*, releasing a show that would continue to dictate the norm for TV comedies for the next decade, and have an enormous impact on American culture as a whole for decades to come.

Drawing on the dry, awkward situational humor that had long been popular in the UK (and, in fact, based on a popular British show of the same name), *The Office* single-handedly launched a new subgenre of TV comedy

into the limelight: the mockumentary. The show followed a goofy cast of office workers in a drroll paper company, under the guise of a “documentary” about the branch. This documentary plot element allowed the show to translate many techniques to comedy that had not generally been used on American TV before: talking heads; long silences; characters looking directly into the camera in opportune moments. A perfect example of the decade’s realism-mania, *The Office* did not source its comedy in individual jokes as much as it did in bits, placing its ensemble of characters (written to represent subtly heightened versions of office stereotypes) into awkward, uncomfortable, and strange situations. Most of the popular comedies of the rest of the decade closely followed *The Office*’s model, utilizing heightened stereotypes, clashing of diverse ensembles, and talking head cutaways to affect comedy. While many of these, such as *Parks and Recreation* and *Modern Family*, received much acclaim, none surpassed the popularity of *The Office*, and none have stayed as culturally relevant even six years after its finale. As of 2019, *The Office* alone took up a whole 3% of Netflix’s viewership per year (Saraiya, 2019). What cult shows in the 90s started, *The Office* perfected, creating a cultural phenomenon that is uniquely pervasive in the everyday life of Americans.

Another thing that largely affected TV in the 00s was fan engagement. Prior to the development of social media, the only real sources of reception for any given show came from ratings and critics. However, in the 2000s, as blogs and internet chatrooms became widely used, and later, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, there was suddenly a new source of feedback for media makers: fans. In the 00s, interactions with creators and fellow fans suddenly became free and easily accessible, and fan communities wasted almost no time in making themselves heard by showrunners.

This intense new form of feedback in the 00s was critical in the success (or failure) of

shows such as *Supernatural* and *LOST*, but it also marked a time in which factors other than money, ratings, or criticism contributed to a major cancellation/renewal decision. One example: in 2009, *Chuck*, a spy comedy with a loyal fanbase, was looking more than likely to be cancelled. However, a vocal fan campaign on social media gained so much attention that NBC decided to renew it. This renewal decision proved that the internet had given fans a new sense of ownership of TV programming, a fact that has only grown truer over time (Carter, 2009).

While fan engagement and the internet changed a lot about television, there is one aspect of TV that barely shifted at all from the 90s to the 00s. While the most popular styles of programming changed drastically on TV in the 2000s, the teen genre, perhaps because of its novelty, remained mostly the same. Soapy high school dramas like *The O.C.*, *One Tree Hill*, *Gossip Girl* and more thrived within the teen niche, gaining fervent followings and becoming some of the most popular shows on TV. However, the most lasting impact on culture from the teen genre would come from a less conventional place.

Following in the footsteps of fantasy shows such as *Buffy* and *The X-Files*, *Supernatural* - which began on The WB in 2005 - would leave its mark on American culture in unexpected ways. Following two brooding brothers road-tripping across the country hunting demons and monsters, *Supernatural* played off of the popularity of magical, supernatural and dystopian teen-oriented fiction of the decade. While not, in itself, particularly remarkable from many other *Buffy/X-Files* follow-ups of the day, the allure of the show’s premise allowed it to quickly gain an almost ravenous fanbase. Using the internet as a tool, *Supernatural* fans discussed the show, set up conventions, made videos and art in appreciation of the show, and published fanfiction. In this, *Supernatural* In all, with the start of a new millennium, both TV

and American culture swung wildly away from anything they had previously been. Growth of the millennial generation led to major changes in the way TV was presented. Because of this, the familial ties between TV and culture were becoming more and more clear. Even though dramas and comedies completely changed direction while the cult and teen genres remained mostly the same, all of their influences combined to inform the future of American culture in ways both direct and drastic.

### **The 2010s: The “Peak TV” Era**

The 2010s was marked by an overflow of TV content. As streaming services grew into vogue and began releasing original content, the rules of the television game changed forever. As more and more streaming services emerged with fresh, innovative content (and networks scrambled to update and improve their own programming to fight the influx) TV shows rocketed in not only quantity but quality. Because of this, the era beginning in the 2010s has been referred to by many television critics as the “Age of Peak TV.” In addition to those changes, the 2010s also saw the rise of a “Nostalgia Era” of TV, featuring many shows purposefully reminiscent of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s as millennial filmmakers paid tribute to the culture of their childhoods.

### **Influence of Culture on TV: Nostalgia and the TV/Social Media Relationship in Action**

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, millennial filmmakers began to break onto the TV scene. Along with them, they brought a sense of nostalgia for the decades they grew up in, leading to a large amount of new content set in the 80s and 90s. In the 2010s, the late 1900s in general was nearly a more popular setting for new TV shows than modern day. Dramas like *The Americans* and *Stranger Things*, and comedies like *The Goldbergs*, *Fresh Off the Boat* and *GLOW*, among others, all portrayed vastly different takes on the same two decades. This trend is part of a larger movement of the 2010s

loosely coined “The Nostalgia Era.” Coming mainly from the reminiscences of millennials on the culture of their childhood, many elements of the 80s and 90s returned into vogue. This concept in itself is not revolutionary - culture is naturally somewhat cyclical. However that cycle, for the most part, had never really applied to TV, and certainly not at the magnitude of that which occurred in the 2010s. The internet is a likely culprit for the proliferation of these trends beyond that which was previously normal; all the shows, movies and music from the 1980s and 90s were easily available for consumption (Lizardi, 2014).

Another manifestation of the nostalgia era was the culture of reboots that emerged in the 2010s. While the TV reboot had conceptually existed for decades, the 2010s saw a major influx of reboots and remakes, especially of shows that were popular in the 80s and 90s, and even the 00s. Several shows from those years now got “sequel” shows that continued the story in some way, including the aforementioned *Arrested Development* and *Full House*. New shows also emerged in the 2010s that were remakes or continuations of popular 80’s and 90’s movies, including *Lethal Weapon* and *Training Day*. Finally, other shows got total reboots with brand new stories, such as The CW’s *Charmed* and *Dynasty*. By the end of the decade, almost every popular show of the past 30 years had been at least considered for a reboot. Many believe that it came from a lack of creativity, but a more accurate statement would simply be that it comes from the newfound easy access to things from the past, thanks to the internet.

If the 2000s introduced the world to the wonders of the internet, the 2010s, in many ways, introduced it to the horrors. One of the major displays of these “horrors” involved politics. The mid-to-late 2010s in America were marked by political tension and cultural division unlike that which had been seen in decades, if not centuries, and this division was echoed on TV as well. After the election of Donald

Trump as president in 2016, many shows began “taking sides” in the political turmoil, and many shows began to show a strong liberal bias or began to feature storylines associated with liberal ideologies, although the strength of political commentary differed from show-to-show. *Supergirl*, in 2017, aired an episode entitled “Nevertheless, She Persisted,” a nod to a feminist phrase popularized after Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren was silenced in opposition to the confirmation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions. *SNL*, flailing in ratings after the departure of most of their heavily popular mid-2000’s cast, found a resurgence in popularity when Alec Baldwin began making regular appearances in sketches parodying the then-president-elect. Many 2016 and 2017 shows even devoted whole seasons and entire premises to political subjects; *American Horror Story* aired an entire season surrounding the 2016 election, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dystopian show with strong pro-feminist themes, won the Emmy for Outstanding Drama in 2017 (Ali, 2017).

Not all shows that took political stances leaned left, however. *Last Man Standing*, a long-running ABC sitcom starring Tim Allen, and the 2018 revival of *Roseanne* both featured main characters that were proudly conservative. However, ABC cancelled both shows, both for reasons that were interpreted by many as political. *Roseanne*’s cancellation was based on a public Twitter tirade star Roseanne Barr embarked on that many considered to be offensive. However, *Last Man Standing* did not have an official reason for its cancellation; the show had an avid following, and performed decently in ratings, leading many (including Allen) to allege it was because of the show’s conservative protagonist and themes (Schwartz, 2017). All of these examples show how much the dominant hegemony in America had a throttle on TV programming - something that comes for better or worse.

However, one thing that widespread social media did provide was a new avenue for fans to rebel against elite decisions, which they used to their advantage, including in terms of TV. One of the most undeniable pieces of evidence proving the TV and culture’s firm and still-growing connection came as a result of the 2018 cancellation season. Before the 2010s, a TV show having a life beyond cancellation was practically unheard of. Upon occasion, a popular show from decades past would receive a revival, and rarely, another network would pick up a show after one network cancelled it. Beyond that, however, cancellations were fairly cut-and-dried.

2018 was a particularly dark year for TV cancellations; 61 shows were cancelled overall - 20 of those in a single day - including a number of established fan-favorites (Carras, 2018). Coming off of the viral success of a 2017 campaign to save the cult-hit *Timeless*, creators, fans and stars of many of these shows wasted no time in reaching out to networks to convince them to save their shows. The most vocal of these campaigns, by far, was for *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, a police procedural comedy on FOX. Fans and actors alike loudly voiced their protest on the show’s cancellation, begging both FOX and Hulu (who had previously saved FOX’s *The Mindy Project*) to give the show another season, to which both networks passed. Finally, only about a day after it was first cancelled, NBC picked up the show for a sixth season.

Fans of other cancelled shows, now encouraged, caused a repeat of this event several times in the next few weeks. *Designated Survivor* was cancelled by ABC and picked up by Netflix; the aforementioned *Last Man Standing* was cancelled by ABC and picked up by FOX; *Lucifer* was cancelled by CBS and picked up by Netflix; *Timeless* was cancelled by NBC again, and once again brought back, this time in the form of a TV-movie. The fight to save *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, however, was most remarkable, simply because of scale: “#SaveB99” was a

trending topic on Twitter for nearly the entirety of the time the show was cancelled. A coalition of celebrity-fans of the show - including the likes of Guillermo Del Toro, Seth Meyers, Mark Hamill and Lin Manuel-Miranda - loudly voiced their disapproval of the decision, and even dubbed themselves “The Guardians of the Nine-Nine” (McKee 2018). This flood of TV resurrections even flowed into the 2019 season, with many networks refusing to cancel low-rated fan-favorites, and even having to release statements that they would not reverse cancellation decisions (Lenker, 2019).

The Nostalgia era, the political craze, and the 2018 show resurrection all connect in one very clear way: they’re all undeniable proof that, now more than ever, TV is listening to its fans - and when most of their publicity comes through social media, they have to. Television has always been strongly tied to American culture, but one of the interesting benefits of the internet age is that it can now be directed by it.

One final example of TV’s response to culture in the 2010s was the dramatization of the TV comedy. While the introduction and popularization of heavy, dark dramas happened in the 1990s and 2000s, the thirst for more quality dramas carried on so prominently into the 2010s that comedies began to evolve to fill the void. By 2015, the comedy style made famous by *The Office* ten years earlier no longer floated in most cases. ABC did notably have some hits in the form of *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*, and a few shows that debuted in the 00s, like *Parks and Recreation* and *The Office* itself, were able to successfully wrap their runs. Other than these rare examples, TV comedies found themselves in an awkward transition point. Comedy had, for a moment, flailed, but was soon reborn - as drama.

While dozens of previous comedies had blended comedic and dramatic elements, 2013’s *Orange is the New Black* on Netflix was one of the first to embrace the comedy-drama

as a true genre. Based on the biography of an inmate in a women’s prison, the show mined the comedic personalities of its ensemble of female prisoners, while also honestly and at times brutally portraying the seriousness of the characters’ situation. *Orange*’s commitment to being both dramatic and comedic broadened the horizons of what a comedy could be, as well as blurring the lines of what a comedy was. *Orange*, however, was only the beginning of the comedy-drama revolution; soon, dark comedies and comedy-dramas were cropping up in droves, especially on streaming services and cable channels, which, of course, had looser content restrictions. Some of the most successful comedy shows of the 2010s were these comedy-dramas, including FX’s *Fargo*, HBO’s *Barry* and The CW’s *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Many shows were also quick to emerge that played with the concept of a comedy-drama; The CW’s *Jane the Virgin* loosely marketed itself as a comedy soap, and Netflix’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* was a comedy-drama for families. This comedy-drama revolution even began to touch “regular” comedies. The 2010s saw many network and cable comedies, like, *Office* writer and producer, Michael Schur’s *The Good Place*, eschew the episode-to-episode plot format used by nearly all comedies at the time, in favor of a more serialized storyline style previously only favored by dramas. All this acted as a remnant of the realism trend from the 00s, as a new generation of filmmakers sought to put their own views of the world more clearly onto the TV screen (in this way allowing it to more closely imitate other visual art media, such as film).

### **Influence of TV on Culture: Netflix and Nerd Culture**

The most prominent way that TV influenced culture, not just in the 2010s but possibly since the reinvention of the drama, was through the introduction of streaming services. In 2007, Netflix, previously known for renting out DVDs to consumers, announced the launch of

a streaming service, where certain shows and films would be available to watch online, free for Netflix subscribers (Helft, 2007). It wasn't until 2013, however, when Netflix released its first original programming, and subsequently changed the television landscape forever. When *House of Cards* came out, it immediately caught the public's attention. With the exception of the occasional, generally low-budget web series, the only place one could go to watch new TV was the TV set. Upon *House of Cards*' success, Netflix was quick to release more original content, and Amazon Prime and Hulu's streaming services, which launched at similar times as Netflix, also began to release original programming.

Netflix's release strategy for its television shows (both original and acquired) was conducive to a new form of TV consumption. Instead of releasing one episode a week, Netflix would release entire seasons all at one time, allowing entire shows to be watched at the leisure of the viewer. "Binge-watching," as it came to be called, involved the rapid, successive watching of entire shows in short amounts of time, and is one of the biggest contributors to American culture in the 21st century (Rattner, 2014). One 2018 poll indicated that approximately 63% of TV watchers ages 18-29 will habitually binge episodes of a series at least once a week (Sabin, 2018).

Binge-watching, as well as the online culture surrounding it, also contributed to a major trend that emerged in the 2010s: the rise of "nerd culture." For a long time, sci-fi and fantasy programming was generally categorized as a part of the "cult" TV genre, much because fanbases of most of these shows were small but vocal. Sci-fi and fantasy shows generally did not get widespread attention, nor consideration during awards season. This all changed with the 2011 premiere of HBO's phenomenon show, *Game of Thrones*. A fantasy drama based on a popular book series by George R.R. Martin, *Thrones* portrayed an ensemble cast of characters in conflict with one another to

win the throne of fictional kingdom Westeros. Famous for its liberal use of sex, violence and plot twists, *Thrones* appealed to casual drama viewers and hardcore fantasy fans alike, quickly becoming one of the most popular series of the 21st century.

*Game of Thrones*' popularity came around the same time as other similar sci-fi and fantasy properties were gaining cultural steam in other media, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the *Harry Potter* series. All of these combined to create a "pro-nerd" cultural environment in the 2010s, which caused a higher supply and demand for sci-fi and fantasy shows, which also began to be commonly seen as their own genre. This later paved the way for highly popular sci-fi and fantasy shows such as *Stranger Things*, *The Flash*, and *The Walking Dead* to emerge to large audiences. What this acceptance of Television "nerd-dom" truly told us, however, is that not only had television completed its 50-year journey from time-waster (think: the "boob tube") to respectable artistic medium. That most people were willing to become intensely devoted to a certain TV show told us that most people thought that TV had something worth investing in.

By the 2010s, current TV was not just affecting culture as a whole; it was affecting the future of media as well. One final thing streaming platforms managed to radically change was the ratings system. Ratings, as mentioned previously, had long been the end-all be-all on the fate of a show. But as streaming services rapidly grew in popularity, this changed as well, for two main reasons.

Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime, the three largest streaming platforms, became known for hardly, if ever, releasing viewership data. This gave renewal decisions an air of mystery - and a sense of unimportance. This new laxity toward ratings began to spill over to cable channels as well. The second reason why ratings began to lose import in the 2010s was simply because

fewer people were watching network TV live anymore. Between DVR, next-day streaming on Hulu and network websites, and postseason streaming on other services, networks could no longer accurately gauge the actual level of public interest in any one show (Mitovich, 2017). Sometimes, shows would perform average or below in ratings initially, then gain large followings of people who streamed the show after its first season ended. This was the case for teen cult-hit *Riverdale*, which averaged a 0.5 in the demo in its first season, only to nearly double to 0.8 when its second premiered, likely due to many new fans picking up the show on Netflix over the summer (Otterson, 2017).

In addition to making “binge-watch” a common verb, the 2010s had some of the most direct impact on American communication to date. Stemming from event-like shows such as *Game of Thrones* that many people watched live, the decade saw the concept of “spoilers” becoming a cultural taboo; letting slip major plot twists (or eventually, even minor plot points) began to be seen as especially rude both on the internet and in real life. Much like the 90s, language used in and surrounding TV also became mainstream beyond the platform in which they originated. Terms like “cancelled” began to be used on the internet to refer to people or concepts that were “over” in the public eye, derived from the usage of the term in TV production.

In all, the 2010s were one of the most eventful decades for television since the medium began. Its effect on culture was becoming not only present, but pronounced. Likewise, fans of TV were becoming more and more of an influence on the decision-making both onscreen and behind the scenes of TV. Fans pushing for more representation of minority groups began to be heeded, and genres once pushed aside by networks and advertisers were now on the forefront of popular culture. Overall, the 2010s were a very public age for TV. With high levels of social media scrutiny, the level of TV consumption rising due to streaming services,

and fan engagement meaning more than ever, this decade all but proved that culture and TV were each integral to the development of the other.

### The Greater Question: Is TV Dying?

Ask a hundred people about television, and you used to get a hundred different answers. More recently, however, a lot of people have been beginning to say the same thing: TV is dying. With the dawn of the internet age, average TV ratings have plummeted down on average year-to-year. Studies show that viewers have been spending more time on social media, and less watching network TV than ever before (Guerrero, 2018). A 2009 NPR report depicted the TV industry as standing on failing legs, saying: “It may not be long before broadcasters go back to Congress, hats in hands, looking for a way to save over-the-air television again. Only next time, they may not find one.” (*Analog TV is dead. Is digital TV dying?* 2009). But if TV is so closely connected to culture, how could this be possible?

Most people claiming that TV is dead are looking at TV as the same medium that they have previously experienced. This is not an irrational way of seeing the situation; after all, movies, television’s closest relative, are still composed, criticised and (in many ways) consumed the same way they have been for years. On the other hand, though, TV is a much more fluid art form than writing or movies.

It could also be argued, though, that all mediums, including TV, are connected to culture in the same way. It is true that movies have also impacted culture in many ways, and music has evolved with the changing of culture, and it is certainly true that TV is not the only impactful method of storytelling we have. However, TV is an extraordinarily unique way of telling stories, and that uniqueness lends itself to a closer relationship with the individual than any other medium. Television stories are not bound by time in the way that other mediums are; most

mediums are intended to be consumed over a certain number of minutes, like music, hours, like films, or a certain number of days, like books. TV, however, is meant to be consumed over a number of months, or even years. TV is meant to grow with the consumer, changing in the way that they change, constantly reflecting what they experience.

TV's relationship to us cannot be measured in the same way that other media can. For one, TV is more temperamental; its relationship to consumer reaction is more crucial to its survival than other forms of art. But this special kind of relationship is, in many ways, mutual. If the evolutionary path of TV has shown us anything over the years, it is that there is a growing need for longer, more immersive stories, ones with episodic tropes and boundaries, but that tell a more-in depth, "real" story. Commonly, calling something the "heart" of something else indicates that it is central to the existence of that thing. TV cannot claim to be the heart of American culture - it's still a relatively new medium, having just learned it has any value whatsoever. No, TV is not the heart of American culture. It is too vitally connected to American culture as it is today to be even a heart. TV is America's new brain; constantly receiving input, adjusting to stimuli, forming thoughts, and keeping the rest of the body running subconsciously. And it's not dying - it's thinking ahead; it's planning for the future

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