

TV's true golden age: Cable for the best drama

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

The 1950s and 1960s are often cited as the golden age of television. Those were the days when comedians such as Groucho Marx and writers such as Rod Serling worked in the business. That era produced many programs that still bear rewatching (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, for one, and I say this not just because I had a boyhood crush on Mary Tyler Moore).

But the golden age of television really was not then but now—and that's because of cable television. Cable television? With its graphic violence and sex?

Yes, cable television, with its admittedly adult fare, offers the best drama available on television. I have in mind such series as HBO's *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* and *Deadwood*; SyFy's *Battlestar Galactica*; and AMC's *Breaking Bad*. All these shows have richly complex characters, topflight writing and multiple, interlacing story lines. The serial structure of these programs allows characters and plots several episodes for development. Even the best feature-length film, by contrast, has only a couple of hours to introduce its characters, set up its story and play these elements out to their conclusion. If movies are short stories, then the best of the dramatic series on cable are like novels. Perhaps this is why shows such as *The Wire* attract script writers who are some of the best novelists of our time.

The Wire is like a massive novel that views the city of Baltimore from several different angles. In successive seasons, *The Wire* examined the core institutions of a modern city, including the police and court system, the school system, the industrial sector and the media. Imagine the storytelling possibilities if you could introduce and develop in one season a hardened but fragile and self-destructive cop and in a subsequent season examine this already well-developed character from the perspective of journalists and overburdened inner-city high school teachers. That's what *The Wire* did, and that surely is a core reason it attracted writers of the caliber of Dennis Lehane and George Pelecanos.

Tony Soprano is probably the most famous of cable drama's complex characters. He is a mafia don capable of killing people with his bare hands, but regularly pouring out his conflicted conscience to a psychotherapist. And we also see Tony as the domesticated, an ostensibly regular guy in suburbia, cleaning his swimming pool and trying to raise two teenage children. If I was at all a typical viewer, it was difficult to resist sympathizing—at times—with this murderous, deceitful, womanizing thug. You might let your guard down in episodes in which Tony sends his daughter to college, or strains to save his drug-addicted and suicidal son. Then would come one of Tony's sudden, violent outbursts, all the more shocking and dramatically effective because you had seen, in depth, other sides of the mafioso.

The most fascinating character in current cable drama is Walter Hill of *Breaking Bad*. Hill is a chemistry teacher in Albuquerque who has been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Expecting his imminent demise, Hill wants to leave his wife, teen age son and newborn daughter with sufficient financial resources after his death. But he won't amass those resources on a teacher's salary. He searches for alternatives, and through a former student who is now a junkie Hill hits on the idea of cooking and dealing methamphetamine. He "breaks bad," and with his considerable expertise in chemistry, he ends up making meth of the highest quality.

Once again, the possibilities of dramatic development are manifold. Is Hill losing his soul as he gains untold wealth? What happens if his wife finds out just how much money he has made and how he made it? What happens when people—even an airplane full of people—die as a consequence of Walt's actions?

As with all the cable dramas I've mentioned, *Breaking Bad* does not shy away from ambiguity. The *New Yorker's* Nancy Franklin is right when she observes that "you could make the case that sometimes leaving viewers uneasy and in the dark, not the use of bad language or depictions of sex, is the biggest difference between cable and network drama."

Agreed. We can adapt the warning of Dave Chappelle, a comedian made famous on cable, to cable drama in general: "Better not bring the kids." But for grownups in search of sophisticated and often stunning drama, there is no better place to find it in our culture now than on cable television.