



## The second golden age of the tube

by Bryan Morell

**The dawn of the 21st century has brought about** a time of accelerated technological change. Telecommunications providers are in a race to make your latest cell phone obsolete. Cable providers and the myriad of television stations they offer keep multiplying at generous rates. This is the first generation to have the tools in their fingertips to create creative content, which can be immediately released upon a worldwide audience. Accompanied by the rise of non-television stations such as Netflix and Amazon, which have now also gotten into the enterprise of producing their own series of popular shows, the field to disseminate content is wider now than it ever has been. A tidal wave of entertainment options have flooded the information superhighway, and some believe that a by-product of all this innovation is the blossoming of a new golden age of television. And while I typically disregard hyperbolic B.S. like that, I find it hard not to agree.

Many of today's award winning shows harken back to the hour long dramas, which helped foster in the period christened by critics and cultural historians as the Golden Age of American Television. From

the late 1930's to the mid 50's, TV's early era was largely defined by the anxious energy of a live network broadcast, powerful teleplays written by literally luminaries such as Paddy Chayefsky, and Gore Vidal, under the influential direction by the likes of Sidney Lumet and John Frankenheimer. The recreation of theatre classics and Broadway musical revivals rounded out the remainder of the programming. And as the medium grew, successful shows from the radio parlayed their popularity into the new juggernaut of the sitcom, whose impact on pop culture still resonates.

A number of names are associated with the invention of television, and while most could rightfully claim the title of TV's birth parent, the name that tends to frequently crop up with regards to the history of America television is a Mormon fellow named Philo Farnsworth. An early 20th century inventor who contributed over 160 patents into the early framework of radio and TV. World War II got in the way of the first mass manufacturing of television in the United States, the invention of cable television in 1948 would help America see its first initial regular programming, and would over the years grow to become an empire unto itself. As television was easy to dismiss due to its manipulative power over public opinion and flash in the pan appeal, those who understood television as a new art form sought to broaden the medium.

Television survived the game show scandals that threatened the innocence of early 1950's America. And broadcast the realities of an unpopular war and the disillusionment of a changing society in the 60's. The confusion of the country was carried over to the next generation, as TV was there to show an American President resign in disgrace. Television saw what many consider its second golden age during the mid-80's to early 90's, where shows such as Hill Street

Blues and St. Elsewhere pushed the dramatic envelope further than it ever had been up to at that time.

The old idiot box has grown a brain in recent years. And while at times we may feel inundated with questionable vapid reality TV, which could seem to shoot the brain theory in the foot, the amount of options available that offset the stupidity are too vast to ignore. Misusing a tool does not mean that the tool is inherently useless. And while digging past the surface of dirt on top can be seen as a labor of frustration, it should be looked upon as an exercise in cultural expansion. Most popular shows today are not hindered by the stifling standards that were once set forth by the major primetime networks. Even modern censors have laxed over time in order to keep their content competitive with the uncensored world of HBO and the gang of the subscription services that have taken a strong hold of the reigns of the future of series development. The days of the three major networks controlling popular programming is long gone, and the big three, NBC, ABC, and CBS are swimming fast in a desperate attempt to stay afloat in the changing tide.

With the array of new avenues available for cultures to cross, popular programs and their standout stars now have a wider international audience to play to. As opposed to the past where they would have to take their acts overseas to attain such attention. Instead of franchising hit shows into foreign forms of their original templates, the original versions are more often shown, accepted and well liked. Numerous film stars have taken to the small screen, as some shows now carry the cinematic weight equivalent to a major motion picture release. While many actually consider this to be the third golden age of TV, I sincerely hope that I'm around to see what excitement and originality the fourth brings in its wake.

## DOWNTON ABBEY

# Is the thrill gone from Downton?

BY TASHA BRANDSTATTER

2014 brings with it another season of *Downton Abbey*, not just one of the most successful dramas in PBS history, but one of the most successful television series of all time, critically and commercially. Yet season four had a noticeable lack of buzz leaking across the pond from its earlier airing in the UK, and PBS felt the need to pad its Sunday nights by pairing *Downton Abbey* with BBC's *Sherlock*—which, unlike *Downton*, did receive plenty of buzz and critical acclaim during its UK and Canada airing earlier in January. Is the bloom off *Downton Abbey*, and will the creator Julian Fellowes be able to recapture it?

*Downton Abbey* is a historical melodrama centering on the Crawleys, an aristocratic family inhabiting the eponymous Abbey, and their servants. Although the show is basically about a house, many of the story lines deal with masculinity—or lack thereof—in its male characters, probably why the show is popular with both male and female viewers. In a 2012 article in *The Atlantic Wire*, one male viewer said he enjoyed the show because,

There's a Clint Eastwood epic flowing through the show in that everyone has deeply repressed emotions and is big on obligations to duty. I don't think you see that in American shows so much... [In 'Downton'] people are swallowing their deeply held feelings and doing their duty anyway. I wish I had the ability of Mr. Bates to stuff everything down into a dark hole, but instead I'm Twittering.

Ah yes, the romance of an emotionally repressive era. Who wouldn't find it appealing? Yet with Lord Grantham's fighting to retain control of his estates, Bates' battle royale with his ex-wife, and the heir to *Downton* struggling to regain the use of his lower limbs (all three of them) in season two, there is definitely a theme running through the series of men trying to assert themselves in the home, a space usually designated as symbolically feminine.

The most important of these male characters, and the heart of the show, was Matthew Crawley, a distant relative of Lord Grantham who was cheerfully living the life of a middle-class lawyer until a death in the family made him the heir to Grantham's title and estate. Despite the large cast of lovable characters and those we love to hate, Matthew was the character that centered the show because it was through his eyes that viewers were able to get to know and relate to the aristocratic Crawleys. They're anachronistic and ornamental, yes, but Matthew's affec-

tion for them and optimism that *Downton Abbey* can be modernized made even ice queen Mary sympathetic, if not likable.

Unfortunately, the actor who played Matthew, Dan Stevens, decided to leave the show last year. The character died rather suddenly in a car crash at the end of season three. His was the second major death of the season, the other being the death of Sybil, the youngest and nicest of the Crawley sisters. While Sybil's exit from the show was handled with grace and emotional impact, however, Matthew's abrupt exit seemed like a slap in face to both Stevens and viewers. Now, at the start of season four, one wonders if *Downton Abbey* can recover from his loss.

The Abbey is still as grand as ever, the characters as gorgeously dressed, and Lady Violet is always ready with her characteristic quips; but the Crawleys also seem increasingly irrelevant in a world that's becoming "modern," a tottering grand dame about to find out she's not wearing any clothes. The most promising new character is Rose, a young cousin of the Crawleys, and if the show featured more of Rose it would probably be better for it. But without Matthew the balance of the show feels off, and there's no good replacement for him: Tom Branson, Sybil's widower, isn't exactly fond of the Crawleys or the upper-class in general; and all of Mary's new suitors are aristocratic and completely boring.

Speaking of Mary, as one of my friends put it after the third season finale, "Of course she had to have a baby, otherwise with Matthew dead we would have gone right into a repeat of season one." True, but one wonders now if that wouldn't have been a better strategy. At least it would give Mary's character something to do. And where are those kids, anyway? Someone should probably go check on them.

Aside from a dearth of interesting and relatable characters, some of the new plot lines Fellowes introduces in season four don't seem capable of furthering the characters in a believable and impactful way. In the first episode, for example, the children's nanny is caught abusing Mini Sybil; and in the second episode (or third, depending which side of the Atlantic you live on), beloved lady's maid Anna is raped by



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a visiting servant. The event itself is preceded by Anna's husband, Bates, scolding her for playing games in the servant hall with the man in question. Perhaps this was meant to come off as prescient on Bates' part, but the tone was more patronizing and suggestive that if Anna'd only listened to her husband, the rape wouldn't have happened.

Of course, it's a writer's job to torture characters, to push them "to the brink," as Fellowes himself put it. But torturing characters without a larger purpose comes off as gratuitous and off-key to the context of the show. Fellowes' strength lies in societal tensions and drawing room drama—civilized backstabbing at its finest. The very serious and violent topic of rape, not to mention child abuse, makes such drama seem trivial at best. Meanwhile, Fellowes does nothing to challenge the benevolent patriarchal fantasy of the relationship between the aristocracy and servants that the show maintains—and it needs to be challenged. Matthew implicitly challenged it for three seasons, an outsider looking in, and that was the engine that fueled the entire drama. If the Crawleys, and thereby the show, are to survive through the 1920s, they need long-term conflict with a thematic scope, such as the struggle to adapt and grow into his new role as Lord Grantham's heir that Matthew provided.

A fifth season of *Downton* has already been ordered, and Fellowes will probably continue doing exactly as he pleases with the show. Nevertheless, one wonders if Fellowes will ever be able to resurrect the magic and resonance of the first few seasons. Maybe Zombie Matthew is in order?