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The Rise of Auteur Television

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By Jonathan Williams | June 1, 2017 | Main



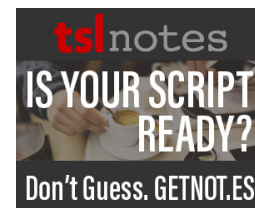
More and more we see film becoming a marketing medium. Bigger and bigger tentpoles rising up, spawning franchises aimed at selling everything from toys, clothes, Halloween costumes, and even Pineapples (that's right, I recently saw a *Star Wars* branded pineapple). This has made it difficult for auteur directors to rise up and secure funding for their films. While there are a couple of exceptions to that rule – directors like Steven Spielberg, Ridley Scott, Christopher Nolan, Martin Scorsese and Tim Burton, who seem to have their pick of the litter when pursuing feature projects – the club has become increasingly elite in a risk averse industry driven by marketing, and behemoth opening weekends.

Meanwhile, the past decade has been touted as the Golden Age of television. As writers, the common rule of thumb is that TV is where the money is and, more importantly, where the creative control lies. It's become a place where artistry is applauded and risks are rewarded. There's no lingering concerns over toys sold and tickets counted, and unlike film, one canceled show does not necessarily signal the beginning of the end for a filmmaker's career.

It's no surprise then that recent years have signaled a diversion of auteur filmmakers into television. TV's always been lauded for its depth of storytelling and character, but until the past few years, it was rare for a show to truly stand out visually or in terms of directorial style. Sure, you had your *Twin Peaks*, and your *Sopranos*, but shows with such laser-focused vision were few and far between. Now, if anything, the opposite feels true. Flip on the TV these days, and it's hard to find something that isn't just as stylistically audacious as anything on the big screen. From last year's *The Young Pope*, to *The Leftovers*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *FARGO*, *American Gods*, *The Americans*, and of course *Twin Peaks*, TV has seemingly been dominated by incredibly stylistic shows that seem to suggest an increased level of authorship.

Look no further than Steven Soderbergh and his work on *The Knick*. Known for his ability to direct, shoot, and edit his own films, the two seasons of *The Knick* represent twenty hours of a singular vision on a level that's never quite been accomplished outside of something like a novel. His economical filmmaking is perfect for the nuance of character and storytelling the TV requires. *"He never covers the*

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action in a scene with ten or fifteen angles when just one or two will suffice." He knows when to shoot a climactic and sometimes violent scene from a wide-shot that may be more effective than using thescriptlab ath. Education Screenwriting Competitions News Store

And though his impact as a director was limited primarily to a couple of episodes, David Fincher's visual stylings have become the template for Netflix's *House of Cards*. "I felt like I didn't need to get particularly intricate or elaborate in terms of the staging. It's very rudimentary, very kind of primitive; it's simple." Fincher has stated. Though his notorious for a number of takes Fincher states that he, "averaged 35 setups a day and 14-15 takes a setup," something almost unheard of in television.

The old adage is that great direction ought to elevate great writing rather than prop up a mediocre screenplay. In film, we more often see the latter, whereas television is increasingly defined by the former. When great directors like Fincher and Soderbergh are unleashed in a sandbox like *House of Cards* or *The Knick*, with few creative constraints and a story genuinely worth telling, the results are obvious.

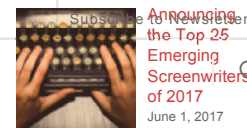
True Detective is another perfect example of this kind of elevation. The first season, which was written by Nic Pizzolatto and directed entirely by Cary Fukunaga, represented a perfect harmony between writing and direction. The second season, which removed Fukunaga in exchange for a revolving door of directors (the old standard for television), resulted in a story that felt out of balance, with the ying of Pizzolatto's writing missing the yang of Fukunaga's steady hand.

Evidence suggests that Soderberg and Fukunaga prefer the lower risk of TV even for their feature film work. Both directors have made wildly acclaimed for TV movies for HBO and Netflix which, once again, removed them from threats of studio interference or box office returns.

Then there are other directors who've found themselves ousted from the Hollywood for styles deemed too creatively-risky, have flocked to television. The Wachowskis are part of this group. Known for their outlandish visions and atypical storytelling, the Wachowskis have seen little success since *The Matrix*, though many of their subsequent films have gained impressive followings in their own right. This, combined with the cost of bringing their vision to the screen, has made them somewhat undependable in the current Hollywood landscape. Enter Netflix and *Sense8*, which provided the Wachowskis with the scale they needed to get their groove back. Now working in the realm of TV, the Wachowskis have found a home where they can expand and explore their philosophies without the dumbing down their sensibilities for mass appeal.

TV allows for the weird, the outlandish and -often – the downright ghoulish. With *The Walking Dead*, filmmaker Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption*) brought a new age of horror on television, one that's been further defined by Guillermo Del Toro and his work on *The Strain*. Despite his popularity among cinephiles and critics, Del Toro isn't exactly synonymous with box office success. Sure, *Pacific Rim* made enough overseas to justify a sequel, but even now we see a reboot of *Hellboy* taking off, leaving Del Toro's much-anticipated 3rd installment dead in the water. Fortunately, Del Toro's *The Strain* has found success on FX allowing the filmmaker to expand upon a world he created in his own book series. While not the huge hit that *The Walking Dead* is, Del Toro's masterful approach to storytelling, along with his stylistic fingerprints give the series an edge and depth that has always eluded *The Walking Dead*.

TV's long been a writer's medium, allowing a freedom and originality that the movies these days seem to lack. So perhaps its no surprise that director's have begun to follow, lending their deft hands to a sandbox that allows for freedom and experimentation. This fusion of excellent writing and sublime direction has resulted in a level of authorship never before seen in visual media. And if Hollywood has any of competing, it's time to up their game and do away with their creatively bankrupt business models.



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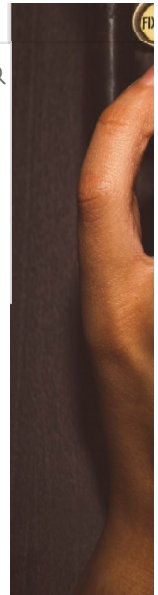
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