

'Quality TV' Within Advertiser Supported Networks

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April 7, 2019

Abstract

'Quality TV' is a concept that we've discussed in our class many times. It can be defined as television with deep meanings rich with resonance and timeless applicability. Premium television channels like HBO and Starz have been included in the narrow definition of those who create 'Quality TV'. What happens when cable networks start to blur the lines of who is considered to be the creators of "Quality TV"? Critically acclaimed television show *This Is Us* is a show centered around deep storylines and timeless topics that can be related to from every generation. A television show like this is considered to be 'Quality TV' but runs on a national public network. In this essay, we will be exploring the idea of how cable networks are trying to copy the idea of 'Quality TV' from other premium networks. Specifically, *This Is Us*. This show produced on a broadcast network defies the typical and is lumped in with other shows that are categorized as 'Quality TV'. It combines the use of serial storytelling, anti-hero characters, and mise-en-scene to emulate what premium television networks began in the 2000s.

Keywords: 'Quality TV', *This Is Us*, writing, production, editing, costumes, storylines, serial storytelling, mise-en-scene, anti-hero

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Since the turn of the century, there has been a new definition arising from what we consider to be enriching, historically “good” TV. Throughout this paper, we are going to be discussing the model of ‘Quality TV’ and how its dynamics have switched from just subscription-based networks to the realms of broadcast television networks. In order to do this, we will need to look within a television show that is redefining what it means to be categorized as ‘Quality TV’. Critically and culturally acclaimed television show *This Is Us* has been on broadcast network NBC for about 3 years. The show features an ensemble cast that has been given many awards for their acting skills and the portrayal of their characters. The show is centered around one family, the Pearsons. The family is comprised of the parents Jack and Rebecca and their 3 kids, twins Kate and Kevin and their adopted African American son Randall. It is shot in 5 different time frames: before/ right after the Pearson kids were born, when the kids are 9 years old and 17 years old, present day and sometime in the future. As the show progresses through the different time frames, the actors change and the stories get much deeper and richer. As we explore how the family interacts at all these different times we can begin to see character roles develop. The elements of writing, anti-hero personalities, and mise-en-scene within each episode shine through.

First, we must establish a definition of ‘Quality TV’ and the elements that it is comprised of. Quality TV can be defined in many different ways, depending on the person you ask. For this essay, we will have our own definition of 'Quality TV'. 'Quality TV' must include enriching, serial storylines with deep meaningful messages. 'Quality TV' must have complex characters or anti-heroes. anti-heroes, for our purposes, are characters that everyone loves, but they have flaws

which make them more and more human. 'Quality TV' must have a great set design and some episodes must be shot in locations they take place in. In the show *This Is Us*, all of these elements can be seen. Thus showing that 'Quality TV' can exist outside of those premium networks.

We will be exploring how these definitions of 'Quality TV' present themselves within the show. Specifically, we will be looking at two episodes of the show. One episode we will be looking at is called "Memphis". This episode is centered around Randall Pearson and his relationship with his birth father, William. The episode follows their journey around Williams hometown of Memphis Tennessee. We will be looking at this episode in comparison to the show *The Sopranos* in the context of the show being shot on location and how it utilizes different parts of the mise-en-scene concepts to project aspects of 'Quality TV'. This specific episode of the show was shot on location in Memphis, like every episode of *The Sopranos* is. It also uses many important elements in editing, costume design and music during the episode that help shape the character's background as well as conceptualize the city of Memphis as a whole.

We will also be looking at the storyline and writing of "The Car". Writing and plot lines are essentially what separates 'Quality TV' from 'regular TV'. This is the element that makes 'Quality TV' have those enriching, deep and meaningful storylines. During all of these episodes, there is 1 character who is the main anti-hero within the text. We will explore this character and show why they are considered to be an anti-hero.

To do all of this, we will need to use research surrounding our new definition of 'Quality TV'. One reading we will use is the reading by Sarah Kozloff called "Narrative Theory and Television". This reading discusses the idea of narrative theory within "Quality TV". The final

reading that will help us establish why *This Is Us* is considered 'Quality TV', is called "Mad Men Visual Style" by Jeremy G. Butler. This reading talks about the uses of mise-en-scene within 'Quality TV'. These 2 readings from our class along with a few show reviews and articles will help to support my claim that ad-supported shows like *This Is Us*, can still be considered 'Quality TV.'

Writing

The writing of a television show is perhaps the most important aspect of it. The voice behind the writing helps one connect to the shows plot line and feel like they aren't watching someone act as much as they feel like they're looking into someone's life through a window. The writing of a television show helps us establish characters, and set the mood of the show. The writing of the show is what pulls at the heartstrings or makes those have an emotional connection to what happens on the show. Writing is what separates your grandparents 'idiot-box TV' from 'Quality TV.'

In shows like *This Is Us* each week the writing that connects the plotlines continues to get increasingly more developed and 'rich'. It is crucial to the plot of *This Is Us* that the writing carry over from episode to episode and fill in gaps and questions the viewer would like answered the next week. 'Quality TV' utilizes serial storytelling as Kozloff (1992) defines it, "[s]tories and discourses that do not come to a conclusion during an episode and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus." Most storylines on *This Is Us* are serial or take many episodes to play out and complete. They are also not chronological and are told with many flashbacks and flash-forwards that come up again in future episodes to connect the dots. The writing gives each character meaning and purpose and helps establish the narrative each episode portrays as well as

continue the storyline through the upcoming weeks in order to keep audiences engaged and interested. As stated in Kozloff's (1992) argument about narrative theory within television, "[s]erial storytelling is what keeps shows alive and what keeps audiences wanting more during the hiatuses. This technique is used by many and is called--the cliffhanger." 'Quality TV' shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The Sopranos* both use serial storytelling, more specifically cliffhangers, to do this. *This Is Us* uses serial storytelling in the form of symbolism and continuity throughout many episodes to connect moments throughout the season back to each other as well as connect one image to an overall theme for a set of episodes. In the paragraph below we will examine how serial storytelling in the form of symbolism and continuity is used in one of *This Is Us*'s best-reviewed episodes.

The episode we are analyzing is from the show's second season. It is called "The Car". This episode immediately follows the plot line of the previous episode, which is surrounding the death of the father figure named Jack. It shows the impact that this one man had on his family and the legacy that he left for them. This episode is critically acclaimed and was put on The Washington Posts list of best TV episodes of 2018 at number 5. The writer of the article Butler (2019), stated: "'The Car' is a stunning portrait of family grief — and a father's unconditional love." The story follows the different journeys and experiences that have taken place in one car. It shows all the different types of stories that can come out of one item. Such as the family buying the car, driving to their fathers funeral, Jack and Rebecca waiting for her potential diagnosis, the milestone of teaching their sons to drive and Jack taking Kate to get her record signed by her favorite artist. Each memory of Jack more emotional and sentimental than the past one. Each story more gripping, more meaningful than the last. Each story that takes place

centered around this car has a message behind it. The writers are able to create an episode entirely out of one material object and have 5 or 6 storylines come out of it, each with a different message. That's the talent of 'Quality TV' writers.

'Quality TV' doesn't have to always be risqué or full of cursing, violence, and nudity like *The Sopranos*. It has to be filled with relatable stories filled with deep rich meanings. Even from the simplest of things in life. The reason why I choose to analyze the episode "The Car" is that it does that flawlessly. It's filled with deep and rich storylines made out of something as mundane as a car. It creates a world where the Pearsons lives are no longer perfect as we see an insight into their lives without Jack. As written about in Vulture writer Maggie Freemont's (2018) review of the episode, "But really, we're seeing all the little gifts Jack left for his family. Moments that maybe didn't feel so important at the time, became very important after Jack's death", showing just how vital the symbolism from beginning to end is within this episode. This episode is filled with tender moments between each character along with displays of true human emotion. Jack's encouragement of Kate's dream, his reassuring speech to Rebecca, his plea to his sons about the importance of family, all centered around this one Pearson family car.

"The Car" ends with a symbolic parallel where Jack's kids are spreading his ashes around his favorite tree, while it begins to snow. Just how he told Rebecca while sitting in their car, he wished it would happen. It ends with the audience knowing that Jack bought tickets for his family to see Bruce Springsteen like he told Kate he would in their meaningful talk within the car. "The Car" has so many meaningful parallels within it. The writers used the car as a symbol of Jack's life. As written by Freemont (2018), "He wants a car that is sturdy and tough because it will face so many bumps and scratches and spills (some of which we see in a lovely montage),

that the car will tell the story of his family... he knows that with that car, *The Car*, his family will be okay. He needs his family to be okay.” The writers use this car to tell the Pearson family story with Jack and to continue telling their story after his passing. Every mundane moment or milestone of it. The car serves as a reminder of each memory the kid has with their father and of each moment Rebecca and Jack share. Not only does the car do that, but it paves the way for his family to start creating new memories, ensuring that they will be okay without him, which is all he ever wanted. This type of symbolism and continuity through different time periods is one that can only be seen in ‘Quality TV’.

Anti-heroes

Within shows, like *This Is Us* and *The Sopranos*, there is always the main character with many flaws that can be seen. The anti-hero is an essential part of ‘Quality TV’ storyline. This person is someone we can relate too, someone who has their own demons but deep down is a good person. An anti-hero can be described as someone who is the protagonist character within their stories but they fail to possess those typical qualities of a hero. They typically have both good and bad qualities. They usually have a troubled past or mental problem, but can also be seen as the good guy that’s relatable to the audience. When you look at an anti-hero you see someone who is not the perfect hero, but someone who tries to almost always do the right thing for them. A person who has their demons and isn’t afraid to show them to an audience.

In *The Sopranos*, mob boss Tony Soprano has all these qualities that make someone an anti-hero. He is not the typical hero, but a guy who has many many flaws shown throughout the duration of the show. One thing an Anti-hero has going for them is that somehow all of these flaws make that anti-hero more likable. Tony goes home to his family, then he cheats on his

wife. Tony is a mobster but has an anxiety disorder and seeks help from a therapist to maintain control over it. Tony makes impulsive decisions but learns from his mistakes. Tony is a relatable protagonist who is far from perfect. A person whom the audience has the time to get to know and understand the flaws that make up the character. All these situations and more are what make Tony Soprano a great anti-hero to base this argument off of.

One of the main characters in *This Is Us*, is the father of the triplets, Jack. Jack is presented to be a perfect father, brother, and husband in the first few episodes of the show. As the show progresses we take a deeper look into Jack's past life and his demons start to present themselves one by one. This concept is talked about by Bonnie Stiernberg (2017) in her article for Rolling Stone:

“He’s just unrealistically flawless in general – an image that’s then shattered in the final few episodes of the season when he relapses and transforms into the TV-dad version of a Springsteen song. We learn about his sketchy past and his cold, alcoholic father. We watch him get into a drunken bar fight and reveal himself to be kind of selfish and controlling of his spouse.”

Jack is a Vietnam veteran who has PTSD from his traumatic time overseas. This PTSD leads to him becoming an alcoholic, like his father. After meeting his wife Rebecca, Jack gives up drinking until it starts to haunt him again when his kids hit their teenage years. As the kids grow older, Jack and Rebecca's seemingly perfect marriage starts to dwindle. Jack one night after a tirade of drinking comes to his wife singing performance and accuses her of cheating on him with her bandmate. This is when Jack hits his low point as the pair decides to separate. All of these qualities are of those that make up a typical anti-hero.

Everyone watching the show can relate to Jack getting frustrated and jealous of his wife being with another man. Those who struggle with addiction can understand Jack's relapse and the hard time he has quitting drinking. Every veteran watching the show can understand Jack's struggle to relate to life at home and his struggles with PTSD.

Even though Jack does have these flaws, we still root for him. We want him to succeed in spite of all those flaws he possesses. That is an important quality within an anti-hero. It has to be someone we want to win, even when it seems like they make the wrong decision or do something that we wouldn't do. Many of us will never be in the position Tony Soprano is in, during many of the episodes of *The Sopranos*. Having to choose whether someone lives or dies, but we still hope that he makes the right choice. Even if he doesn't do what we would, we still hope that the police don't find him or that someone doesn't rat on him. We root for him in spite of his poor decision making and we relate to his struggle between good and bad, which is an important part of what turns a regular protagonist into a 'Quality TV' anti-hero.

Mise-en-scene and On-location Shots

In 'Quality TV' you can see that a great deal of effort and work is put into each character's costume, set design and text placement, wherever that may be. Perhaps one of the things that made *The Sopranos* such a popular form of 'Quality TV' was its opening sequence of recognizable North Jersey landmarks.

This Is Us uses its own form of mise-en-scene in many different ways throughout the show. From casting to character makeup to ensuring that sets are accurate with the times and places they reside in. The same amount of work that went into making *The Sopranos* set so fascinatingly relatable can be seen here.

Perhaps the reason that there are on-location shots is that it helps to relate the story to its audience. A show can take place anywhere in the world, but the reason that on-location shots are used is to establish a narrative that people may recognize as the characters go through each episode and develop their own story. This value of on-location shots and giving their TV narrative a distinct place to play out is what moves 'general TV' into that sought after category of 'Quality TV'. This can be seen in the episode "Memphis". The episode centers around one character Randall and his relationship with his birth father in the final days of his life. His one last wish is to visit his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee and experience it with his son, to make up for the lost time. By shooting this episode in Memphis, you give context to Randall's father, William's life. It shows where he grew up and how he was raised and the culture that surrounded him. What makes it more special, is those who live in Tennessee, see the show appreciate their state and use their culture in a way that helps shape William's character right before he passes on.

The establishing shot of Memphis in "Memphis" includes many famous places that are specific to that area to show that it was really filmed there. It shows the famous recording studio Stax, as well as the famous 'Soulville' sign that is located in the heart of the city. They also show the Lorraine Motel, which is an iconic motel that holds The National Civil Rights Museum within it. By showing these shot of iconic places in Memphis it helps to establish that this episode was really shot there, therefore making the story more relatable. As I stated above this could be to help those familiar with the area relate to it more or to help those who have never been there, see Memphis for the city that it was meant to be represented as in this narrative, the place that turned William into the man he is.

This episode is also special in the history of *This Is Us* because this was the only episode of that first season to be almost completely shot on location. One reason that AD-supported television shows cannot always be filmed on location is that they do not have the budget to travel to the places where things are supposed to be shot. Especially this is us because it takes place in 3 to 4 different places each episode. They also have more of a time constraint regarding their shows, which makes it hard to pack up production from California and move it across the country just to film one episode. Unlike premium networks, shows on AD-supported networks have shorter hiatuses and longer seasons. Premium networks can have shows with a 10 episode season that takes 2 years to produce. Because advertiser-supported television has quotas to meet and time slots to fill they do not have that same luxury of flexibility. They have to have 20 plus episode long seasons completed to premiere during the months of September-December and January-April every year. This makes it extremely hard to pack up production and move around the country in order to get those on-location shots.

For the purposes of this essay, we will be using Jeremy G. Butler's definition of mise-en-scene used in his article "Mad Men Visual Style". Butler (2013) defines mise-en-scene as "[e]lements arranged in front of the camera, and it's cinematography or elements associated with the camera itself... Cinematography includes framing, camera angle, and camera movement. It is also critical to attend to the program's editing it determines what we see on screen, for how long and in what context." The first aspect of mise-en-scene that we will analyze is cinematography used in this episode. It is shot using one camera in most scenes, this is a film-like tactic used by other shows, like *The Sopranos*. By using the one camera shot, this episode feels more natural to those that are watching it. The emotions feel more real, the scenes

seem less rehearsed and more film like. It utilizes the one camera shot in scenes with just two people, especially between William and his son Randall and William and his mother. But using this film-like approach to a shot, it allows for the scenes to seem more authentic and has a better chance to connect with the audience watching it. This is a common practice of 'Quality TV' shows.

The next and final aspect of mise-en-scene that is used within “Memphis” is the aspect of editing and how the story of Williams life is told. The show bounces back and forth between 3-time frames as far as editing goes. William as a newborn, William as a 20 something and William in the present. By showcasing these 3 different time frames and editing the scenes to be out of chronological order, it adds depth to the story surrounding William’s life. It allows us to take a look back to see how William got into the position he is in today. This technique can be seen in *The Sopranos* as well. When Tony goes to his therapist to discuss his ongoing anxiety, he has to take a look back at the events that happened to him prior to being in the therapy session. This technique of out of order storytelling is used in 'Quality TV' to keep audiences engaged and is a crucial part of serial storytelling, as discussed in the sections above.

Conclusion

These elements of TV previously above are essentially what composes so-called 'Quality TV'. These elements can be seen in the prestige era of television started by *The Sopranos* on premium and subscription networks. Now 20 years since the start of *The Sopranos* in 1999 we can see these same elements being used in advertiser-supported networks, like in the show *This Is Us* airing currently on NBC. *This Is Us* is one of the few shows on advertiser-supported

television that possesses those 'Quality TV' elements everyone looks for in a serial television show.

Firstly, it utilizes some of the best plotlines currently on television. Premium networks included. It utilizes the actors' talents and creates deep, meaningful, rich storylines filled with emotional lessons and relatable moments in life. These elements are those that make up the writing of 'Quality TV' shows. As discussed in the section above on writing, *This Is Us* capitalizes on aspects such as symbolism and continuity to bring their texts to life. It uses symbolism heavily in the episode we examined, "The Car". This episode showcases that everyday items the viewers at home use and can turn into something resembling the legacy of the man who left it. It uses a mundane object to come across as an important symbol of someone's lifetime. In and out of the time jumps, that car is used in different ways that go beyond transportation. Eventually, it leads to the car being the central source of Pearson family memories. This symbolism utilized by the writers is similar to those used by other 'Quality TV' writers. At the end of the episode, you are left with satisfying 'ah ha' moment, when you finally see the pieces of symbolism connect and fall into their meaningful place in the story.

The next defining and important part of 'Quality TV' that *This Is Us* possesses is that of an anti-hero. Anti-heroes are present in most if not all 'Quality TV' shows. They are those characters that don't always make the right or perfect decision but can somehow still be related to and in most cases rooted for. Even though they don't always make the right decision, you can always see the anti-heroes point of view and understand their reasoning for making one decision over the other. Within *This Is Us*, the anti-hero is the main character, Jack. He is presented as the perfect father, husband, and friend in the first few episodes of the show. As *This Is Us* progresses

into its later and complex storylines, we find that Jack struggles with his own demons. Those include PTSD from the Vietnam war, alcoholism and intense jealousy over his wife. Those demons can be relatable for anyone watching. Being relatable is an important part of being an anti-hero, it's what makes the audience root for you even when you don't make the best decision.

Finally, the last aspect that makes up our definition of 'Quality TV' is that of mise-en-scene and on location shots used to tell a story. These elements of mise-en-scene we are using are editing, cinematography and importance of on-location shots. As discussed above, the episode "Memphis" was specifically shot and produced in Memphis to portray a genuine narrative of the character William's life. It was important to the story to have historic parts of Memphis shown and have those parts of Memphis help round off William's background. Next is the way in which that story of "Memphis" was told. By using a film-like, 1 camera shot for the most intimate of scenes, the episode is seen more realistically and emotionally through the audience's eyes. By telling the story out of order by using a specific editing style you are able to see moments of the past directly followed by those of the present, showing how those past moments directly impacted William's future. These elements are used in shows like *The Sopranos* in flashbacks. The flashbacks are utilized to help give context to the current situation the characters are in. Telling the story out of order is what helps give audiences a glimpse of how events can directly affect one another. This is the final element that is commonly used in 'Quality TV' narratives.

All the elements discussed above, writing, anti-heroes, and mise-en-scene are what separates regular TV from the sought after category of 'Quality TV'. As proved above, these elements are not exclusive to those shows on premium networks, like *The Sopranos*. They can

exist on advertiser-supported networks as well in shows such as *This Is Us*. This critically acclaimed drama is apart of the sought after category of 'Quality TV' for the reasons as proved above. This show possesses those necessary qualities and separates itself from those other prime time dramas on other advertiser-supported networks. Because this show falls under the category of 'Quality TV', it may be time to start looking for quality programming outside of our premium networks and giving 'Quality TV' shows like *This Is Us*, the respect it deserves, regardless of the platform it is distributed on.

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