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“WITH 22 EPISODES A YEAR”:
SEARCHING FOR QUALITY IN US NETWORK TELEVISION: THE CASES
OF *THE GOOD WIFE*, *BROOKLYN NINE-NINE* AND *JANE THE VIRGIN*¹

Abstract

The notion of “quality television” has been endlessly revised over the last three decades. Given the medium’s technological, institutional, economic and aesthetic evolution, various scholars have probed and explored its forms of quality, focusing especially on the US scenario, a notable forerunner and leader in the development and international distribution of TV shows.

Applied to the American industry, this ever-evolving definition has some recurrent features that make it a sort of “super-genre”, a label for TV series that share some elements of “prestige”. Concentrating on the US scenario, where nowadays “quality” mainly tends to be a label for cable series, this paper aims to identify those prestige features and to answer the question: is there such a thing as quality network television in a cable-dominated market?

After establishing a theoretical framework by tracing how the notion of quality television has evolved, the article focuses on three contemporary case studies: CBS’s *The Good Wife*, The CW’s *Jane the Virgin* and Fox’s *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. We see how these three series share some aesthetic and narrative tropes that exploit broadcast television’s weaknesses and restrictions to appeal to a certain upscale audience, resulting in critical acclaim and awards.

In conclusion, we argue that several characteristics of quality cable television can be applied to a wave of network television productions that, although based on the standard formats of broadcast storytelling, are critically comparable to more acclaimed shows, ultimately fitting into the prestige series super-genre.

Keywords

Quality television; audience; network television; TV series.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of quality television, one of the most debated in the field of Television Studies, has undergone endless revisions over the last three decades. Given the manifold technological, institutional, economic and aesthetic evolution of the medium, diverse scholars questioned and explored its forms of quality. While now we can find numerous analysis on national cases², a great part of early and seminal studies pertain to the US

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¹ The essay was conceived and developed by the authors in close collaboration. However, as regards the draft of single sections, Paola Brembilla wrote sections 1, 2 and 3; Lucia Tralli wrote sections 4 and 5; sections *Introduction* and *Conclusions* were written jointly.

² For instance, on the Italian case, see L. Barra, M. Scaglioni (eds.), *Tutta un'altra fiction. La serialità pay in Italia e nel mondo. Il modello Sky*, Rome: Carocci, 2013. As for European TV series, see V. Innocenti,

scenario, notably a forerunner and leader in the development and international distribution of TV products. Over the years, these studies have taken into consideration diverse factors in the definition of quality in the US TV industry. Although a quite heterogeneous area, we have observed that this ever-evolving definition bears some recurrent features that make quality television a sort of 'super-genre'. As Sarah Cardwell argues, in fact, to label something as quality television is like making a generic classification because we are talking about "texts that, although different, belong together in some way"³. However, recently, most of these theories tend to talk about US prestige shows in relation to the basic and, above all, premium cable markets, overlooking other forms of quality that, in our opinion, could still fit that super-genre.

Economically speaking, the quality super-genre is about a group of products that target a certain audience segment and, in order to achieve it, deploy a range of narrative and aesthetic tropes that up the overall production and cultural value of the series itself. It is therefore no surprise that, thanks to advantageous institutional policies, abundant revenue streams and smart branding strategies, the quality label is nowadays commonly applied to cable and over-the-top television. However, it is also true that some network series raise above the common broadcast television standards to be acclaimed as qualitative relevant for many and different reasons. So, what are these reasons? In other words, how can some network series achieve the quality status in a cable-dominated market? This paper aims to answer this question.

In section one we will retrace the evolution of the notion of quality television applied to the US scenario, and highlight its recurring traits in order to retain some main points and to establish a theoretical framework for our own examination. After presenting the three case studies, in section three, four and five we will dwell on what we will identify as their 'quality features', i.e. a range of aesthetic and narrative tropes that, making the best of broadcast television's weaknesses and restrictions, aim to appeal to a certain audience and to result into critical acclaim and awards recognition.

In the end, we will argue that several characteristics of the US quality cable television can actually be applied to a wave of network television productions that, although based on the standard formats of broadcast storytelling, could be critically compared to more acclaimed shows, ultimately fitting into the prestige series super-genre.

2. QUALITY TELEVISION: A RECAP

In 1984, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi argue for a 'quality factor' that characterises the TV series produced by independent production company MTM Enterprise⁴. Their starting point is a demographic thinking policy targeting young urban adults that gradually spreads during the 60s and takes over during the 70s⁵. During this period, the

A. Auteliano (eds.), *Cinema and Cié. International Film Studies Journal – European TV Series*, 19 (2012). Regarding the exchanges between quality television in the UK and the US, see E. Weissman, *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence Between the US and UK*, Abingdon-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

³ S. Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, edited by K. Akass, J. McCabe, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, 25.

⁴ J. Feuer, P. Kerr, T. Vahimagi (eds.), *MTM: "Quality Television"*, London: BFI Publications, 1984.

⁵ Cfr. M. Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies": Quality Demographics and 1960s US Television", *Television. The Critical View* (7th ed.), edited by H. Newcomb, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 15-36.

three networks stress the composition of the audience, rather than the sole aggregate number, in order to fulfill a relevance drive meant to draw quality viewers with high disposable income. They do so by relying on various MTM's productions that champion 'creative difference', 'reflexiveness', and 'progressiveness'⁶. Feuer describes them as liberal and upscale, constantly seeking the 'quality' look for film and giving its creative staff an unusual amount of freedom. This strategy aim to suggest the image of MTM as a quality producer that "serves to differentiate its programs from the anonymous flow of television's discourse and to classify its texts as a unified body of work"⁷.

In 1996, Robert J. Thompson looked back at the end of the 80s to notice how "pressed into the deployment of target marketing strategies by the proliferation of cable services, network TV began to introduce a new type of complex and sophisticated programming aimed directly at an upscale audience"⁸. Thompson therefore introduces the competition-factor, arguing that broadcast networks, through series such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), *M*A*S*H** (CBS, 1972-1983), *Twin Peaks* (Fox, 1990-1991), *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005) and *ER* (NBC, 1993-2002), initiate what he names the Second Golden Age of Television, a period that spans from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s. During this period "quality [drama] has become a genre in itself, complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics"⁹, including ensemble cast and multi-strand narrative, genre hybridization, self-consciousness, realism and controversial themes, a prestige pedigree and, again, a turn to desirable blue-chip demographics. All of these characteristics results into awards and critical acclaim. But, most of all, quality television during the Second Golden Age tends to be defined by what it is not: it is not 'regular' TV¹⁰.

In 2003, Kristin Thompson analysed this period's productions from the narrative and aesthetics standpoints, asking whether there is such thing as 'art television'. The answer is yes, if the shows taken into consideration do conform to the main characteristics of art cinema¹¹. Her examples include *Twin Peaks* and *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-), as clear-out cases of programs that contain such elements and incorporate different levels of appeal, combining the artistic and the commercial to differentiate themselves from the rest of television.

Four years later, after the consolidation of HBO as a leader in the pay TV market, a collection edited by Kim Akass and Janet McCabe¹² casts a light on cable programming as the ultimate outpost of quality television – along with players that gained prominence later on, such as basic cable channel AMC¹³. In their chapter, Akass and McCabe tie the

⁶ Feuer, Kerr, Vahimagi, "Introduction", in *MTM: "Quality Television"*, X; Feuer, "MTM Enterprise: An Overview", in *MTM: "Quality Television"*, 2-3. Among more than 40 original programs, we can list *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), *The Bob Newhart Show* (CBS, 1972-1978), *The Betty White Show* (NBC, 1977-1978), *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988).

⁷ Feuer, "The MTM Style", in *MTM: "Quality Television"*, 32-33.

⁸ R.J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, New York: Continuum, 1996, 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹¹ K. Thompson takes into consideration the five major traits typical of the art-cinema mode listed by David Bordwell: "a loosening of causality, a greater emphasis on psychological or anecdotal realism, violations of classical clarity of space and time, explicit authorial comment, and ambiguity". K. Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television*, New York-London: Harvard University Press, 2003, 110.

¹² Akass, McCabe (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*.

¹³ On the quality programming of AMC, see A.N. Smith, "Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC's Original Drama Series", *Television & New Media*, 14, 2 (2013): 150-163. Accessed May 24, 2015, DOI: 10.1177/1527476411418537.

main characteristics of HBO's programs to its institutional and industrial background: no FCC restrictions, no commercials and no advertisers, paid access to content. As a consequence, "doing things differently, setting itself against what is prohibited on network television, emerges as a crucial institutional strategy"¹⁴. This strategy aims to create a brand identity and a niche orientation perfectly embodied by the channel's catchphrase "It's Not Television. It's HBO". From the aesthetic point of view, Sara Cardwell lists the characteristics of cable quality: "high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music"¹⁵. But it is Jane Feuer that, reminding that in the 70s and 80s the distinction from 'regular' television was at the core of MTM quality strategy as well, argues that "to the US television industry [...] the term quality describes the demographics of the audience. Delivering a quality audience means delivering whatever demographics advertisers seek or, in the case of premium cable, attracting an audience with enough disposable income to pay extra for TV"¹⁶.

Though this short literature survey does not account for everything that has been said and written on quality television, it nevertheless brings to the fore some main points. First, each era, with its own industrial strategies and cultural and aesthetic values, has created the setting for the surge and spreading of its specific kind of quality. Second, the notion of quality television seems therefore to embody an array of contingent specificities that ultimately come to determine what is acknowledged as a certain qualitative evaluation in a given period of time. As Todd Van Der Werff puts it: "The dirty little secret here is that essentially every decade except the 1960s has been proclaimed the 'golden age of TV' at one time or another"¹⁷. Third, the definition seems to always work on a comparison basis, i.e. quality television is not 'regular' television, it is something better on many levels. As Michael Newman and Elana Levine argue: "discourses of legitimation are premised upon cultural hierarchies and hierarchies of all kinds require the denigration of some to justify the elevation of others. In the case of television it is not other media that suffer this denigration. Rather, it is certain kinds of television that are denigrated, dismissed, or ignored"¹⁸. Fourth, because of the three afore-mentioned points, the quality television label has been shifting from certain network television series to certain cable series and players that have up television standards (premium channels HBO and Showtime, but also basic channels like FX and AMC, along with the new OTT entrants Netflix and Amazon Prime).

However we deem it necessary to acknowledge that history is once again repeating itself, as network television is still responding to this competition by creating series that could fit the quality label. Notoriously, US network television is characterised by institutional and commercial constraints that include content restrictions (free-to-air transmissions do entail the control of the FCC over obscenity, indecency and profanity), ad-

¹⁴ Akass, McCabe, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability. Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, 66.

¹⁵ Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement", 25-26.

¹⁶ Feuer, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, 147.

¹⁷ T. Van Der Werff, "The Golden Age of TV is Dead. Long Live the Golden Age of TV". *The A.V. Club*, September 20, 2013. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/article/the-golden-age-of-tv-is-dead-long-live-the-golden--103129>.

¹⁸ M.Z. Newman, E. Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*, New York: Routledge, 2012, 36.

vertisers' meddling, budgetary limits and outworn narrative structures that require plot climaxes and cliffhangers before commercial breaks¹⁹. Nevertheless, the three series we are about to examine, found their unique ways to bypass the weaknesses and reputation of network television through carefully-crafted narrative tropes that contribute to foster social discourses and critical appraisal.

3. THE CASE STUDIES: WHAT AND WHY

In January 2015, Noel Murray writes about the rise of the so-called 'mid-reputable TV', that stands in between 'prestige' shows ("heavy themes, high production values, accomplished actors") and 'trash' TV ("dumb jokes and hammy performances"). Network TV series such as *Sleepy Hollow* (FOX 2013-), *Arrow* (The CW, 2012-) or *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-) fits this category, as they have fervent following, including among TV critics, but they are not major players in the awards race. What Murray argues is that these shows do qualify as quality television, but are not perceived 'prestige' – that is, they are not considered worth of intense scrutiny over plot, style and coded messages. This, however, does not apply to all network shows, as some of them seem to have reached, on different levels, that prestige status²⁰. We would like to focus on three of them: *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-, hereafter TGW), a serialized legal drama created by Robert and Michelle King and supported by the names of Ridley and late Tony Scott as executive producers; *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (FOX, 2013-, hereafter B99), a single-camera cop comedy created by *Parks and Recreation*'s alumni Dan Goor and Michael Shur; and *Jane the Virgin* (The CW, 2014-, hereafter JTV), a serial comedy-drama loosely based on Venezuelan telenovela *Juana la Virgen* (RCTV, 2002), created by Perla Fariás and developed for U.S. television by Jennie Snyder Urman.

We found that these series share three elements that generally recur into the quality television discourses, elements that foster that "intense scrutiny over plot, style and coded messages"²¹, ultimately contributing to bestow a prestige aura on the show. As we are about to see, these elements are:

1. narrative complexity achieved through intertextuality, genre hybridization and social engagement;
2. the appeal to segmented, upscale and valuable audiences;
3. critical acclaim and awards recognition.

¹⁹ On the correlations and interplays between institutional/economic constraints and narrative formats in U.S. TV series, see A. Smith (2011), "Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC's Original Drama Series"; A. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2nd ed.), New York: New York University Pressbook, 2014.

²⁰ N. Murray, "Not Prestige. Not Trash. The Rise of 'Mid-Reputable' TV". *The A.V. Club*, January 5, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/article/not-prestige-not-trash-rise-mid-reputable-tv-213058>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

4. “YES, THIS REALLY HAPPENS. LOOK IT UP”: NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY THROUGH INTERTEXTUALITY, GENRE HYBRIDIZATION AND SOCIAL DISCOURSES

Intertextuality, cross and self-references, genres hybridization and serialization are some of the peculiarities of what Jason Mittell refer to as narrative complexity. This type of storytelling, he argues, has been trending in the past two decades in both broadcast and cable television and aims to offer an alternative to conventional television narratives²² – i.e. to differentiate from regular television. Let’s see how our case studies achieve this.

Talking about MTM, Jane Feuer notices a focus on the personal dimension of public issues, which connotes characters with a degree of complexity, along with a drive for intertextuality and self-referencing that tackle the nature of the medium itself. For instance, “in mocking ordinary television, *The Betty White Show* exempts itself and claims quality status”²³. In our cases, we could say that in detaching from ordinary television by mocking it or experimenting on genres and formats, our three shows exempts themselves and claim quality status.

B99 is basically a parody of cop shows that heavily relies on allusions and quotation. The series is framed by paratexts – promotional posters, promos, teasers, YouTube clips – that visually recall the style of regular cop shows. However, some details disturb that canon. For instance, the opening credits features a typical cop show score, but the short sequences meant to present the leading characters, feature the actors in hilarious situation. The episodes, that have both an anthology plot and a slight hint of running plot, combine parodic sketches and cutaway gags that, à la *Family Guy*, can be repurposed and distributed again as stand-alone videos (let alone the uncountable GIFs made by fans after every single episode airing, making B99 one of the most ‘giffable’ shows on TV at the time being). As parody frames the entire operation, intertextual references to pop culture amplify the ironic effects and play with the audience knowledge, from action and cop movies to TV series and pop icons like Terry Crews, who basically plays himself as Sergeant Terence “Terry” Jaffords²⁴. B99 seems therefore to provide a diverse range of reading levels: it is in fact a cop procedural, as we do have a case-of-the-week, but it is also a witty comedy that heavily plays the game of references with its audience, bestowing on the show an aura of unusual narrative complexity for a comedy.

A similar parodic operation on a TV genre is put into place by JTV, and taken to another level. Set into a Latino family and community, on the one hand JTV ironically detaches from telenovelas by making fun of its most basic tropes. For instance, in each episode there is a ‘latin lover narrator’ that duly recaps the story for the audience, also providing wit commentary through on-screen writings because the storylines are so over-complicated that no one can really keep up with them²⁵. But on the other, JTV also widely relies on that same overcomplicated narrative, as Jane’s story unfolds through

²² Cfr. J. Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York-London: New York University Press, 2015.

²³ Feuer, “The MTM Style”, 50-51.

²⁴ B99 relies on recurring quotations and allusions to *Donnie Brasco* and the *Die Hard* franchise. As for TV series, allusions span from Showtime’s *Dexter* to CBS’ classic *Cagney and Lacey*, which are the names to the twin daughters of Sergeant Terry Jaffords. Ironically, when CBS threatened to cancel the show in 1984, a group of viewers started a campaign to save it and called themselves *Viewers for Quality Television*.

²⁵ JTV’s narrator, played by professional voiceover artist Anthony Mendez, could be considered an effective character on the show. His role has in fact gained ample critical attention: see e.g. L. Hill, “How *Jane the Virgin* Is Redefining TV Narration”. *Vulture*, May 12, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, http://www.vulture.com/2015/05/jane-the-virgin-is-redefining-tv-narration.html?mid=facebook_vulture; S. Saraiya, “Why We Need Narrators: “Jane the Virgin Has the Best Voice-over on TV”, *Salon*, October 29, 2014. Accessed May

unrealistic and unlikely plot lines. In so doing, the show celebrates the telenovela culture as well, also thanks to characters like Rogelio de la Vega (Jaimie Camil) – a telenovela star who also happens to be the newly found father of protagonist Jane Villanueva (Gina Rodriguez), – and Jane’s abuela (Ivonne Coll) – an avid consumer of such shows. The result is a combination of both intertextual and metatextual references that revolve around the character of Jane, a disillusioned yet romantic modern girl who is suspended between an ironic detachment from the telenovela culture and a drive right towards it. However, allusions are not limited to the television world. The show has in fact been praised for addressing the issue of immigration reform during the episode aired on 2015 Martin Luther King’s Day. In *Chapter 10*, Jane’s grandmother lies unconscious at the hospital, but when the doctors find out that she is not a legal US citizen, they report her and inform her family that, as soon as she wakes up, she’d be deported. At this point, the narrator underlines the seriousness of it all and types on the screen: “Yes, this really happens. Look it up. #immigrationreform”.

This “personal dimension of public issues” can be observed more extensively in TGW. The CBS show is in fact packed with references to contemporary culture and stories ripped from the headlines. A good example is episode *Loser Edit*, aired on April 5th, 2015, which contains a major arc in which Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski) defends a gay couple in a lawsuit against a wedding planner who refused to work with them because of her Christian beliefs. Though the episode was shot in February, the airing results impressively well-timed as the states of Arkansas and Indiana made national headlines for supporting the rights of business owners to ignore laws conflicting with their religious views – the Religious Freedom Law. This is just one example of current issues timely tackled by the show, which range from NSA to college rape, from the Ferguson protests to musical remix and copyright infringement, from Anonymous to Bitcoin. This high degree of realism supports a structure that detaches from regular TV genres by blending the procedural episodic style of a legal show to a more layered and multifaceted drama where characters’ complexities are put in the foreground.

5. “A CULTURE THAT WANTS TO SEE THEMSELVES AS HEROES”.
AUDIENCES AND REPRESENTATION: WOMEN, POLITICS, ETHNICITY

As we have already stated, one of the selling points of quality television lies within its implied quality audience. As Jane Feuer states: “The appeal of [a quality] programme must be double-edged. It must appeal both to the ‘quality’ audience, a liberal, sophisticated group of upwardly mobile professionals; and it must capture a large segment of the mass audience as well [...]. The quality audience gets to separate itself from the mass audience and can watch TV without guilt, and without realising that the double-edged discourse they are getting is also ordinary TV”²⁴. In our three cases, the sophisticatedly-crafted narrative of the shows and their clever hybridization with popular television genres aim exactly to this kind of double-reaching.

In the TGW case, especially in the first seasons, the legal procedural format and the law-centered running plot of Alicia’s husband Peter (Chris Noth) trial and social redemption, somehow steers the overall narrative into a more-accessible and less-compli-

24, 2015. http://www.salon.com/2014/10/29/why_we_need_narrators_jane_the_virgin_has_the_best_voice_over_on_tv/.

²⁶ Feuer, “The MTM Style”, 56.

cated framework than what we see in the following seasons. As above-mentioned, *TGW* is a show where sensitive and difficult topics are often at the core of episodes’ plotlines, and while the series do not always let the ‘most liberal’ side win the legal battles, the core values of most of the characters (Alicia and the only female boss of the law firm, Diane Lockhart, are openly democrats) are built to appeal to a specific demographic. Besides the single episodes storylines made to appeal to a politically engaged audience, *TGW* managed to become, season after season, a compelling tale of a woman’s resilient struggle to achieve her goals, thus appealing to a fundamental segment of the audience that thoroughly expressed the lack of significant and well-written women characters in major TV shows. From being the passive victim of a politics and sex scandal to becoming an experienced lawyer, from being nominated Junior associate of a law firm to starting her own law firm, to, finally, starting a political career, Alicia Florrick’s work-related and personal journey (a broken family, a possible divorce, a bad-timed complicated love relationship with one of her bosses, Will Gardner), is the main selling point of the show.

JTV’s appeal is somehow builded on the same ground: woman-led with an ensemble cast of many women with a considerable age diversity, it tells the story of a profoundly likeable – whereas Alicia’s is frequently more ambivalent – young woman, that struggles when faced with an unthinkable turn on her already well-planned life. JTV’s most appealing element, though, it’s the casting of almost all latino actors to play the main characters. Even if the telenovela-inspired plots and settings of the story are oftentimes used as ironically driven comedy stunts, the culture and context from which they emerged are never mocked nor mistreated. Even the Villanuevas’ passion for telenovelas is portrayed with affection. The attempt to catch a different audience – namely soap operas and telenovelas spectators – is clear with the casting of telenovela-famous actor Jaime Camil, who plays the part of telenovela star Rogelio De La Vega.

As for B99, one of the main selling point of the show is the legacy of SNL’s alumni Andy Samberg, whose fame is tied with his eight-years job as part of the live comedy show. Nowadays, SNL former stars are spreading all around TV and Hollywood, usually with great results: Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Seth Meyers, Maya Rudolph, Jimmy Fallon, Jason Sudeikis, Kristen Wiig, Bill Hader, just to name a few, are linked with many successful projects, and B99 has certainly made capital of this by using a SNL-esque comedy tone in many occasion. Besides its clear focus on a young, witty and liberal audience, that would seek for that kind of piercing and clever comedy, B99 also plays the card of a openly diverse cast in which Samberg is almost the only white male, ‘although’ an Italian-American. The rest of the main cast includes two latino female characters (Rosa Diaz and Amy Santiago), Jake’s best friend, African-American, heart of gold bodybuilder Terry, Italian-Americans Charles Boyle and Gina Linetti, and their leader, homosexual African-American Captain Holt.

What these shows have certainly in common is their adamant capitalization of such specific niche audiences, which on the one hand can be easily marketed to adequate sponsors, and on the other can contribute to bestow the prestige aura on the shows as MTM’s shows used to do in the 80s: they compensated low ratings with the quality of their audiences, marking the shift from ‘mass’ to ‘class’.

6. “BEST SHOW EVER”. AWARDS AND CRITICAL APPRAISAL

For shows such as our three cases, awards can prove to be quite effective not only in the ‘quality narrative’ build around them by the network, but also as an attractive lure for

an audience that is now almost overwhelmed by new content each TV season. If a new show starts by winning an important award very early, this will likely mean an immediate increase in popularity and therefore higher renewal chances.

TGW, which has just ended its sixth season, has an impressive score of awards and nominations, that started just after the first season: 148 nominations and 26 wins, including 7 for Julianna Margulies as Leading Actress, one for almost any season (Golden Globes 2009, SAGA 2010 and 2011, Emmy 2011 and 2014). The series also landed several nominations as Best Drama (e.g. Emmy 2010, 2011, 2012 and Golden Globes 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014), winning the People's Choice Award as Favorite Network TV Drama in 2014.

As in the case of TGW, both JTV and B99 gained a lot of attention by winning several important nominations and awards just after their first season wrapped up. In the case of JTV, the Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series - Musical or Comedy was given to the show's main star, Gina Rodriguez, after just half of the series was aired. The show also won the People's Choice Awards for Favorite New TV Comedy in 2015. B99 also scored two important awards after its first season in 2014, Golden Globes for Best Television Series - Musical or Comedy and Best Actor for its protagonist, Andy Samberg.

Gina Rodriguez gave a passionate acceptance speech after her Emmy winning (the first award assigned to a Latina actress in eight years), in which she pointed out that her award "represents a culture that wants to see themselves as heroes"²⁷. Rodriguez has frequently been praised for her choice to portray Jane and not another 'latina maid' character on television ("I found it limiting to see women of my skin color only playing very specific roles as though Latino stories are different"²⁸), and her star persona is gaining an immense popularity while she has been featured in almost every magazine worldwide²⁹. During interviews and media events, she often recalls why her role as Jane in JTV and her – and fellow latino cast members – presence in the TV industry is making a huge impact on a notoriously underrepresented community. Besides the attention given to representation issues, the overall press and critics reactions to the series has been remarkably positive: from a general appraisal of its complex and compelling narrative despite its ridiculous plot ("How the silliest show on TV became an endearing must-watch"³⁰), to an unexpected recognition and commendation for its portrayal of women and gender issues, even in the feminist-oriented press and media ("The unexpected miracle of 'Jane the Virgin': Her surprisingly realistic television pregnancy"; "'Jane the Virgin' Has a Surprisingly Progressive Take on Sex"; "'Jane The Virgin' Did the Damn Thing and Discussed Abortion"³¹).

²⁷ L. Hernandez, "Why Gina Rodriguez Is the Golden Globes' Biggest Winner", *Huffington Post Latino Voices*, January 1, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lee-hernandez/gina-rodriguez_b_6456964.html.

²⁸ L. Goldberg, "'Jane the Virgin' Star Gina Rodriguez Wants to Be the Latino Meryl Streep", *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 22, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/jane-virgins-gina-rodriguez-wants-726918>.

²⁹ Among them, R. Buxton, "Gina Rodriguez's Wonderful Wisdom On Body Image", *Huffingtonpost*, April 21, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/21/gina-rodriguez-body-image_n_7104118.html; J. Miller, "'Jane the Virgin's' Gina Rodriguez on Breaking Ethnic Stereotypes and Her Golden Globe Nomination", *Vanity Fair*, December 16, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/12/jane-the-virgin-gina-rodriguez-interview>

³⁰ C. Bell, "How 'Jane The Virgin' Pulled Off A Near-Perfect First Season", *MTV News*, May 13, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2158633/jane-the-virgin-perfect-season>

³¹ H. Steinkop, "'Jane the Virgin' Has a Surprisingly Progressive Take on Sex". *Bitch Media*, Decem-

As for B99, the critics went from a lukewarm reception of the pilot and first episodes (“So-so Fox comedy will test Andy Samberg’s appeal beyond ‘SNL’ digital shorts”³²), to openly praise it after the Golden Globe winning and the second part of the first season (“How ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’ Became This Year’s Hottest New Sitcom”³³). Moreover, while the official ratings for the show have always been somehow low, media commentators have started to openly express their affection for a show that ‘everybody should be watching but isn’t’ (“Have you been watching ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’?”³⁴). B99 presentation in the media seems to follow the pattern of the ‘misunderstood gem’, the one that the public has yet to acknowledge. As for TGW, the show is probably one of the most revered show on television: it has also been featured on media outlet such as *The New Yorker* among others established art-TV show such as *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2’15) or *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-)³⁵. The press insists on many appealing quality aspects of the show, from its take on politics (“What ‘The Good Wife’ gets so brilliantly right about American politics”³⁶) to its unique investment in discussing religion and atheism³⁷, from its subtle and high-brow work on costumes³⁸, to its impressive cast ensemble of well-rounded, complex and unpredictable female characters³⁹.

As Jonathan Gray asserts, “[r]ather than simply point us toward shows worth watching, reviews can tell us how to watch those shows, and hence what those shows are. As paratexts, reviews help to create texts, occupying the all-important gray area between encoding and the production of the work, and decoding and the production of the text”⁴⁰ As JTV, B99 and TGW navigates the troubled waters of broadcast-quality television, reviews and critics all played along to establish these shows’ status as com-

ber 3, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/jane-the-virgin-has-a-surprisingly-open-minded-take-on-sex>; “Jane the Virgin Paves the Way For Better Diversity on TV”, *The Mary Sue*, March 16, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.themarysue.com/jane-the-virgin-diversity-on-tv/>; J. Escobedo Shepherd, “Jane the Virgin Did the Damn Thing and Discussed Abortion”, *The Muse*, February 11, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://themuse.jezebel.com/jane-the-virgin-did-the-damn-thing-and-discussed-aborti-1685181887>; C. Framke, “The unexpected miracle of ‘Jane the Virgin’: Her Surprisingly Realistic Television Pregnancy”. *Salon*, February 17, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/02/17/the_unexpected_miracle_of_jane_the_virgin_her_surprisingly_realistic_telehhvision pregnancy.

³² B. Lowry, “TV Review: ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’”, *Variety*, September 11, 2013. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://variety.com/2013/tv/reviews/brooklyn-nine-nine-tv-review-1200605009/>

³³ K. Fallon, “How ‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’ Became This Year’s Hottest New Sitcom”, *The Daily Beast*, January 31, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/31/how-brooklyn-nine-nine-became-this-year-s-hottest-new-sitcom.html>.

³⁴ G. Virtue, “Have You Been Watching ... Brooklyn Nine-Nine?”, *The Guardian*, March 28, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/mar/28/have-you-been-watching-brooklyn-nine-nine-e4-review>.

³⁵ J. Rothman, “The Greatness of ‘The Good Wife’”, *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-greatness-of-the-good-wife>.

³⁶ M. Ambinder, “What *The Good Wife* Gets so Brilliantly Right about American Politics”. *The Week*, November 18, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://theweek.com/articles/442100/what-good-wife-gets-brilliantly-right-about-american-politics>

³⁷ R. Lizik, “The Good Wife’s Religion Politics: Voters Have No Faith in Alicia’s Atheism”. *The Daily Beast*, November 23, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/11/23/the-good-wife-s-religion-politics-voters-have-no-faith-in-alicia-s-atheism.html>.

³⁸ S. Clott Kanter, “The Good Wife: Your Inside Look at the Costume Department!”, *In Style*, September 30, 2012. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.instyle.com/news/good-wife-your-inside-look-costume-department>; E. Vincentelli, “‘Good Wife’ Costume Designer Talks Julianna Margulies’ Looks”, *New York Post*, October 20, 2014. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2014/10/20/good-wife-costume-designer-talks-julianna-margulies-looks/>.

³⁹ J. Hoffman, “‘The Good Wife’ and Its Women”, *The New York Times*, April 29, 2011. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/fashion/01CULTURAL.html>.

⁴⁰ J. Gray, “The Reviews Are In. TV Critics and the (Pre)Creation of Meaning”, in *Flow TV. Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, edited by M. Kackman et. al., New York-London: Routledge, 2011, 125.

plex, witty, well-written, ambiguous, morally challenging, social and context-aware, that ‘happen’ to be on broadcast but should be really considered more than that. As Elizabeth Wurtzel puts in her *The Guardian* take on the show: “Mad Men has the buzz – but *The Good Wife* is a better show⁴¹”.

7. CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this paper, we asked how could some network series achieve the quality status in a cable-dominated market. The state of literature on quality television helped us set the basics: quality is generally a label applied to what is not ‘regular’ television. Every time specific economic, technological and institutional circumstances foster the creation of new narrative and aesthetic standards, a process of legitimation based on hierarchies is put into place – in the 70s, MTM productions were better than other network series; in the 80s and 90s, the Second Golden Age proved that many more network series could be better than others; from the 00s on, cable series were better than all broadcast shows put together, except for some scattered cases. Although the broadcast model is gradually evolving (we are in fact witnessing more and more straight-to-series orders for shorter series or so-called mini-series events), we believe that B99, TGW and JTV still stand as good example of how these scattered cases have bent the restrictions and reputation of broadcast television in their favor, by keeping broadcast series standards (22 episodes a year, the respect of FCC regulations, advertisers’ meddling) and then working on them to try different narrative, structural and aesthetic tropes that allowed them to target upscale and knowledgeable audiences, while at the same time receiving critical acclaim and award recognition.

As history repeats itself, we are not witnessing a brand-new phenomenon: the same quality strategy we have highlighted in these contemporary shows, can actually be traced back to the MTM strategies. What is new here is a media scenario where competition is higher and where audiences are pre-segmented into specific niches, besides a more open-minded social context where gender, race diversity and inclusivity are more and more core-issues in political agendas.

We believe that our cases prove that quality television can live inside more ‘regular’ television formulas as long as they experiment and push the boundaries of standard forms of narrative and storytelling. Indeed, if the quality television super-genre encompasses features such as distinction, legitimation, high-production value, sophisticated storytelling, narrative complexity and niche-targeting, the three shows we analysed could rightfully claim that prestige label even in the infamously ill-suited context of network television even with 22 episodes a year⁴².

⁴¹ E. Wurtzel, “*Mad Men* Has the Buzz – but *The Good Wife* Is a Better Show”, *The Guardian*, April 13, 2015. Accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/apr/13/mad-men-good-wife-alicia-florrick-don-draper>.

⁴² From Julianna Margulies 2014 Emmy acceptance speech: “What a wonderful time for women on television. And all the women that I’m nominated with here tonight is such a testament to that. But truly, this belongs to Robert and Michelle King; all our writers, who never cease to amaze me with 22 episodes a year”.