

It's Not TV, It's Quality TV: Refining Television at HBO

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KIM: Whenever we start thinking about Quality TV, particularly in preparation for papers such as these, our discussions more often than not come back to *cahiers du cinema* and the *politique des auteurs*.

Why?

Because it was another moment when intellectuals systematically evaluated and tried to make sense of a visual form, intensely analysing and scrutinising it, and elevating its status in the process. In seeking to understand the very nature of the film form and its aesthetics, introducing a new lexicon even – the *auteur*, *mise en scène* – these intellectuals busied themselves with the task of understanding what made film unique; and in so doing identified a canon of best practice designed to make visible that theory. In and through their journal, their approach to intellectual criticism, the forms chosen to articulate new ways of thinking and seeing film, these critics put into discourse categories of film – and sponsored a revolution in cinema.

Far from us making some tenuous, possibly spurious, connection between our intellectual pursuits today and what happened here in France in the 1950s, what we want to suggest is that what we have witnessed over the last decade or so is a similar shift in intellectual discourse—but this time related to television. It is a period marked by an experience of ordering, of classifying, not only of the explicit televisual form and television style, but of the philosophical foundation on which our assumptions, values and judgements are based when we start to talk

about the worth, and importance, of television as a medium. To quote **Michel Foucault [SLIDE 2]**:

‘it is no longer a question of making a previous content manifest to knowledge, but of providing a content that will be able to offer a ground upon which forms of knowledge can be applied.’
(*The Order of Things*, 2003: 75).

JANET: The aim of our paper is therefore not so much to define what quality TV might look like on a particular channel at a particular time, as much as it is to ask why we are compelled to talk about television in this way.

And how, in turn, a television company like the premiere US, pay-TV cable company HBO systematically set about producing television that would be defined as quality as they create a canon of modern television art and storytelling, while compelling us to never forget that this is what they are doing. In short, it is not about merely listing the features of quality TV, as much as it is about searching out the very site on which that practice of defining quality is made possible: to establish the common ground, as it were. It is, to quote **Foucault**, ‘*the language that silently pre-exists within a discourse*’.

In sum on what basis does our knowledge and theory of quality TV become possible?

It is no small coincidence that these moments of frenzied intellectual activity to make sense of an art form often correlate with moments of apparent crisis – to create order from perceived disorder. This urgency to define, this impulse to explain and categorise (and thus somehow retain), often happens at a period when something is perceived to be on

the verge of disappearing, a sense that something is about to be lost. Just as cinema was alleged to be in crisis in the 1950s (with its declining audiences, and shifts in demographics, loss of exhibition circuits, the impact of television), we are witnessing a similar crisis as television as we know it is coming to an end. Of course television is not finished; but it **is** changing.

Digitalisation, video on demand, TiVo, the DVD and box set, time-shifting, catch up TV, the demise of the schedules, Internet TV, viewing television on various different kinds of platforms – laptops, smart phones etc. We are reaching the limits of our current categories as different doors start to open, not only in terms of technological and industrial changes, but also in terms of new systems of thought that account for those shifts.

In the midst of this convulsion we take our cue from **Foucault**, as we understand **quality TV as nothing more than a discursive construct**. Indeed, as we have just said, asserting an idea of quality at moments of perceived crisis is nothing new; but it is the underlying rules, assumptions and ordering procedures that enclose a particular cultural artefact and establish it as something special in its field that is important here. It is a process that brings order to chaos and continuity over discontinuity in a cultural landscape where ideas appear and rationalities are formed, only to dissipate and evaporate soon afterwards.

KIM: What we contend is that HBO with its original programming constituted an idea of what a modern canon of US television fiction might look like. Since relying ever more on prestigious, big budget original programmes to entice subscribers to pay the extra monthly fee, HBO has been occupied in a purposeful rebranding strategy to create a sense of itself as a purveyor of contemporary television art and culture. [**SLIDE 3**]

Ex-HBO chairman and CEO **Chris Albrecht** even went so far as to claim, “HBO is more than a place; it’s an idea ... In certain cases’ it’s like the Medicis, like we’re patrons of the arts.’ Referencing directly the Renaissance mercantile family who sponsored a revolution in art is telling; it speaks directly to how HBO has taken meticulous care to institutionally position itself—while endlessly talking about itself – as the benefactor of an extraordinary wave of accomplishment in television drama that is doing something different, something important.

Our point is not whether **we** think its stable of high performance originals – *Sex and the City*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood* and more recently *Boardwalk Empire*, *Treme*, *True Blood* and *Game of Thrones* – are quality or not, but that HBO has busied itself creating and disseminating a sense of **itself** as **producing** quality TV series.

JANET: [SLIDE 4]. It may at this point be worth pausing for a moment, and taking an ever so brief look at the history of HBO to see how, since its launch as one of the first non-terrestrial cable networks (and becoming in 1975 the first to broadcast via satellite communications). Because across its history HBO has repeatedly pushed the boundaries of the medium – in terms of delivery, form and content.

HBO first transmitted a Vancouver-New York hockey game to 365 homes in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on 8 November 1972. Today, it reaches about 28million US homes (about one-third of the TV households in America).

In 1986, HBO became the first TV broadcaster to encrypt its signal to combat piracy; and thus it set itself apart from the competition – selling itself as something not seen elsewhere on the television landscape. From early on then, the channel placed a high premium on selling its

distinctive brand as something worth paying for each and every month, something that subscribers cannot get elsewhere. The company has actively created an exclusive domain, branding itself as producing television for anyone with discriminating cultural taste; or, as **Amanda Lotz** put it: 'HBO thrives by defying program standards that appeal to the mass audience, and succeeds by exploiting the limited access as a means of acceptance as high (or at least higher) elite art.'

We want now to flesh out this idea of limited access and elite art and think about how HBO turned disadvantages, i.e. its restricted availability, additional cost, into its commercial advantage and a cultural cache.

KIM: HBO is a subscriber-based system; and, because it financially relies on monthly subscriptions, the channel is faced with the endless challenge of having to produce programmes that are worth paying for.

Long have broadcasters designed programmes with an eye toward securing and rewarding viewer loyalty, but HBO ***must*** provide value for money. And the company has done this by establishing a unique cultural capital for itself, thus justifying the additional \$10-15 a month, on top of the basic cable package. It is not about giving the viewer what they are *willing* to watch, but ***what the customer wants to watch***.

[SLIDE 5] There is, however, an important caveat. For, while HBO's public relations sells the idea of its customers as paying for an **exclusive** viewing experience, it is worth bearing in mind the following:

- HBO belongs to Time Warner Inc., which includes **Warner Brothers Productions**, Internet, music and publishing interests. HBO may have started out as a small pay-movie channel as part of the Time Inc. cable package, but it has since become the jewel

in the Time Warner television crown. Here, then, is a notion of quality, of exclusivity and commercial value, rooted in the business practice of the world's largest media conglomerate.

Furthermore this has another implication in that original series like *The Sopranos* aren't so much in competition with primetime US network shows like *The West Wing* and *ER* (both produced by Warner Bros Productions), as much as offering an alternative product within a diverse international multi-media portfolio.

JANET: Next is the question of diversification, which is not only about HBO operating INSIDE Time Warner, but also how the channel actually does business.

HBO is always looking for ways to generate income. It pioneered video-on-demand, for example, as well as alternative ways of selling its products beyond its schedule.

HBO also sells its shows as exclusive syndication deals, to other networks (more of which later).

The company also repackages its series as box sets. In fact it pioneered this media form, first with video and later DVD. It was a pragmatic business decision to extend beyond its limited market reach, beyond its restricted subscription base. The box-set also circumvents the potential problem that limits where HBO can sell programmes with difficult content – whether on basic cable or network – which allows the company to reach a broader market, namely those unable or who choose not to receive HBO.

KIM: [SLIDE 6]: There is another implication related to HBO's subscription-only basis and how that determines its decision to invest heavily in a small, but well-funded series of original programmes.

- Subscription means that HBO is subject to what is known as CHURN. Churn measures the number of subscribers who disconnect and/or reconnect, as well as calculates whether a programme is worth the cost of the monthly subscription payment. Industry analysts have estimated that around 50-60% of HBO's business is subject to churn, as subscribers cancel subscriptions: because people move and later re-subscribe, or simply decide it is not worth the money (esp. those who take advantage of discounted introductory offers).

HBO thus spends a small fortune on promoting itself to customers – and customer satisfaction is vital for business success. (In the 1990s, for example, HBO spent more than \$200m a year – 10% of its annual revenue to hold onto subscribers.) It cannot take for granted the loyalty of customers. The channel must offer a product – and dare we say an exclusive, 'quality' product – for which people are willing to pay extra. In short, HBO, in order to survive within a highly competitive market, must continue to attract new consumers while keeping churn to a minimum.

JANET: Promotion and branding are crucial and the channel initially proved far more adept at these practises than its rivals.

Until the mid-1990s, HBO busied itself establishing a coherent and highly visible brand identity, offering exclusive access to what couldn't be seen on either free TV or basic cable (e.g. uncut first run Hollywood movies and exclusive sporting events like boxing).

Post 1996 marked a shift, partly because the HBO brand had become established, and partly because the media landscape was changing. Thus when **Jeff Bewkes** succeeded as president and CEO in 1995, he introduced a different concept of branding. His idea was to create a more intense and long lasting relationship between customers and the HBO brand by **producing original series**.

The way in which the public relations campaign branded the original series was about not only an exclusive viewing experience (a gated community through subscriptions), but also these shows having distinct cultural value – which, in turn, helped HBO transform itself from an occasional use channel into a truly cultural phenomenon.

KIM: [SLIDE 7] Central to HBO's success has been its audacious marketing claim, 'It's Not TV. It's HBO'. Introduced in 1996, the slogan proved a smart way of differentiating HBO products from the competition, distinguishing original series from standard broadcast network fare. It was a way, argues **Amanda Lotz**, for HBO to distance its content from [quote] '*stereotypic notions of television as "low art"*'. HBO thus promised exclusivity; it is also, notes **Avi Santo**, about granting subscribers membership to a select community that ranks above those who tune in to standard broadcast and cable stations.

And promoting this idea of exclusivity, of being part of the in-crowd, is vital. HBO sponsored, for example, a series of promotional spots, which played on the idea of their original series as 'watercooler TV' – the type of shows that people feel compelled to talk about with friends and co-workers. The deadpan, documentary-style campaign credits the cable network for bringing back banter to the office. Let's take a look ...

Extract: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGA8H_MSPb4

Campaigns like this enable HBO to create a 'buzz' about itself. It trades on the fact that it is offering something unique and of value, something audiences cannot get elsewhere – but something everybody is talking about.

In this campaign, and through other marketing strategies, HBO exploits a cultural capital that it believes its selling to subscribers within the freemarket. If as Avi Santos writes: '*In Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement*, **Pierre Bourdieu** argues that cultural capital grants its owners access and knowledge that enables them to distinguish themselves and gain elevated status in society', HBO, we would suggest, embeds this idea within its notion of quality.

JANET: [SLIDE 8]. 1999 saw **Leibovitz** shoot the Sopranos cast (including creator **David Chase**) for *Vanity Fair*. Based on **Leonardo da Vinci's** iconic Last Supper with Tony at the centre, the image gained immediate fame – and **Leibovitz** won an award for it in 2000.

[SLIDE 9] So successful was the image that HBO hired **her** in 2002 and again in 2004, to shoot the promos for upcoming series, including 'The Hell Has No Fury Like The Family' campaign, for season five.

[SLIDE 10] Evoking past masters like **da Vinci**, and later **Theodore Gericault** and **Eugene Delacroix**, artists who made art that changed art, these promotional campaigns make clear that HBO wants us to see *The Sopranos* as television that is changing television.

In terms of the quality TV debate, campaigns such as these trade heavily on an exclusive cultural domain; and while HBO sets out to appeal to as broad an audience as possible for its service, it does so through creating

an object of desire related to restricted consumer access and an elite cultural capital.

The idea of niche marketing in television is, of course, nothing new. But, as evidenced, HBO has taken it to a new level ... and for the first time a cable/satellite channel has become the first place to find breakout programming. Let us take a look at one of its ads promoting this idea through its cool retro beat (from the early noughties).

Extract: HBO and its 'Sunday is ... HBO'.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUBT-kvtiJU>

KIM: At the start of the noughties, and for most of the decade, HBO has owned Sunday nights. The strategy, in which a network schedules its hit shows on one night, is nothing new. Indeed, HBO borrows directly from NBC when the network scheduled its best shows on Thursday nights, with its 'must-see' TV line-up dominating throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

HBO positioned itself in a similar way. Producing appointment TV for Sunday night – a strategy that continues to this day where audiences come to expect the best of what HBO has to offer. Scheduling original series on Sunday evenings helps launch new shows, including the latest offerings like *Boardwalk Empire*, *Luck*, and more recently *Girls* and *Veep*, which score well in the ratings simply because of the lucrative 9pm timeslot which has become associated with the cultural cache of HBO.

JANET: Central to the success of HBO has been its original programming, which serves as means of reducing churn and generating buzz in order to attract—and retain—viewers.

With no commercials to interrupt programmes and no advertisers threatening to pull lucrative dollars, HBO has been able to pursue a different programming strategy as well as innovate in a way that terrestrial networks cannot.

[SLIDE 11] HBO first built its reputation by scheduling uncut Hollywood feature films and specials (stand-up, sporting events—HBO's initial satellite telecast was of the Mohammed Ali-Joe Frazier boxing match from Manila). Later the channel started to produce its own films as well as the occasional long-form drama or miniseries that wouldn't have got made elsewhere –like *And the Band Played On* (1993), which dealt with the early years of the AIDS epidemic. It the kind of project that would have difficulty finding funding elsewhere in the US. So here is another feature of quality related to risk taking and breaking boundaries (more of which later). But essentially these were one-off projects.

The HBO original series thus became central to the post-1996 business strategy, which built a more intense and long lasting relationship between channel and subscriber through a weekly viewing commitment extending over 13 weeks (rather than an occasional watch).

[SLIDE 12] With these shows HBO sets itself apart from the everyday as it invites viewers to approach the original series with a particular sensibility. Namely, to think of them – from its miniseries like *Angels in America*, *John Adams* and *Mildred Peirce* to its dramas like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Six Feet Under* – as works of TV art.

The perceived cachet of HBO as a haven of creative integrity is constantly being reasserted, in and through the company's self-promotion and waged in aggressive marketing campaigns. Implanted in

its original programming philosophy, and made intelligible in each original series, HBO to a certain extent imposes new norms for television fiction. Yet to utter a new direction is no easy matter; and what the subscription channel has done with its original programming proved sufficiently groundbreaking that at first HBO had to account for its existence and take charge of what made the series unique.

Evoking valorised literary and dramatic forms to set its originals apart from regular television bears, we would suggest, traces of cultural snobbishness and elitism. As if reputable associations are essential before a discourse of what constitutes originality in television drama can be articulated and/or accepted. HBO may tell us that *The Sopranos* for example is not television but it does so based on established values and assumptions of what that might mean.

KIM [SLIDE 13]: It is worth noting that HBO's most successful originals are more often than not rooted in 'classic' US generic forms: the western, the gangster, and the rom-com. Appropriating classic US cultural traditions – literary, theatrical and performative, and those that enjoy a privileged place within the US cultural imagination, means that the originals can determine their own value. It is when one of the original series inhabits a particular privileged generic form and plunders past generic conventions that HBO finds recognition and is better able to promote its prestige.

What we are witnessing is a familiar practice, something that we have seen before in film for example, whereby, the film artist will subvert genre, parody the conventions or take the genre in an unexpected direction. HBO has in part created its reputation by creating new generic cycles through transforming existing ones, suggesting somehow that they are doing something innovative and original with the form. In short:

the HBO original series needs the strict generic rules to establish its televisual uniqueness.

But there is also an elegiac-ness to this process. It is almost as if HBO can *only* be original precisely because it works strictly within a classic generic formula with established parameters. That elegiac-ness emerges in the straining against the limits of that discourse as the series attempts to do different with the genre. *Tony Soprano* may tell us that he has come in at the end, but the aesthetic style and generic conventions as used and revised by the series evokes a feeling of nostalgia for the formidable visual and folkloric iconography of the gangster film established by Warner Bros. and RKO during the classical Hollywood era.

Deadwood begins in 1876 and textually entangles myth with history. Retelling the story of the American frontier is, in part, about a nostalgic yearning at the heart of the *Deadwood* text, for stories that make sense of American identity, history and character. As for *Sex and the City*, the fantasy of happy-ever-after with Mr Right is rooted in its nostalgic use of screwball traditions and the *mise-en-scene* of New York as a romantic playground of fun and possibility. Despite Carrie Bradshaw welcoming us to the age of (un)innocence where romance has flown the coop, the form and *mise-en-scene* of the series compels us to think differently and yearn for the possibility promised by the classic Hollywood romance. In so doing there is an idea of quality based on shared cultural heritage and its importance for a nation. It is about what a particular nation values in terms of storytelling and the stories that it wants to tell itself.

JANET: Central to HBO's definition of its original series is its promotion of the TV *auteur*, foregrounding showrunners such as **Darren Starr**, **David Chase** and **Alan Ball**. Reliance on an original creative vision

behind each project finds HBO placing a high premium on the kind of authorship associated with a liberal enlightenment. Repeatedly writers, producers and directors talk about the creative freedoms enjoyed at the channel. Latitude to tell stories differently, creative personnel given the autonomy to work with minimal interference and without having to compromise, has become the HBO trademark – how they endlessly speak about and sell themselves; how the media talks about them; and how customers have come to understand what they are paying for.

[SLIDE 14] Time and again, the creators tell us of how they were drawn to HBO because of creative freedoms. **David Milch** and **David Simon**, for example talk of how channel personnel encouraged them to be provocative, daring, esoteric – to do different.

New television *auteurs* have also emerged. **Terence Winter** (*The Sopranos*, and more recently *Boardwalk Empire*—working with **Martin Scorsese**), **Robin Green** and **Mitchell Burgess** (also *Sopranos*) and **Michael Patrick King** (*SATC*). Moreover, these writers (often becoming producers) are given a high profile – promoted and fore-grounded often as much as the creator.

Long has it been known that commercial US television likes to minimise risk; but what we see at HBO is a variation on that. While the channel doesn't replicate successful dramas (these are originals, after all), the company does give its authors further opportunities to tell new stories and produce new shows. **Alan Ball**, creator of *Six Feet Under*, was given another chance with *True Blood*; **David Simon**, who initially found recognition with *The Wire*, is responsible for *Generation Kill* and more recently the critically acclaimed, *Treme*; while **Terence Winter**, who worked on *The Sopranos*, is the man behind *Boardwalk Empire*.

(Although success doesn't necessarily follow, and one only need think of **David Milch** who hasn't yet built on his initial achievement of *Deadwood*. *John of Cincinnati* was cancelled after one season. Milch recently had another chance with, *Luck*, a horse racing drama starring **Dustin Hoffman** and **Nick Nolte**, but this was cancelled reportedly because 3 horses died in the filming. Still, the point is that HBO takes risks not with genres, but with its *auteurs* (its creative visionaries).

We do not for one moment suggest that the *auteur* guarantees great television, but that the *auteur* as discourse carries important creative meaning and cultural capital that help establish a reputation for a series—particularly for HBO where series are sold as originals.

At this point is it worth saying that we think it no small coincidence that renewed interest in television in terms of authorship and *auteur* debates coincides with how HBO financially supports (and, more importantly, celebrates) writing teams. Implied here is an idea of the original tele-literary product that places emphasis on smart writing, compelling stories told in innovative ways, and a unique, creative vision behind each project. Reliance on an idea of a sole artistic vision finds HBO placing a high premium on the kind of authorship associated with more traditional art forms – the author as brand label associated with international Art Cinema, for example.

KIM: [Slide] Each HBO series strives to create a distinctive and highly unique visual style. From the hideously beautiful visual referencing of *Deadwood*, to the theatrical tableaux of *Six Feet Under*, HBO aesthetics consistently reference established 'high-end' aesthetic forms, drawn from elsewhere like European art cinema and western art, but it does so to determine value and legitimise a new televisual aesthetic.

The company has earned a reputation for lavishing money on each production. Shot on film, often on-location, and with high production values makes these originals look distinctive. One episode of *SFU*, for example, cost more than \$2m (almost twice as much as a standard network drama); *The Sopranos* cost \$3million per/hr episode, and *SATC* \$2m per half-hour.

Original series look filmic; and this is fostered by the fact that many renowned independent film directors like **Susan Seidelman**, **Allison Anders** and **Rodrigo Garcia** (son of **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**), and more recently **Martin Scorsese** and **Todd Haynes** have taken the directing helm. Not only does movement between film and television say something important about the complex cross-media relationship that exists between contemporary film and television production, and, in particular, those associated with American Independent Cinema working in close association with a studio and its television arm. But also the presence of high-profile individuals who have worked on Independent film productions brings an art cinema sensibility with them (and in the case of Alan Ball the prestigious clout of an Oscar winning screenwriter). This filmic sensibility is associated with artistic and aesthetic values, of cultural capital and value, the author as brand label.

Innovations in production techniques have allowed TV series to produce the same sort of visual effects once the sole preserve of Hollywood feature films. We would now like to consider the 2002 Emmy award winning credit sequence to *Six Feet Under* beginning with these extracts.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS3P9UbxesQ>

[EXTRACT] - <http://beohm.com/sixfeet/makingSFUopener.mp4>

(5 mins of extracts)

JANET: Immediately with the switching on of the HBO logo, the viewer is invited to leave behind the world of regular TV and enter into the realm of HBO. This is followed by the SFU credits, in which the viewer is further interpolated into an existentialist world of artistry and contemplation: meaning is deliberately elusive and the foregrounded fusion of music and image provides an emotional space preparing the viewer for what is to come.

- But what is more interesting still is how the credits invite a high level of scrutiny and announce the artistry of the show – and taps into a longer history of other series that announce their quality and prestige through the credit sequence (like *Twin Peaks*, for example).
- Moreover, within the critique the aim is to reveal the craftsmanship, the visionaries behind the ideas. From Alan Ball to Thomas Newman, the credit sequence is subject to the kind of attention reserved more often than not for high art, as if to authenticate and make visible the importance of this work.
- These artists talk about creative leaps of artistic faith, but that process is spoken about and through established ideas of the value of the artist and their authority to speak about such matters.

KIM: Original series have become authentic labels of quality, of exclusivity and brand equity.

- It is no small coincidence that *Sex and the City*, with its compulsive obsession for designer labels, is the product of a channel itself preoccupied with promoting an exclusive brand identity. *SATC* gives added meaning to the HBO slogan – “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO” – with its celebration of contemporary fashion and exclusive designer shoes as well as its ‘in’ places to eat and be seen in Manhattan. Vicarious consumption and desirable lifestyles are built into the series formula and *mise en scene*. Which further brands the HBO audience as it sells lifestyle choices and a sense

of self to that audience. Let us have a look at an extract from *SATC* when Carrie finds the holy grail of designer footwear:

EXTRACT: The Urban Myth of Mary Janes

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXSIUAS2MNw>

JANET: With no advertisers to appease, and no sponsors to placate, HBO can push the cultural envelope and include bad language, violence and explicit sex scenes. Nowhere on network TV could **Rachel Griffith's** character (in *Six Feet Under*) embark on erotic sexual adventures with strangers. Indeed the freedom to be rude is crucial to shows like *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood*. One of those apocryphal tales has it that **David Chase** pitched *the Sopranos* to 4 networks, and came close to closing the deal with FOX before he was told to rewrite the pilot without swearing, nudity or violence.

But what we want suggest is that in promoting series like *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos* and *SFU* as a high-quality product (as having an author, a creative vision behind it) means that the original series can navigate difficult adult content – sex and profanity – by putting it firmly into a context where smart writing sets the production apart from its competition.

One only needs to examine the use of profanity in *Deadwood*, for example. The series became notorious for its unprecedented use of bad language and violence; but immediately HBO, through promotion and publicity as well as through interviews and newspaper features, enclosed the difficult content within respectable discourses – of historical verisimilitude, of literary respectability and highly valued performative traditions. Put another way: evoking ideas of quality in terms of creative

risk-taking and artistic integrity are cited as ways of justifying the explicitness.

KIM: Which brings back to the very ordering and classifying of these kinds of television fictions. Or, more specifically, how do we talk and write about these shows?

HBO itself has intensified speech around asserting the importance of the creative contribution **it** believes it is making to modern television drama. Never has more attention been focused on explaining and dissecting the text – endlessly described in official companion books and on websites, articulated within DVD commentaries, analysed in feature-length articles and interviews for broadsheets, magazines and specialist media journals.

These original programmes exist enclosed in a sustained critical discourse not only generated by HBO, but also by a broader interpretive community. Print media, and in particular the broadsheets, take charge of meaning, inserting it into its hierarchy – of value, of taste and judgement. **[SLIDE]** Look for example at how the liberal US ‘intellectual’ broadsheets talked about and made sense of *The Sopranos*: **Caryn James** of the *New York Times* cites ‘a piece of capicola as Tony’s Proustian madeleine’; and **Stephen Holden** describes the series’ accumulated conflicts as having ‘the force of Greek tragedy. Or is it a Chekhov comedy replayed in the profanity littered argot of New Jersey hoodlums.’ **Claudia Rosett** describes ‘the intricately well-written ... superbly acted ... mobster story’ as defying the usual television labels, likening it instead to ‘a Greek drama adapted with all its gore and insight into the modern world – Oedipus with semi-automatics; the House of Atreus on Prozac’.

Bold statements, indeed. But more to the point, *The Sopranos* is being talked about in a very particular way and comments like these give us permission to think of, and speak about, *The Sopranos* as contemporary **quality** television.

Our point here is that HBO is doing nothing new (and US television is littered with other examples of companies talking about their ‘must-see’ programmes), and of course intellectual broadsheets have long inserted popular cultural artefacts into a hierarchy of value and taste, but it is the intensity of that self-reflexive commentary turned criticism that intrigues us.

JANET: [SLIDE] There can be no doubt that HBO’s original programming is first and foremost a pragmatic business decision. And one taken at a time when broadcasters were coming to terms with, and responding to, transformations taking place elsewhere within the industry such as the requirements of corporate mergers, changes in federal legislation, and developments in televisual technology and delivery systems; which, in turn, made visible a new television landscape defined by branding and niche marketing, heightened competition for customers and consumer choice.

To this end HBO is a television company that has made visible transformations in the contemporary US TV landscape. In its total commitment, as **Jeff Bewkes** said, to ‘*produce bold, really distinctive television*’, of breaking new ground in programming, HBO has innovated and pushed, for better or worse, US television into newer and (for the networks – often difficult) directions. NBC aired *Leap of Faith* after *Friends* in the Thursday night comedy line-up, written by *SATC*’s **Jenny Bicks**, but it proved a pale imitation of the HBO original. NBC also produced *Kingpin* a muted nod toward *The Sopranos* set within an

international drug cartel. (Both lasted only 6 episodes, before cancellation.)

What lesson can also be drawn from this movement of storytelling ideas from HBO to the networks is that notions of quality don't necessary translate. What appears as quality in one context can be seen as derivative and mediocre in another. This is illustrative of the fact that any notion of quality as a definable set of characteristics or conventions is redundant. Instead what we must understand is the criteria by which the quality label is mapped and made useful.

KIM: By the mid-noughties, though, the days when HBO seemed unassailable were behind it. Its biggest hits *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City* had finished, and newer series like *John from Cincinnati*, *K-Street*, and *Rome* never generated the same kind of buzz. At the same time HBO had begun to second guess creative decisions and there was a sense that they were trying to hard with shows like *Carnivale*.

By 2007, it did seem as if HBO had lost momentum. Other cable companies started to imitate the channel in terms of style and content. fX had done rather well with series like *Nip/Tuck*, *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, dramas which arguably went even further with depictions of sex and violence than HBO; more recently HBO's main rival Showtime has been seen as representing the best of US TV with shows like *Weeds* and *Dexter* (starting **Michael C. Hall** from *SFU*), *Nurse Jackie* (again starring another HBO star, **Edie Falco**) and the post-9/11 drama *Homeland* with **Daniel Lewis** who initially found fame in America through HBO's *Band of Brothers*. And let's not forget, the award-winning, *Mad Men*, created by ex-*Sopranos* writer **Matthew Weiner**, which, single-handedly, turned around the fortunes of AMC, American Movie Classics, on which it airs. (Ironically: HBO turned down the project.). What we are seeing, to a

certain extent, is the HBO cache migrating across the television network as stars and writers who have established a reputation on HBO bringing a particular expectation of quality (in terms of performance and storytelling) to a new project.

HBO's business success has also prompted others to reassess their strategies; for market leaders lead the way for others. The US commercial industry is after all a copycat one. Cable companies like fX and Showtime literally stole the HBO play book and started producing dramas in the mid-noughties which were just as challenging, daring and controversial as anything seen on HBO. And more lately AMC (Story Matters Here) have joined the list as *Mad Men* has led the way for *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead* and the remake of *The Killing*.

JANET: [SLIDE] While HBO temporarily lost ground to competitors, it has always been more than a cable network and production studio. It is also an internationally diversified entertainment corporation and a high-profile global brand.

The channel is fast becoming more of an owner-syndicator, selling shows like *The Sopranos* and *SATC* to various media outlets (from cable to Internet access, within and across national territories. HBO needs to sell its signature shows as exceptional, happening only once and never repeated. This is television designed to stand out from not only the domestic, but international competition. It is a strategy that has paid dividend in terms of syndication and sales to international markets, with HBO, in 2010, agreeing a content deal with BSkyB, reportedly worth around £150million over five years, for the sole rights to the channel's entire back catalogue as well as forthcoming productions). This deal with Rupert Murdoch has been repeated in other territories like New Zealand, for example. Venturing huge amounts of capital to purchase hit

shows is about buying the exclusive HBO label to brand the identity of a particular channel (both at home and aboard). What we find in the UK, for example, is that HBO shows are now locked behind another paywall with Murdoch using the cultural cache of the HBO shows to sell his product for a premium.

KIM: HBO is also an internationally diverse entertainment corporation and global brand. It is a network, but it also generates business from a whole host of spin-off channels from HBO Ole to HBO Asia, from HBO Canada to HBO Latino. It continues to produce programmes (many of which are made for a particular linguistic market), but has developed online contents for its corporate web site, launched new businesses like broadband Internet access as well as pioneered new forms of delivery like HBO on Demand, the box set (a form of self-scheduling) and HBO Mobile (producing original mini-episodes that can only be viewed on the mobile phone) and its latest venture – HBO Go – with its strapline – It's HBO. Anywhere – a new streaming service, which gives instant access to all its shows wherever and whenever you want. But only within the 50 states of America. Still, the point is that with these incremental moves from traditional pay TV into the IP-device world, HBO consolidates its reputation as being relevant, innovative and cutting edge (at a time when its programmes may no longer carry the cultural weight and artistic merit of the earlier shows like *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos*).

So where does this leave us?

So reflexive are the modern television texts, so knowing about their own construction, of their own generic affiliations and televisual history, that it leads us to ask: have we not reached a point where we need different kinds of critical methodology to account for, and make sense, of them? *It seems that we are at another moment where critical commentary is*

folding back on itself. Indeed, so keenly aware is *The Sopranos* text of its status as quality TV, for example, that we, as critics, are in danger of becoming reactionary, possibly redundant, merely left to describe what has already been said, as we lose our traditional role in that naming and ordering process.

JANET: Just as *Cahiers* pioneered new forms of criticism, occasioned by an obstacle in theoretical ordering, have we not reached another similar moment when we need to find new systems of thought which enable us to reflect on a moment of the new, sufficient enough to describe and account for it? Just as the 50-year maturation of film precipitated a new kind of criticism, it seems to us that we have reached a similar point in television studies.

Yet the difference between our position and that of *Cahiers du Cinema* is that, while *Cahiers* gave a discourse for directors like **Alfred Hitchcock** and **Douglas Sirk** to retrospectively speak of their work, (and let's remember that it was the legitimacy granted by French intellectuals which gave these directors a lexicon to describe their own work and find meaning), this ordering process is now embedded into the very television texts themselves, as well as anticipated in the production process, in the marketing and ancillary texts.