

Representing “America”:

Changing representations of American society in
quality television



**“ AFTER ALL, WE ARE
NOTHING MORE OR
LESS THAN WHAT WE
CHOOSE TO REVEAL. ”**



House of Cards. Willimon,
2014.

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Abstract

Over the past decades, American television has experienced tremendous change. Commercialization and digitalization have completely reshaped the television landscape, making the medium more accessible and relevant than ever. This thesis focuses on ways in which American television represents the American society. 20th-Century quality TV shows are compared with contemporary equivalents in order to determine how representations of American family life, American law enforcement and American federal politics have changed. Aside from these three focal points, the case studies provide insights in several other areas of “America”. The sitcom genre currently repeats and re-affirms pre-existing representation of the American family, whereas the crime and political dramas have a tendency to represent American law enforcement and government in a more negative light than their predecessors. This suggests that contemporary quality television is shifting away from traditional representations in favor of a more critical perspective, which is coupled by global commercial success.

Keywords: quality television; television studies; representation; imagined community; sitcom; crime drama; political drama

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Introduction

Representation: an introduction

After the attacks of 9/11, America faced the collective challenge of overcoming a national trauma. President Bush saw film and television as the perfect instruments to send the “right ideological message” to the public. Directly after the attacks, Bush assembled a number of Hollywood screenwriters to help the Pentagon with anticipating possible scenarios for future attacks. In the same year, the president asked some of the most influential and powerful people in film and television to control these industries in the wake of 9/11, with the ultimate goal of justifying the war on terror (Schopp 14). Not only scholars consider mass media to be influential, even our political leaders do.

Film and television have always played a crucial role in constructing reality. In the postwar years, American popular culture represented American life as one filled with wealth, luxury, freedom and happiness. This was during a time in which Europe was still recovering from the destructiveness of war, a time in which consumerism was at a low point. In the words of Rob Kroes: “Consumerism may have been a distant dream in postwar Europe, yet it was eagerly anticipated as Europeans were exposed to its American version, through advertising, photojournalism, and Hollywood films” (49). Through advertising, Europe was acquainted with the American luxury lifestyle. At the height of the cold war, the US relied heavily on this image, as it played a crucial part in the battle of ideologies. After all, the cold war was a “struggle, above else, for the minds of men” (qtd. in Pells 65). The notion that mass culture is crucial in promoting an ideology has been accepted among scholars. Jen Webb, in her book on representation, summarizes this as follows:

Not only do they [the cultural industries] provide the common grounds and the material for the formation of a sense of national community; not only do they need to be regulated to ensure that government-approved ideas circulate, but they also reproduce the relations of power in society. (117).

Webb suggests that the cultural industries can be a very successful tool for a government to promote its ideology. In the early years of the cold war, the State Department chose to focus on America’s moral, spiritual and material strength. In the rhetoric of Cold War discourse,

this strength was often translated into superiority over the Soviet Union (Pells 65-67). Strength was the key word in Hollywood during the 1970s and 1980s, as many films portrayed America from the perspective of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny (Webb 118). Anywhere but in the US, there seems to be a sentiment of contempt for such notions, since the typical narrative of the American good guys versus foreign ‘baddies’ is repeated over and over again. A perfect example of such a copy of American exceptionalism is the ‘Red Dawn’, an American film from 1984 starring Patrick Swayze and Charlie Sheen. Jen Wells puts it as follows: “The story is focalized through two football-playing, gun-toting, missile-humping, traitor-killing, hell-raising, commie-bashing, all-American brothers” (118). In the film, America is invaded and the protagonists use deadly force (‘Red Dawn’ could double as a movie sponsored by the NRA) to fight off the Soviet enemy. In doing so, they embody American values (Wells 118). A second example is Wilfried Fluck’s discussion of American Vietnam movies. He argues that these movies do not portray history in a realistic manner, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, focus only on the American side of the story. “It is amazing indeed to what extent even progressive movies have been "self-centered" and completely disregard the Vietnamese. The major victim of the Vietnam War seems to be the American psyche, not the Vietnamese victims of the war.” Thus, even in a movie that is forced to portray an American weakness, the focus is on the endurance and resilience of America.

American television paints a similar picture. As Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis note, American television used to focus almost exclusively on higher-class families, constantly reaffirming the notion of the American dream (75). A striking example of the priority that American production companies gave to this premise is *The Cosby Show*. In this show about a black wealthy family, the immediate post-civil-rights-movement African American family is portrayed as one that is no longer affected by racism. Obviously, racism was still an issue during the 1980s and remains so today, but Jhally and Lewis reveal that white foreign audiences got the impression that racism was a thing of the past (72). In my discussion of *The Cosby Show* in chapter 2, I will go into this topic in more detail. The examples mentioned here are just a small fraction of the stereotypical representations that have contributed to “America” as an imagined community.

Methodology

According to Adorno, the cultural industries typically do not impose ideas on people, but instead present a limited range of possible ideas (Webb 117). While the cultural industries as a whole might not impose the same notions, they do portray and impose an ideology. “Ideology poses as the only reality (...) and offering it so often that it seems almost impossible to think another way” (Webb 117). This leads us to the notion that the American television industry promotes such an ideology, filled with concepts such as the American dream, manifest destiny, consumerism, and every other notion that makes America “America”. My aim in this thesis is to find out whether this still applies to American television. Based on my own experiences as a media consumer, I hypothesize that recent American quality TV shows have a tendency to challenge this constant reaffirmation and repetition of quintessentially American values. This thesis will analyze a total of eight case studies. These are divided in three chapters, each of which covering a TV genre. Each chapter features TV shows of different eras; a comparison will be made between contemporary and 20th-century shows in order to find out if representations of America have changed. Chapter 1 will introduce the topic of my research as well as the relevant theories. Chapter 2 analyzes case studies of *The Cosby Show*, *Dallas* and *Modern Family* in an attempt to answer the following sub question: has the family sitcom changed its attitudes towards family relations and gender? Admittedly, *Dallas* is a soap opera and definitely not a sitcom, but like the other two shows, the main theme is the American family and interpersonal relationships. This will be discussed further in chapter two. Chapter 3 analyzes the 1990s show *Twin Peaks*, as well as the more recent *Prison Break* and *Breaking Bad*. These shows classify as crime dramas, and as I mentioned earlier, they belong to the quality TV ‘genre’. The focus in this chapter is the representation of American law enforcement. Finally, the fourth chapter analyzes two political dramas: *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. As the genre suggests, these shows will be analyzed in their representation of the American federal government.

These shows have in common that they are considered quality TV shows. In addition, they are some of the most popular American fictional TV shows, and all contain interesting attitudes towards certain aspects of American life. I have chosen these three genres because I believe they provide a representative sample of the current quality television landscape. Of course, additional case studies are needed in order to come to uncontested conclusions, but within the scope of this BA thesis, these case studies cover a decent amount of representations conveyed in American quality television, and are thus suited to provide an answer to my research question: how do contemporary American quality TV shows represent America in comparison to their 20th-century predecessors?

Chapter 1 – Topic and Theory

Quality TV

This thesis will analyze contemporary American *quality* TV shows, as opposed to ‘regular’ TV. The reason for this is as follows. A significant volume of research has been done on representations of specific aspects of American society in popular ‘regular’ TV. For example, the field of criminology has analyzed the way cop shows represent American law enforcement, and the field of gender studies has produced dozens of articles on gender representation in American television. Quality TV is a relatively new genre, and most research into this specific category of television has been done on production quality and artistic merit. In a study of representation, quality TV shows are especially interesting because of the revolutionary nature of the genre. Catherine Johnson explains this in ‘Branding Television’:

... over the second half of the 1990s HBO developed a brand identity as the home of quality television in the USA that drew on a wide range of its programming, but was centred on the shift towards producing adult, edgy, authored and high-budget original drama series. (32)

This suggests that quality TV shows do not reaffirm pre-existing values by default, like a ‘regular’ show such as *Crime Scene Investigation* or *The Bold and the Beautiful* is expected to do. But how is quality defined? There are numerous differences between regular TV and quality TV, which are mainly determined by aesthetics, production quality, the depth of story lines and casting. In 2007, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass compiled and edited a collection of seventeen essays about the definition of Quality TV. I will cite or paraphrase some definitions here, which are all in the spirit of Robert J. Thompson’s definition in the preface: “[Quality TV] is best defined by what it is not: it is not ‘regular’ TV” (xvii). In the first essay, Sarah Cardwell attempts to distinguish quality TV from ‘good’ TV, and finds that whereas the latter is an easily made value judgment, the former category is difficult to define. According to her, quality TV shows are characterized by a set of generic qualities, such as content, tone, ambiguity in exploring interpersonal relationships, but also production features such as complex narrative structure, use of poetic language and intricate themes. She admits that it is impossible to make a complete and unambiguous list of criteria for quality. Still, the easily

recognizable set of generic qualities almost turns quality TV into a genre: “to label something ‘quality television’ is like making a generic classification: it is comparable to agreeing that a certain film is a western” (21). Peter Dunne, who has professional experience in the television industry, finds a much more concise definition for quality: “We can look at the state-of-the-art technologies and the millions of dollars it takes to produce one episode of a primetime drama and base an opinion of quality on them, but nothing matters unless the writing is quality writing” (99). Yet another vision comes from Máire Messenger Davies, who defines Quality TV as an institutional genre: “[quality] tends to be equated with ‘unpopular’ and applied to genres such as the documentary, and religious and educational programming that public service broadcasters are required to supply because they are ‘good’ for us” (171). This dichotomy between popular and unpopular, quality and entertainment can also be seen when comparing American quality dramas with the most popular TV genre, reality TV. Jane Feuer further uses this comparison to further complicate the definition of quality: “Since reality TV is arguably no more or less ‘original’ than HBO drama and since both genres have their authors and geniuses, why should one form have so much more artistic status than the other?” (156). This is merely a sample of the many visions on what defines quality in television, and each vision has merit in its own right. I chose to include contrasting visions to illustrate the complexity of making a value judgment on media content. Given the ultimate goal of this research, Johnson’s and Dunne’s definitions are the most useful; quality TV is television that is original or controversial in its writing and thematic content.

This thesis will investigate how eight popular American quality TV series represent aspects of American life and society. Investigating the way in which these series represent America should result in a significant profile of representations of America in TV shows. The shows that I will investigate are NBC’s *The Cosby Show*, CBS’s *Dallas*, ABC’s *Modern Family*, ABC’s *Twin Peaks*, AMC’s *Breaking Bad*, FOX’s *Prison Break*, NBC’s *The West Wing* and Netflix’s *House of Cards*. These shows have in common that they are popular American quality TV. They can be divided into three genres: the family sitcom, the crime drama and the political drama. The next sections will outline the theoretical background necessary for analyzing these TV shows.

Imagined Community

This thesis mainly focuses on the way American television series represent America. This section will elaborate on what representation entails, as well as what exactly is meant by the term ‘America’. We will first look at the theoretical concept of “America” as an imagined community rather than a nation-state, after which several theories of representation will be discussed. The case studies in chapters two through four should be read in the light of this theoretical framework.

Like most American cultural products, the TV shows I analyze in this thesis either consciously or subconsciously contain attitudes towards the American society and ideology. In order to conduct a representation study, the term ‘America’ must be defined. There is a distinction to be made between the political nation-state United States of America and the collective mind’s imagination of the concept “America”. Benedict Anderson provided the most popular definition by proposing the imagined-community-theory, which was quickly adopted in the field of media studies. Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (6). This theory derives from the notion that although a nation is simply too big for every citizen to know one another, there exists a sense of national pride and belonging. Anderson rightfully argues that this collective identity is created and sustained by media. The ‘community’ is imagined as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”, which ignores the actual issues of inequality and exploitation that occur in the nation-state (7). In Anderson’s version, the imagined community is bound by the borders of the nation-state to which it applies, which makes sense when discussing concepts of nationhood and national pride. It provides this thesis with a framework for analyzing how American products represent American life and society, or in other words, “America” as an imagined community. All the TV shows discussed in this thesis have contributed to this imagined community, just like the thousands of Hollywood films and other American television programs. When I speak of representation of America or the US in this thesis, I refer to the imagined community that is shaped by popular culture and exists in the collective minds of everyone exposed to these cultural products.

Theories of Representation

In the academic world, the term representation is used in examining underlying meanings and attitudes in a text. In the field of media studies, the term thus applies to the underlying attitudes in the ‘text’ of the media product. For example, if someone were to analyze how a

certain film represents the role of women in the workplace, one would carefully read the script of the film as well as watch the film with great attention in order to analyze the ‘text’. This poses a problem for television studies: what exactly is the text of a television series? A show such as CSI has hundreds of episodes, which could make representation research problematic. Depending on the specific research question, the text of an isolated episode might be sufficient to answer the question, but this poses yet another problem: can research into an isolated fragment of a show’s text lead to conclusions about such a show’s representation of the researched topic? Even though these areas of difficult do not have to result in false conclusions, I choose to avoid these issues by analyzing TV series that can be read as one long text. These series have main storylines that evolve throughout the entirety of the show, spanning multiple episodes and even seasons. For example, Breaking Bad is a five-season show with one carefully crafted main storyline that is initiated in the pilot episode and concluded in the very last episode of season five. The case studies in chapters three and four are all TV shows that can be read like this, like extremely lengthy films. This means that the text of the product can be identified and analyzed correctly. In chapter two, in which I discuss the family sitcom genre, the shows are not of this kind: they mainly consist of standalone episodes, meaning that every episode is an isolated text. This does not pose the aforementioned problems, since sitcoms have a tendency to portray the same values, attitudes and sentiments in most of the episodes. In chapter 2, I will elaborate on this.

Philosophers have been thinking about representation ever since the classical age. Plato was the first to publish thoughts about representation. His theory of forms proposes that every object in our surroundings is a mere representation of the one true form of this object. This true form cannot be perceived using one’s senses, but exist as non-physical blueprints that form in one’s mind over time. Interestingly, we now understand representation as the complete opposite of this theory: texts contain representations which our minds translate to the corresponding images. Jen Webb has written a thorough discussion of the definitions of representation in her book entitled “Understanding Representation”. According to Webb, the process of representation involves the mind’s image forming of a ‘sign’ that occurs in a text. Webb goes even further by stating that representation does not only make the connections between signs and mental images visible, it actually makes those connections: “Representation is not just about substitution and reiteration, but is about constitution: it constitutes – makes real – both the world and our ways of being in the world and communities” (10). Thus, representation is key to the creation of an imagined community. The aforementioned Benedict Anderson regarded ‘print media’ as the agent by which a

government created sentiments of nationhood, resulting in an imagined community. Nowadays, this print media has been replaced with mass media products, of which television shows are just a small part. Guy Debord outlined a very negative perspective to the role of media in the formation of a community: “the media does more than separate nation from nation; it also wrenches individuals away from each other and from Nietzsche’s ‘real truth of nature’, plunging them instead into the lie of culture” (Webb 114). Although this view is very pessimistic, it does illustrate the potential power that mass media has in community formation. Representation creates our world, and the mass media control processes of representation, which often means that a certain ideology is repeated over and over again (116). Of course, media consumers do not accept or adopt every attitude, meaning or idea that the mass media portrays, but it does shape the way we see the world, either consciously or subconsciously.

I hypothesize that the more recent American quality TV shows challenge pre-existing American values, whereas the older TV shows provide cliché representations of “America”. The next chapters will investigate three TV genres, the sitcom, crime drama and political drama. This investigation will either confirm or deny this hypothesis. Bear in mind that this thesis does not attempt to provide a comprehensive profile of representations in American TV in general. Achieving such a work requires a collaborative effort from scholars in the Television Studies. This thesis contains carefully selected case studies which provide a relevant sample of the quality TV shows in the three genres. These case studies will answer my research question: how do contemporary American quality TV shows represent America in comparison to their 20th-century predecessors?

Chapter 2 – The family sitcom/soap opera

In the introduction of this thesis, I mentioned Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined community as the tool I am using for discussing how TV shows represent “America”. In Anderson’s version, “America” as an imagined community is held together by notions of nationhood and national comradeship, meaning that the community is contained by the geographical borders of the nation-state to which it applies. In this first case study chapter, I will briefly divert from this theory in favor of Jaap Kooijman’s slightly altered version of imagined community. In chapter 1 of his book entitled “Fabricating the Absolute Fake”, Kooijman argues that the US propagates ‘universal’ values, which transcend US borders:

“American pop culture has the capacity to be produced, sold, and consumed as being universal, assumed to represent the human experience in general without being culturally specific or bound by national geography” (40). This is largely due to American cultural hegemony since WWII. Kooijmans imagined community is a useful tool for explaining how TV shows from the family sitcom and soap opera genres have global appeal as well as global influence. In this chapter, the attitudes towards the traditional American nuclear family will be distilled from two popular sitcoms and one soap opera. Even though the main focus of this chapter will be the portrayal of the *American* family, it is important to realize that these representations often contain universal family values which are not necessarily nation-specific.

In the introduction, I stated that the TV shows in this thesis all belong to the quality TV genre. However, the first two case studies of this chapter, *The Cosby Show* and *Dallas*, do not meet the aforementioned criteria for being considered quality TV shows. These case studies are relevant nonetheless, because they provide me with a set of ‘traditional’ American values that can be compared to those conveyed in *Modern Family*, which is a quality TV show. What separates *Modern Family* from other sitcoms is its clever, witty writing and mockumentary-style directing. In addition, the show has been praised for its acting and production quality, making it an interesting case study precisely because quality and sitcom do not coincide often. The section on *Modern Family* will elaborate further on its ‘quality’ stamp. The main sub question for this chapter is as follows: If and how does *Modern Family* represent the American family differently than *The Cosby Show* and *Dallas*?

The Cosby Show

NBC’s *The Cosby Show* has often been referred to as the biggest show in the world. The main reason for this is its massive global, not just American, appeal. The show ran for eight seasons between 1984 and 1992, and was the first popular sitcom about an African-American family. Its domestic popularity has often been addressed by scholars, but attempts at explaining its international success are scarce.

Timothy Havens wrote an essay on *The Cosby Show*’s global appeal, which he ascribes mostly to race. Havens compares *The Cosby Show* to *Family Ties*, which was its main competitor. Havens notes that both shows appeal to non-American audiences simply because they were the most popular shows in the US: “In many areas of the world, audiences are accustomed to and even prefer Western culture” (449). What both shows have in common

is their representation of the American dream and capitalist consumerism, where “material comfort allows family members to avoid the drudgery of daily work” (449). This representation is by no means revolutionary. American mass media has always had the tendency to idealize and promote consumerism. After all, television itself is a commercial product. Havens continues by arguing that race is the determining factor in explaining the difference in international appeal between the two shows. In doing so, he makes some interesting remarks on how *The Cosby Show* represents race, and what this might ‘teach’ foreign audiences about race debates in the US. He notes that the high-class societal position of the Cosby family suggests that post-civil-right-movement African American families are equal to white American families. In other words, the show “leaves white audiences with the impression that all economic barriers for African Americans have been removed through affirmative action” (450). Combined with the show’s avoidance of political issues that are specific to the American domain, this means that foreign audiences, who are expected to be aware of racial issues in the US, do not have to identify much with American domestic problems. Instead, the show focuses on the family as the cornerstone of society, a premise which has often been used in TV shows. This avoidance has most likely been a commercial decision, since the show is a sitcom and not a work of political critique. Still, it does minimize the image of a US that is in constant domestic conflict between black and white. In doing so, *The Cosby Show* downplayed the American racial crisis of the 1980s for its international audience.

In their book entitled ‘Enlightened Racism’, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis go one step further, stating that the *Cosby* show gives white foreign viewers the impression that racism is a sin of the past: “programs like *The Cosby Show* encourage the viewer to see the real world through rose-tinted spectacles”. This also goes for the show’s representation of the American dream. Jhally and Lewis note a trend in television: “television envisages class not as a series of barriers but as a series of hurdles that can be overcome” (73). In other words, it reinforces the idea of the American dream. According to them, *The Cosby Show* shows that the American dream is achievable for the lucky few who find their way through the cracks of the class system (73). For a more detailed discussion of the American Dream in television, see chapter 5 of ‘enlightened Racism’.

Dallas

Around the same time when *The Cosby Show* aired, there was an American soap opera which had massive appeal both domestically and abroad: *Dallas*. I chose to include this soap opera here because in terms of representation, it does not differ much from the other case studies in this chapter, which belong to the sitcom genre. The show tells the daily life stories of the Ewing family, a rich, southern American family. *Dallas* aired from 1978 to 1991, an impressive stint for a primetime soap opera. Like *The Cosby Show*, *Dallas* was very popular abroad, which makes it an interesting case study in the light of this thesis. For my analysis of the representations of America that are conveyed in the show, I use Ian Ang's 1982 book called "Watching *Dallas*: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination". Ang sought to explain the popularity of *Dallas* in the Netherlands, so she placed a small advertisement in the paper, looking for people who watched the show. The 42 respondents' results formed the foundation of her book, and even though this sample is far from scientific, this manner of conducting a media effects study was revolutionary at the time.

The European intelligentsia feared *Dallas*' popularity for the obvious reasons. They feared mostly that Europeans would mimic the Ewings' behavior, which was superficial, rude and decadent (Pells 259). European critics saw the Ewings as the personification of American greed and ruthlessness. In her book, Ang shows that this apperceived danger was an overly cautious exaggeration. Most of the respondents felt ashamed to be enjoying the show, knowing that it was 'bad' for them (Pells 261). Ang concludes that *Dallas* is not a quintessentially American show, but a show that families all over the world can identify with. This ties in with Kooijman's imagined community, which is also not bound by borders. Despite the portrayal of universal values, viewers realized that the show took place in the setting of the American higher class of society. Like most soap operas, the focus was on family tribulations instead of social or political commentary, but any show about a set of American characters (sub)consciously represents America in a certain way. As many of the respondents to Ang's advertisement wrote, *Dallas* is perceived as a quintessentially American show. This Americanness was considered a negative aspect of the show, as illustrated in the following response: My opinion of *Dallas*? Well, I'd be glad to give it to you: worthless rubbish. I find it a typical American programme, simple and commercial, role-affirming, deceitful. The thing so many American programmes revolve around is money and sensation (qtd. in Ang 93).

Thus, critics of the show loathe it for its Americanness. *Dallas* represents American life in a way that is stereotypical for American cultural products. During the 1980s, this representation was often regarded as shallow and decadent, as Ang's survey shows. Still, most

viewers looked beyond the top layer of American consumerist superficiality and discovered a pleasurable series about the daily family life. This suggests an acceptance that cultural products of this quality could only be produced in the US. After all, the budget of 700,000 dollars per episode was far out of the reach of European production companies (Ang 3). The Americanness of soap operas such as *Dallas* is the result of the dependency on economic marketability, according to sociologists Mattelart et al.: “content must be reduced to universally consumable motifs. This applies in particular to American series which in the US serve as ‘commercial’ packaging (...) This reduction to the normal human aspects of existence offers a stereotypical and schematized image of reality” (qtd. in Ang 93). Once again, the American compromise of financial success in favor of originality and substance is the cause of European criticism. *Dallas* represents America in a way that foreigners had experienced with many of its predecessors. The show reinforced this representation which, despite all the criticism, resulted in global success.

Modern Family

ABC’s Emmy-winning mockumentary *Modern Family* depicts the daily life of a modern and wealthy American suburban family. Starting in 2009, the show is currently airing its seventh season, and has been renewed for an eighth season in March 2016. *Modern Family* has received widespread critical acclaim, winning five consecutive Emmy awards for Best Comedy TV Series (“About...”). The show stars an ensemble cast, with each of the characters representing a typical stereotype of a modern American family. These stereotypes include a worrying mother, an emotionally unavailable father, a homosexual couple, a teenage girl and a ‘gold digger’: a young and attractive woman married to a much older and wealthy husband. These characters interact in such a way that they convey certain themes of American everyday life, meaning that anyone can relate to the show in some way. The American ideals and values in *Modern Family* are very similar to those in *The Cosby Show*, making it likely that they have a similar effect on foreign viewers. The main difference between the two shows is the production quality, which would make *Modern Family* a quality TV show. Aside from typical and classic soap opera themes such as love, family, jealousy and friendship, *Modern Family* also attempts to portray modern American values, such as the tolerance for homosexuality and gender equality. According to Nicole Catherin Staricek, who wrote a thorough and detailed thesis paper on gender in *Modern Family*, the show fails in portraying modern values. Instead, it merely repeats traditional representations of favored gender roles:

Unfortunately, media artifacts such as *Modern Family* do not invite transformation. They only work to maintain what is already in place and in the case of this present-day program, the characters and their traditional gender roles serve as benchmarks for audiences. (87)

Despite its name, *Modern Family* does not represent a modern, emancipated American family, according to Staricek. In a similar analysis, Carolin Leihmann comes to the same conclusion: “despite its success, this show is not as modern as it claims to be and could easily have been aired in the 1980s, a television era that was also characterized by a return to traditional family values” (4). Leihmann’s criticism is primarily focused on gender roles: “*Modern Family*, airing in the 21st century, is continually stereotyping women in an old fashioned manner as mothers and housewives. These clichés do not meet real female ambitions or provide an adequate portrayal of today’s American women” (4-5). Still, both Staricek and Leihmann view the roles of Mitchell and Cameron, the characters who portray a homosexual couple, as an exception. Steven Edward Doran wrote an essay about homodomesticity in *Modern Family*. He finds that even though the show “uses the rhetoric of equality and liberation surrounding homodomesticity to obscure the ways that it sustains the subordination of gay subjects”, the mere presence of a gay couple in a popular sitcom is unique and promises “a potential for the expansion of queer sensibility into what were once intractably heterosexist realms” (Pullen 102).

Modern Family represents the traditional notion of what an American white, suburban family should be like. Rather than using emancipated characters that break free from outdated gender roles, the show essentially portrays a family in the way that reminds of classic soap operas such as *Dallas*. The only truly revolutionary aspect of the show is the recurring theme of homodomesticity, but according to Doran, even this portrayal is not as ‘modern’ as it should be. Thus, *Modern Family* does not appear to be as modern as its title suggests. A similar conclusion can be drawn when looking at the show’s attitudes towards the American family. These attitudes can be seen when looking at formula that the writers use in producing the episode. Every episode is a ‘standalone’ episode, which means that the main storyline begins and ends within the same episode. The basic underlying formula of these narratives is as follows. In the beginning, the family members are confronted with a family-related problem, which the characters try to cope with as the episode progresses. At the end, the characters come together to argue about their differences, only to come to the conclusion that

family is all that matters and that love overcomes jealousy and anger. In other words, the show introduces typical family issues in every episode, but never lets these issues tear apart the American family. The American family as the cornerstone of society is an ideal that the showrunners still hold in high regard, which is interesting given the declining stability and diversification of the average American family in recent years. As Brigid Schulte states in *The Washington Post*, there is no ‘typical’ US family today, like there was in the 1950s and 1960s (Schulte). Research by the Pew Research Center supports this statement:

In 1960, the height of the post-World War II baby boom, there was one dominant family form. At that time 73% of all children were living in a family with two married parents in their first marriage. By 1980, 61% of children were living in this type of family, and today less than half (46%) are. (“The American...”).

What does this longing for fallen family ideals say about the sitcom genre? Why does television uphold this outdated American family in a diversifying American society in which families like the *Ewings* or the *Brady’s* are increasingly uncommon? The answer might lie in the impact of 9/11. As early as 2004, only three years after the attacks, Lynn Spigel showed that American television had returned to normalcy. TV programming “channeled the nation back to normalcy – or at least to the normal flows of television and commercial culture.” (239). ‘Normalcy’ is not the most suitable term for the state of American television after 9/11, but it does rightfully indicate a sentiment of nostalgia to pre-9/11 America. Jaap Kooijman recognizes the presence of this sentiment in American television. After studying several pop-cultural responses to 9/11, he came to the following conclusions:

The significance of the 9/11 episodes analyzed in this chapter can be found in the way all of them take the acceptance of American idealism for granted, each of them assuming that viewers will uncritically recognize these American values as being self-evident and universal. By celebrating the values that an imagined America embodies, these television shows can ignore the actual politics of the nation-state USA. (66).

Kooijman also uses Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined community in his analysis of the US, as I mentioned earlier. Although his analysis was focused on texts which directly address the events of 9/11, I believe his findings are applicable to the sitcom genre today.

Much like the episodes Kooijman discusses, *Modern Family* as a series celebrates traditional family values in a way that prompts sentiments of nostalgia. It ignores any possible impact that 9/11, feminism, emancipation, or the liberalization of love has had on the American family, and chooses instead to portray the traditional American family in a ‘modern’ wrapping.

The family sitcom and soap opera genres seem to reaffirm the same values constantly. This results in what Jean Baudrillard has coined as a hyperreality. Hyperreality refers to the constant reaffirmation of a similar idea in popular culture, which results in something that is better than reality, a hyperreality (Kooijman 70,71). Baudrillard even goes as far as saying that America is no longer ‘real’: “If indeed American life is a movie rather than being like a movie, American life can be perceived as a hyperreality, in which the actual reality of life has become part of the stream of images mediated by Hollywood and television” (Kooijman 71). Whether America is indeed a simulacrum constructed by representation is an interesting question, but will not be discussed further in this thesis. Still, hyperreality does help to explain that *Modern Family* merely reaffirms pre-existing values and images. The show is one of the latest installments of the hyperreal story of the American family. It keeps traditional family values alive.

In conclusion, the three shows discussed in this chapter contain very similar attitudes towards the ideal American family. Universal values regarding interpersonal relationships, gender and race are portrayed in all three of the shows. This allows for the conclusion that the American family ideal as portrayed on television has not changed much over the past thirty years or so, ignoring the actual societal changes in the American family that have been taking place. There is certainly something to say for the theory that this resilience can be traced back to 9/11, but as with every media production, there are many other factors in play. Jean Baudrillard has provided media scholars with a way to define this phenomenon, but his hyperreality does not provide a clear-cut explanation either. Additional case studies are needed for us to gain a better understanding of why the family sitcom or soap opera is resistant to changing representations.

Chapter 3 – The crime drama

One of the most popular TV genres has always been the crime drama. Shows such as *Magnum P.I.*, *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team* garnered impressive ratings in the 1980s, and in 2014, CBS’s *NCIS* was the most-watched TV show in the world (Kissell). The reason for

including this genre in my thesis is twofold. Firstly, its massive global appeal and success make it an integral part of any television studies thesis. Secondly, the crime drama always represents the American government, law enforcement in particular, in a certain manner. This, of course, has consequences for the apperceived attitude of the show towards American law enforcement. For this chapter, I have once again chosen three critically acclaimed TV series: ABC's *Twin Peaks*, FOX's *Prison Break* and AMC's *Breaking Bad*. The first aired over the course of only two years, 1990-1991, while *Breaking Bad* and *Prison Break* aired after 9/11. There are many other suitable case studies within this genre, from *The X-Files* to *The Wire* and *24*. I have chosen these shows in particular because of their status as the *crème-de-la-crème* of quality television, the best that was on the air during their respective time frames. These case studies will provide an answer to the following sub question: how do contemporary quality crime dramas represent American law enforcement in relation to *Twin Peaks*?

Twin Peaks

According to many scholars, critics and fans, ABC's *Twin Peaks* was the show that changed television forever. For example, *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner said that he only became aware of the possibilities of television after watching *Twin Peaks* (Lavery 117), and the *Cinema Journal* dedicated much of last spring's issue to "the series that changed television" (Garner 137). Reasons for this include the unprecedented production quality, complex characters and narrative format. However, I am not concerned with making quality judgments about this show. In the light of this chapter, the significance of *Twin Peaks* lies in its attitudes towards American law enforcement. The show revolves around the mystery surrounding the death of Laura Palmer, a beautiful high school senior who was loved by the entire community. An idiosyncratic FBI agent, Dale Cooper, teams up with the local sheriff's department to solve the murder, only to find that supernatural forces might have been playing a role in Laura's death. The small town in which the series is set is filled with characters who lead double lives and always have ulterior motifs. Nothing is what it seems, which makes the show such an intriguing mystery. This mystery extends itself to the show's genre classification. It possesses the generic aspects of both the crime thriller and the soap opera. Linda Ruth Williams, who wrote an insightful essay on this issue, defines *Twin Peaks* as a "serial-thriller soap": "*Twin Peaks* refused to mark the difference between the dark seriousness of its dominant storyline and its bizarre comic-surreal subplots" (37). It combines

“the interpersonal psychosexual complexities of prime-time soap opera” with “the investigative serial’s hopeful pathway towards the resolution of crime” (38). This makes the show an interesting case study in the field of television studies, and it is difficult to resist conducting an analysis of the show’s representation of small-town Americana. Nevertheless, I chose this series for its depiction of law enforcement, which I briefly analyze below.

In contrast to most crime dramas, *Twin Peaks* depicts law enforcement as honest, honorable, capable and incorruptible. FBI agent Cooper is a likeable character who attempts to make sense of the bizarre and unexplainable events in *Twin Peaks* using his eccentric investigation style. Cooper is written as the ideal FBI agent, who investigates every lead, considers every suggestion, and has tremendous patience with the local law enforcement. In his investigation, he is aided by model cop Truman and his equally likeable deputies. The first exchange between Cooper and Truman in the pilot immediately establishes their professionalism. Cooper quickly clarifies that he is in control of the investigation, and that “sometimes local law enforcement has a problem with that” (“Episode #1.1”). Sheriff Truman accepts this, and a fruitful cooperation ensues. This scene is pivotal to the attitudes towards law enforcement conveyed in the show, because as Cooper rightfully says, the interdepartmental power struggle in American law enforcement is a recurring theme in American popular culture. This positive representation is also conveyed in Cooper’s superiors at the FBI, who are friendly characters that never obstruct or rush the investigation. Again, unsympathetic or even corrupt superiors are not uncommon in American cinema and television. The only bad-mannered character is agent Cooper’s forensic colleague, Albert Rosenfield, who is initially set up as an arrogant and despicable special agent. The following dialogue, which ends with Truman punching Rosenfield in the face, perfectly illustrates this:

Albert Rosenfield: What the hell kind of two-bit operation they running out of this treehouse, Cooper?

Albert Rosenfield: I have seen some slip-shod backwater burgs, but this place takes the cake.

Albert Rosenfield: Oh yeah, well I've had about enough of morons and half wits, dolts, dunces, dullards and dumbbells... and you, you chowder-head yokel, you blithering hayseed. You've had enough of me?

Sheriff Harry S. Truman: Yes I have.

(“Episode #1.3”).

Nonetheless, the writers later felt the need to turn Rosenfield into a more likeable character, as he sincerely expresses his respect and affection for sheriff Truman in season 2. In this sense, we can consider Rosenfield as a comedic element of the show, and certainly not as a negative portrayal of the FBI. After all, Rosenfield is “the best in his field”, a statement with which he fully concurs, of course (“Episode #1.3”). Such an outright positive attitude towards law enforcement would be odd in contemporary television and cinema, as the next case studies show. In the 20th century however, the police were usually portrayed like this, as multiple studies have shown (McNeely 12). The next case studies suggest a recent trend of representing law enforcement as incapable and corrupt.

Breaking Bad

AMC’s Breaking Bad is often considered to be a revolutionary TV series. On IMDB, the preeminent internet movie database, the show has been rated 9.5/10, making it the highest-rated show of all time (“Most”). Aside from the public acclaim, critics too have been exalting the drama series about a middle-aged cancer-diagnosed meth dealer. Breaking Bad has won 16 primetime Emmy awards (“Breaking”). In essence, the show tells the story of a man who rises to power and wealth despite facing overwhelming odds. This classic American narrative has been used countless times with great success. This is the typical story of the ‘underdog’ who pursues his own ‘American dream’ and somehow manages to succeed and eventually live his dream. This show distinguishes itself from its predecessors in various ways, the most crucial of which is its topic. In the classic American underdog narrative, the disadvantaged hero overcomes his (traditionally, the American hero is of the male sex) obstacles by means of just force and ethical behavior, showing that good always defeats evil. Examples of such films include Sylvester Stallone’s Rocky, Andrew Davis’s The Fugitive, and popular comic book narratives such as Batman and Spider Man. Breaking Bad is different in this respect. Protagonist Walter White is diagnosed with cancer, after attempts to provide for his family by producing and selling crystal meth, a highly addictive and illegal drug. In the context of this thesis, it is interesting to analyze how the show takes a position on the ethicalness of dealing drugs in order to secure a future for your family. Many prominent TV critics have thought about this controversial topic. Barry Garron from The Hollywood Reporter found that the series is tolerant towards drug dealing: “For all his middle-class morality, Walter never voices concern about the drug’s deadly impact or reservations about contributing to it” (par.6). Garron wrote this after seeing the first few episodes, but as the series progresses, the show

increasingly questions the morality of Walter White's business ventures. In a radio interview, creator Vince Gilligan explains that one of the central themes to the show is that actions have consequences ("Vince"). Walt's choices and actions often result in death and chaos for the innocent, with the plane crash at the end of season 2 as the most gruesome example. This reveals that the series does not attempt to downplay or justify the gruesome nature of the meth business.

Although the show does not justify the protagonist's decision to build a drug empire, it does painfully expose two major American policy issues: the war on drugs and the healthcare system. Marisa Mazart wrote a thorough thesis on *Breaking Bad* as a product belonging to the western genre, in which she argues that the series reverses the classical western narrative. Walter White is presented as the hero, who completes his goal by using illegal action and lawless behavior against his lawful enemies. These enemies include the DEA and, in a broader sense, the American healthcare system. This role division is directly opposite to that of a traditional American western narrative:

By Walt breaking the law rather than founding it, the series reverses the typical narrative of the Western. Before Walt started cooking meth he was a passive father and an enthusiastic science teacher, but he transforms to become a greedy, selfish, outspoken criminal and murderer. He was law abiding and now he is not. *Breaking Bad* is not about the establishment of social order and political authority, but rather the breakdown of order and moral values to critique what America has evolved into. (Mazart 40).

This critique is cleverly illustrated by cartoonist Christopher Keelty, who reinterprets one of the pivotal scenes of the first season. Walter White is unable to pay the medical bill for his cancer treatment, after which he resorts to drug dealing in order to pay for his treatment. In the cartoon below, Keelty illustrates that White could continue teaching chemistry if he were diagnosed with cancer in any other country than America. What Keelty means with "any other country" is probably a western welfare state.

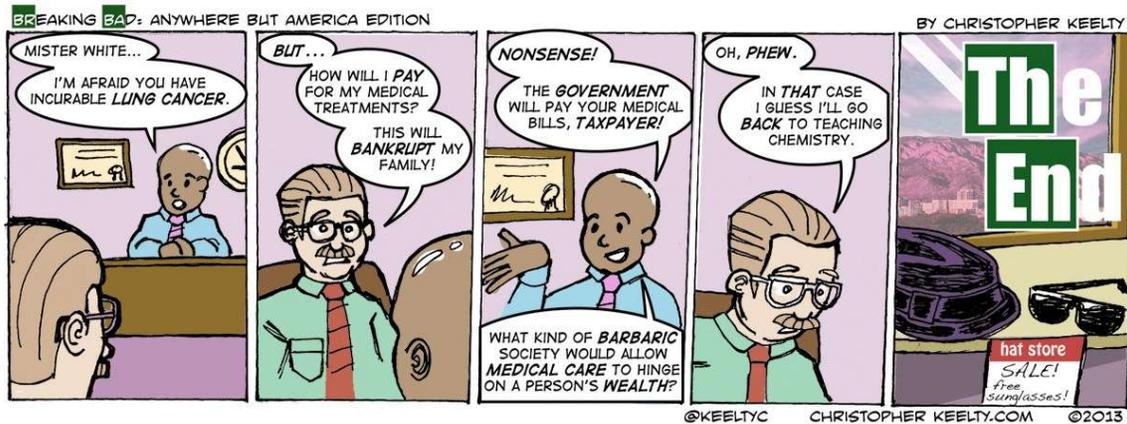


Fig. 1. Christopher Keely's Comic Strip

Source: Keely, Christopher. "Breaking Bad, anywhere but America edition." Comic Strip. 8 Dec. 2013.

In addition, the simple fact that Walter White is able to make extreme amounts of money in the drug business despite being completely inexperienced in criminal activity is a critique of America's failing war on drugs. According to Tony Newman of the Drug Policy Alliance, Breaking Bad illustrates that the American war on drugs enriches drug lords, results in countless casualties and fails to stop drug use (Newman). Further criticism comes from Jessie Bullock M.A., who even went so far as to coin the "Breaking Bad Effect": "Targeting a kingpin does not mean that his organization will cease to operate. It means that someone might take his place, the organization might splinter into rival factions, or a newcomer might see a market opening and enter" (Bullock). Breaking Bad illustrates this on many occasions, as every drug lord in the series is replaced by another, and eventually by Walter White himself. The fact that White's own brother-in-law is a DEA agent who somehow fails to connect 'Heisenberg' (White's alter ego) with a man he sees on a regular basis further stresses the failure of America's war on drugs.

Finally, the show can be read as a critique on capitalism. Marisa Mazart read the show in a Marxist framework, successfully attempting to explain Walter's rise to power as a typical example of how Marx typified capitalists. The background story of Walter White reveals that Walter was a happy laborer when he co-founded a successful chemical company. At a certain point, he left the billion-dollar company while only receiving 5000 dollars for his efforts. This caused him to become the unhappy and lifeless chemistry teacher the viewer meets in the first episodes. In other words, the capitalist Walter failed to see the non-economic value of the

good work he had done at the company, and instead focused on his meager compensation. Another way in which the show criticizes capitalism is Walter turning into an irrational, murderous and greedy leader as he gains wealth and power. Mazart aptly analyzes this:

Walt's reasoning is irrational and further shows how he has turned greedy and became inconsiderate of others. This is an important characteristic of him as capitalist because Walt was a laborer like the "mules" while he worked under Gus; nevertheless, he cannot identify with them. (39).

Admittedly, extremely detailed and thorough analysis of a text with the length of that of *Breaking Bad* could cause media scholars to draw far-fetched conclusions, such as Mazart has done here. Still, her analysis is helpful when we analyze texts with the focus on representation of ideology. In sum, *Breaking Bad* sheds a negative, dark shadow on certain aspects of the American society. On first sight, the show seems to convey the noble message that every action has consequences, and illegal actions can have disastrous consequences. This is also what the show's creator said the show is about, which seems like an attempt to depoliticize the controversial topic of the show. However, carefully analyzing the show reveals a strong critique of American society in three aspects: the American healthcare system, the war on drugs and capitalism. In the post-9/11 climate in which American military power, ideological superiority and patriotism have been revived in popular culture, the between-the-lines critique of these concepts in *Breaking Bad* is very interesting. This is not a 'return to normalcy' as I discussed in chapter 2, because the sheer negativity of *Breaking Bad*'s attitudes towards the US is quite revolutionary. Of course, this show is not the first to criticize American ideological foundations, but it is the most successful one to date. Could this signify a break from the television status quo of constant re-representation of "America" as a well-defined cliché? Only the future can tell.

Prison Break

The critique on American law enforcement that is conveyed in *Breaking Bad* can be seen in many contemporary American cultural products. One of the TV series in which this theme is the most prominent is Fox's *Prison Break*. Starting in 2005, the show aired four seasons and has been renewed for a fifth season scheduled to air in 2017. All four seasons are available on Netflix internationally, and have been aired on television as well. The show has

been lauded for its premise and first season, after which critics gradually became less positive about the show as it progressed. For example, Mike Duffy wrote in a review for the Detroit Free Press that “Like any over-the-top, conspiracy-laced concept, "Prison Break" will only work if viewers are giddily enticed to jump aboard the Willing Suspension of Disbelief Express” (“Prison”). This reveals the main problem of the show. Its unparalleled level of suspense comes at a great cost: the events surrounding the conspiracy increase in absurdity as the series progresses. Nevertheless, the show criticizes the US government in ways that are worth exploring.

Firstly, the US penal system is questioned. The show tackles this theme using four characters: prison warden Pope, commanding officer Bellick, prison doctor Sara Tancredi and her father, the governor of Illinois. One of the main characters has been sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit, which causes tension among the non-convict characters on the show. Governor Tancredi represents the conservative argument, which holds that crimes of a certain severity are punishable by death. In the pilot episode, a conversation between Michael and Sara reveals the different views that Sara and her father have on prisoner rehabilitation: “Michael: Wouldn’t think you’d find the daughter of "Frontier Justice" Frank working in a prison—as a doctor, no less. Sara: I believe in being part of the solution, not the problem” (“Pilot”). Sara’s belief eventually leads her to intentionally leaving the door of the prison infirmary unlocked so that Michael can escape at the end of season 1. The contrast in opinions about prisoner rehabilitation is further embodied by the two main characters in prison personnel, warden Pope and commanding officer Bellick. Whereas Pope treats the inmates with respect and tries to do everything “by the book”, Bellick tells governor Tancredi that the warden fails to “grab the situation by the gonads” and “take control” (“Riots”). Bellick does not believe in rehabilitating the inmates. In fact, he does not see them as people with rights, as he reveals in a conversation with Michael in the pilot episode (“Pilot”). CO Bellick and his colleagues personify the issue of inmate mistreatment and extortion. On a number of occasions, the officers condone prisoner-on-prisoner violence and torture, and they are prone to bribery and steal from inmates. Officer misconduct is obviously a tool for the writers to make the prisoner ‘heroes’ more likeable in comparison, but even if the writers did not intend to create a critical representation of officer behavior, the resulting image is not pretty. Correctional officer misconduct has been a well-documented reality in the US (“Staff”), suggesting that the actions of Bellick and the other officers cannot be disregarded as pure fiction. Thus, the show can be seen as a representation of a contested penal system that is far

from perfect. The writers do not take a clear position in this debate, and seemingly intend to merely display the presence of differing views on the US penal system.

Secondly, one of the show's central themes is government corruption and conspiracy. As the aforementioned TV critic Duffy pointed out, the show is driven by an implausible and incredible conspiracy, which includes a stone-cold Vice President and 'the company', which makes decisions and gives orders that even the president of the United States is forced to obey. The company is primarily concerned with protecting America's oil-driven economy from new energy sources. They can act with impunity because they have complete control over the vice president, and thus of the president and the entire law enforcement department of the US. As many critics have pointed out, such a conspiracy is far-fetched and unrealistic, but one aspect of this conspiracy is based on a real societal debate. In episode eleven, two lawyers find out that "Vice President Reynolds funneled millions of dollars in research grants into her brother's company. That money was filtered into millions of small accounts that made millions of small donations to her campaign" ("And"). Campaign funding is an issue in every national election in the US, deriving from the fear that large corporations can influence political agendas and decision-making by supporting candidates. *Prison Break* employs a clear position in this debate by greatly exaggerating the influence a company can have on politics. Thus, the show recognizes the possibility that illegal lobbying can occur on a national scale.

Prison Break does not paint a pretty picture of the US government. It presents a flawed penal system which includes officer misconduct, criticism of the death penalty and the ability to escape from a maximum-security correctional facility. In addition, the federal government is being portrayed as a corrupt organization in which external funds can influence political decision-making. These themes are not original or controversial in American television, since narratives of officer misconduct and political corruption have been told before. Nevertheless, they do purport a negative image of American law enforcement. Combined with the conclusion drawn from *Breaking Bad*, this suggests that contemporary quality TV tends to criticize rather than idealize American law enforcement. However, we should not forget to consider the commercially driven intentions of the shows' writers. In *Twin Peaks*, the good guys are Agent Cooper and the sheriff with his deputies, whereas the protagonists in *Prison Break* and *Breaking Bad* are essentially criminals. Thus, it makes sense for the writers to portray the 'heroes' as the good guys. Nevertheless, the sheer contrast between the model cops in *Twin Peaks* and the corrupt and incapable lawmen in the other shows is a contrast that cannot simply be ascribed to fan-base-pleasing writing. These shows are quality TV shows

with unparalleled writing quality, perhaps with the exception of *Prison Break*. This means that the creators and writers of the show were certainly aware of the underlying representations they were creating. Even if these representations were not intentional, they certainly were not avoided either, suggesting that in the cases of *Prison Break* and *Breaking Bad*, the writers consciously criticized American law enforcement and society.

Chapter 4 – The political drama

Of the three genres discussed in this thesis, the political drama is the least common. Many TV shows do feature highly ranked governmental officials, but they are seldom the protagonists in these shows. Political issues are a recurring theme in these shows: Sitcoms such as NBC's *Parks and Recreation* and ABC's *Spin City* approach politics through a comical perspective, whereas crime dramas like HBO's *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* tend to highlight the dark, corrupt side of politics. For this chapter, I chose two shows that place high-ranking government officials at the center of their narratives: NBC's *The West Wing* and Netflix's *House of Cards*. These shows are the highest-rated, most popular American political dramas of the past two decades, and their focus on Washington politics and the presidency makes them ideal cases for analyzing representations of Washington politics and ideology. The focus in this chapter is on how the American federal government is represented during different eras: the Bush administration and the current presidential race.

The West Wing

NBC's *The West Wing* premiered in 1999 and lasted seven seasons, ending in 2006. The show portrays the daily life of democratic president Josiah Bartlet, trying to find a balance between themes of politics and interpersonal relationships. On the Internet Movie Database, IMDB in short, the show scores 8.8 out of 10, making it one of the highest-rated shows of all time. In addition to its popular appeal, the show has received widespread critical acclaim, winning 26 Emmy awards ("The West Wing").

Although critics lauded the show for its writing, acting and production quality, its portrayal of politics has received some criticism. Despite the council of former white house staff members in the writing process, numerous former white house staff members have criticized the show for its lack of realism. Former president Gerald Ford's daughter Susan said the following: "I can't watch 'The West Wing.' They turn left and right where you are not

supposed to" (qtd. in Nevius). For the viewers however, this was never an issue, since this was the first time they got an inside look into the white house. As journalist Matthew Miller wrote: "it [the show] presents a truer, more human picture of the people behind the headlines than most of today's Washington journalists." (Miller).

The West Wing draws a positive picture of national politics. Jed Bartlet is a humane, good-hearted liberal president who enjoys great support from the people of the United States. Most of his staff members are equally kind and sincere. The white house staff is presented as a chaotic yet pleasant working environment, in which benefaction is considered highly meritorious. In addition, president Bartlet often assumes the role of father figure for his staff as well as the nation, alleviating their problems and investing in their friendship. Like any TV drama, The West Wing also touches upon Washington's lack of transparency and themes such as sex and violence. However, the secrecy surrounding the white house staff always seems to be around well-meant acts.

Aside from painting a pretty picture of Washington politics, the show tries to portray the ideal democratic president in a liberal fantasy. According to scholar Jason Mittell, the show "appealed to viewers who felt that President Clinton had been too moderate" and offered "an idealized sanctuary for loyal Democrats during the Bush administration" (281). The fictional President Bartlet was very popular among democrats. "Jed Bartlet is my president" was a popular bumper sticker during the run of the show (Mittell 281). It is not surprising that republicans often referred to the show as "The Left Wing", a term coined by Jewish columnist Naomi Pfefferman (par.1). The first season is packed with policy and legislation that can only be described as liberal. Jonathan Last sums up some of these instances of liberal politics:

In the first season, Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen as Clinton) and his administration have come out in favor of paying reparations to blacks for slavery, using statistical sampling for the census, putting the self-described "most liberal judge in the country" on the Supreme Court, keeping a Secret Service confidentiality clause, letting gays serve openly in the military, enacting tough campaign finance reform and taking up hate-crimes legislation. (par. 5).

It is safe to conclude that The West Wing represents American federal government as a walk in the park in which it is not too difficult to pass a liberal agenda. The show is indeed a liberal fantasy which could not have come at a better moment, given the fact that Bush's right-wing

administration was occupying the white house at the time. Interestingly, creator Aaron Sorkin has said that *The West Wing* does not swing in any political direction. The inaccuracy of this statement is further supported by Sorkin's reputation as a democratic activist, who probably felt he could present a better version of the Clinton White House (Last par. 5).

House of Cards

In the light of this thesis, Netflix's *House of Cards* is a very interesting case study. *House of Cards* tells the story of the Machiavellian Francis Underwood, who will do anything to become the most powerful man of the western world: president of the United States. As an experienced congressional representative and house whip, he is an expert at achieving his goals, supported by his equally conniving wife Claire. Netflix's most famous original production is based on a British show of the same name, which tells the story of a British Prime Minister. Like the other case studies discussed in this thesis, *House of Cards* is fictional. However, what sets it apart from other fictional TV shows is its realism. *House of Cards* creator Beau Willimon has been consulted by former white house staff members and members of congress in order to depict the reality of US national politics, the most notable of which is Jay Carson (Utichi). The show seems to profit from the real-life elections in the US, because viewers recognize certain elements of political practice from *House of Cards*.

Various themes of American life and society that I discussed in the other case studies come back in this show. Protagonist Frank Underwood has successfully climbed up the social ladder: from a poor farmer's son to the most powerful man in the western world. Frank's rise to power aptly exemplifies the American dream, in which a person can achieve anything they desire if they are willing to work for it. *Prison Break*'s theme of government corruption also exists in *House of Cards*, albeit on a lesser scale. For example, Frank Underwood is able to murder both a journalist and a congressional representative in the first two seasons of the show ("Chapter 11") ("Chapter 14"). Aside from these murders, Underwood mostly acts within the confines of the law, using his manipulative talent to get others to do what he wants.

Beau Willimon, the creator and writer of the show, has distanced the show from satire and political commentary. In an interview on Fresh Radio, he said the following:

We are not trying to base our characters on any one person in particular or couple in particular (...) if we went that route it would be very limiting for us because then we'd just be doing satire — and that's not what we're trying to do. ("Forget").

In a different interview, Willimon further distanced the show from reality: “I don’t think “House of Cards” is a reflection of all of D.C. We’re not trying to say that this is the way Washington, D.C. is” (Horn et al.). Willimon’s remarks suggest that he does not intend to comment on the political reality through House of Cards. Nevertheless, House of Cards inevitably depicts Washington politics in a certain way, albeit unintentional. According to Robin Wright, the actress who plays Claire Underwood, prominent Washington politicians said that this depiction is “99% accurate” (McDevitt). This suggests that House of Cards represents Washington politics without judgment and in a very realistic way, giving viewers a behind-the-scenes look into US federal politics. The writers do not idealize the way politics is conducted in Washington, and don’t condemn it either. They depict Capitol Hill in all its grace and crudeness, showing the viewers that a representative democracy is not a perfect type of governance. Aside from the murders, the storyline tells the viewers that a congressman with enough influence and manipulation skills can legally ‘corrupt’ the democratic process.

Despite the fact that House of Cards is a political TV show, it does not appear to support either a conservative or a liberal agenda. Throughout the show, the presidency is in the hands of the democratic party, and protagonist Frank Underwood pretends to firmly believe in the principles of the democratic. Behind the scenes however, Underwood never expresses his true political stance or ideology. The show does not judge any of the political ideas and schools that are portrayed; the only reason the viewer is rooting against the republicans is because a republican victory would stop the Underwoods’ rise to power. It is quite unusual that an American TV show does not support a certain ideology, let alone a show that takes place on Capitol Hill. Nonetheless, American media have criticized the show for being right-wing and secretly pushing a republican agenda. Randy Shaw of The Huffington Post has called the show a “republican fantasy world”: “While critics praise House of Cards, its promoting a right-wing political agenda is ignored. The show glorifies union bashing and entitlement slashing within a political landscape whose absence of activist groups or anyone remotely progressive resembles a Republican fantasy world” (Shaw par. 1). Admittedly, most of the political acts that are portrayed are those that would belong in a right-wing agenda. Despite this, I still argue that the show does not promote a political view, since all of these political acts from the Underwoods are not conducted out of political principle. Instead, everything the Underwoods do is part of an elaborate plan to rise to power. For example, when Underwood ‘bashes’ the teacher’s union in season 1, he only does so in order to come

closer to the President, not because he disapproves of the political power that unions have. (“Chapter 5”). This avoidance of political bias makes it irrelevant to draw parallels between House of Cards and the current real-life political ideologies. Instead, the value of this case study is in its representation of the practice of politics; unlike the West Wing, it does not idealize a specific political view; it merely represents Washington as an arena prone to corruption, lies and secrecy.

Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed several American quality TV shows in order to answer my research question: how do contemporary American quality TV shows represent America in comparison to their 20th-century predecessors? The premise of this thesis was the assumption that contemporary quality TV shows have a tendency to be revolutionary and controversial, leading me to hypothesize that they do not reaffirm the cultural values that make up “America”, the imagined community. The research in this thesis has confirmed this hypothesis, albeit not fully.

Chapter 2 contained case studies of TV shows in the sitcom and soap opera genres. The Cosby Show and Dallas are prime examples of representations of the traditional suburban American family, in which the hard-working husband provides for his stay-at-home wife and children. Despite its title, Modern Family does not challenge this representation, and instead attempts to resurrect this American family. This nostalgia perfectly fits the post-9/11 sentiment of going “back to normalcy”. This chapter has shown that today’s most popular quality sitcom represents the American family in a way that can be described as a cliché.

In contrast, the crime dramas discussed in chapter three confirm the hypothesis. Whereas the American law enforcement is being idealized in the ‘soap opera thriller’ Twin Peaks, the more recent Prison Break and Breaking Bad convey harsh criticism several aspects of American society, including law enforcement. Prison Break contains themes of government corruption, officer misconduct and capital punishment, which offer a negative perspective of the American law enforcement and penal system. Breaking Bad contains similar representation, albeit less on the surface. Close reading reveals criticism of the American healthcare system, law enforcement and even capitalism.

Finally, chapter 4 revealed that the political drama has also stepped away from idealization. The West Wing offers the liberal fantasy with the perfect democratic president. In addition, Washington politics is portrayed unrealistically and rose-colored. This stands in

sharp contrast with *House of Cards*, in which the power-hungry Francis Underwood does everything necessary to obtain the presidency and become the most powerful man in the western world. Interestingly, the negative representation in Netflix's political drama is considered more accurate and realistic than *The West Wing*. Like the crime dramas, *House of Cards* confirms my hypothesis.

As I mentioned earlier, these case studies do not provide a complete profile of the way American quality TV shows represent "America". Further research is necessary in order to draw reliable conclusions. What I can conclude is that this thesis suggests the presence of a trend in contemporary American quality television: crime dramas and political dramas represent America in a way that is much more critical, pessimistic and negative than their 20th-century predecessors did. Secondly, I found that the modern sitcom seems to be driven by nostalgia for the traditional American family and traditional American notions of consumerism and gender. Again, additional research in similar case studies is required to confirm these conclusions. Representation in television is a field that requires much more attention in the future, and with the increasing negativity projected in TV, this field might just come to the attention of media scholars.

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