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Golden Age of TV

Abstract

"We live at the intersection of several important events: the rise of the TV serial, the self-assertion of cable networks, the advent of streaming and binge-watching. What does all this change and even power shift mean?"

Posting about television and movies from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-golden-age-of-tv/>

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The Golden Age of TV

 [all in allthings.org/the-golden-age-of-tv](http://allthings.org/the-golden-age-of-tv)

Howard Schaap

Going around the room, the answers were probably somewhat predictable, but nowhere near uniform. *What are you watching right now?* I asked this question to the English profs sitting around the pod and the answers I got were birdshot: [The Good Wife](#), [The Americans](#), [The First 48](#), [Downton Abbey](#), [Battlestar Galactica](#), [Breaking Bad](#), [The A-Team](#) (that one's mine—the kids love it; I'm not sure what that says about anything).

Friends of mine not from the academic world were lately promoting to me shows they have watched: [Longmire](#), [Hell on Wheels](#), [Parks and Rec](#), [The Office](#). Interestingly, one of these shows, *Hell on Wheels*, overlapped with a quick student survey I took about TV shows students are watching: [New Girl](#), [Californication](#), [Game of Thrones](#), [Portlandia](#), [Peaky Blinders](#), *Hell on Wheels*. Sample size for this survey? One student. In other venues, too, I've come across shows such as [Rectify](#), [Six Feet Under](#), [Luther](#). The list goes on and on.

And that's the point. The TV libraries of all of us seem to be suddenly bursting at the seams. "We're living in the golden age of TV," said a novelist on a writers panel at my MFA program last year. The panel was considering the question, *How do writers avoid the time-suck of social media and internet streaming in order to write?* This writer's answer: when it comes to TV, why would you want to? TV, streamed or unstreamed, has never been finer.

It's not that there's not controversy around TV. Recently, *Christianity Today* noted the divide over the *History Channel's* drama [Vikings](#). Is it enough history? Does it portray Christianity and paganism accurately—and fairly? My sister describes *Game of Thrones*, a show she's dedicated to, as "soul-killing," and the aforementioned student, when he considered the show, interpreted "soul-killing" to mean "bleak—evil wins. A lot." In the department, we debate the effect on the culture of binge-watching as opposed to fabric-of-your-week-watching. Recent sitcoms like [Blackish](#) and [Fresh off the Boat](#), meanwhile, have started conversations about wider cultural representation on television.

But controversy means conversation, and the same kind of conversation does not seem to be taking place around film, a fact signaled by the recent [Oscars](#), which Neal Patrick Harris dubbed a celebration of Hollywood's "best and whitest." Even the patterns of the Academy Awards this year seemed to nod to the revolution in TV. Arguably, two of the nominees for best picture—[Boyhood](#) and [Birdman](#)—took their cues from TV via negativa. "What can film do in three hours that TV can't do?" these films ask. Their answers: a twelve-year life span and one long take. (Given, *Boyhood* got its inspiration before this new age of TV, so it can hardly be said to "take its cues" from TV, but in critical hindsight those sorts of accidents never matter).

Other major themes to this year's *Oscars* were characters on the rise or in demise, hardly new themes on either account—except when you compare them to the long form development of TV characters. Both best actor and best actress went to roles that portrayed characters in physical demise, something that a viewer probably wouldn't care to watch take place over several years of a show. The way film does character, as one of my colleagues puts it, is "film's short story to TV's novel." It's interesting—even quaint—to watch a meteoric character rise or demise in two short hours, now that we've come to expect years and years of [Don Draper](#).

What does all this change and even power shift mean? Certainly, we live at the intersection of several

important events: the rise of the TV serial, the self-assertion of cable networks, the advent of streaming and binge-watching. One can imagine how scholars will trace—and are tracing—this through specific shows—[Lost](#), [The Sopranos](#), [Breaking Bad](#)—as well as through technology and market turns.

But the flowering of TV also calls for more conversations—about what we watch but more importantly, perhaps, about how we watch and why we watch. About what kind of stories we gravitate toward and what those stories say about us and how those stories shape us.

Last week at Dordt we screened a local film. It's a film that Hollywood can't do because it's local—it gets into the place like a film crew from somewhere else on a tight time schedule and budget can't get into a place. It's a good film, one that feels uncontrolled by moneyed interests, though someone somewhere is no doubt holding a bag. It feels like the kind of film that says Hollywood might be changing, that if enough people can make local films and find audiences for those films, then the Hollywood pie might be carved up in more and more democratic—or, more realistically, representative republic—pieces. This is also what film can do—tell local stories in local places—and it might be the counterpart in film of the bouquet effect that has happened in TV: more stories told better reaching wider and more diverse audiences.

Perhaps the Golden Age of TV, if that's indeed what we are in, will also help change film for the better, will enrich our lives by telling more complex and more complete stories about a diverse humanity and diverse world. If so, then we as Christians need to join this conversation, or, to fit the metaphor, we need to smell and appreciate the diverse scents of the bouquet.

Readers of iAt: How about you? What are you watching? How are you watching? And why?