



10 "No Exit" Blue Revisions 08/31/06

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS  
they hear VOICES. Someone's coming.  
Shh. DEAN  
Sam quietly closes the door and they hide in an alcove as...

MAN'S VOICE  
It's a great building, they fixed  
it up real nice. Apartments come  
furnished, too.  
That's so convenient. YOUNG WOMAN'S VOICE  
Dean and Sam know that voice. They step out of hiding.  
Coming straight toward them are Ed and... Ed.  
What the hell are you doing here?  
JO  
(without missing a beat)  
This is my boyfriend Dean and his  
buddy Sam.  
ED  
Good to meet ya. (to Ed) are, honey,  
got here.  
He eticks out his hand. Dean has no choice but to shake it.  
Yeah, she's a pisth. DEAN  
So, didya already check out the  
apartment? JO  
Dean isn't quite sure what can job she's doing it. Sam  
more POINTED-- JO  
The one for rent? DEAN  
Yeah, we did. Loved it.



Rachel Talalay

---

# Will Television Sound the Death Knell for Directors?

Not long ago, a “seasoned television director” was a euphemism for a hack. Over the past decade, however, with new economic models and digital advances, television has started to change. First, HBO enticed high profile feature directors to improve the image of television, and recently, Netflix has begun redefining the broadcast medium by creating a new financial strategy that has resulted in them becoming leaders in this fast-changing digital economy. *The Wrap* recently posed the question “Emmy vs. Oscar: Which Honors the More Substantial Work?” (June 27, 2012). In true Hollywood headline hype, television pitches itself as *the* transformational medium to save the entertainment world. But is it?

It is widely accepted that feature films are a director’s medium while TV belongs to the writers and producers. On feature films, the director is the key creative lynchpin of the product whereas in television, the director is generally a part-time hire whose creative input is limited. With this new model, in which high profile Hollywood directors work in television, the uneasy relationship between television producers and directors is testing the old adages. The hope would be that these changes could improve the situation for directors in the television medium. As an experienced television director, I see a variety of pitfalls arising from the glorification of the television medium that might result in the demise of the director as auteur.

To understand this disquietude, it is necessary to examine the differences between the film and television business models. The two media are on separate branches of the entertainment industry that, while jointly motivated by profit, have entirely different financial structures. Big budget films are predominantly financed by major studios, who, given the state of the current marketplace, are attempting to decrease financial risk by making tent-pole movies (attractive summer blockbusters full of stars, action, and computer graphics). Conventional wisdom states that the marketplace is primarily male and aged fourteen to twenty-four, and that if a film’s marketing entices that

core audience, female viewers will follow suit. Successful blockbusters such as Marvel’s *Iron Man* (2008), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), or *The Avengers* (2012) are the capstones of this model. Hot male leads bring both sexes. Therefore, adrenaline-driven, male-dominated stories rule. Statistical trends show that the youth-male audience actually prefers to play video games or watch programming on their computers. However, it only takes one *Avengers* movie, with its worldwide box office of \$1.4 billion dollars, to affirm this outdated model that leaves almost no money for other types of movies (least of all to the ones that cater to any other audience demographic).

The economic mysteries of this model are apparent when one examines the minority demographic of women. In March 2013, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) hosted its first ever summit for women directors. This small population (13% of the guild) included some fiercely independent voices, a few of whom had been chosen to direct a whopping 5% of the guild movies made this past year. At a forum devoted to discussing these distressingly low numbers, some astonishing statistics were revealed: 55% of the movie ticket buyers are women, and women do somewhere in the neighborhood of 77% of the shopping. Yet, the feature film business continues to cater to the male-oriented and male-dominated demographic.

One of the most compelling participants in the forum was an independent producer with years of experience in the studio system. She described the movies she makes as “movies women want to see and men do too.” The box office market tally for films she has produced, or supervised, tops one billion US dollars. This lone producer did not cast herself as a champion of women—women buyers, women directors, women actors, and women’s stories—but she is. Her mission is to fill a huge gap in the marketplace with the moderately budgeted (10 to 30 million dollars) movie. This type of film, which has immense profit potential and lies somewhere between the blockbuster and the independent film, has nearly disappeared. These are the movies that once



worked to establish auteurs while allowing them to survive without having to mortgage the house or max out the credit cards for a film that might never see the light of day (let alone Sundance). Unfortunately, one such producing maverick alone cannot save independent filmmakers. This brings us to the much more lucrative and varied world of television, with its cable specialty channels, vast audiences, and constant demand for new product. It seems as if television would be a brilliant training ground for new talent, an opportunity-maker for the struggling indie filmmaker, and a safety net for mid-career talent looking for variety.

The business model for television is first and foremost about volume of material (number of episodes). In order to churn out an American TV season of twenty-two to twenty-four episodes per year, vast machinery is put in place to expedite the production with maximum efficiency. Few people outside the industry understand the grind of a television series. Take, for instance, *24* (2001-), a visual feast of adrenaline-pump. This medium to high budget hour-long drama includes twenty-four episodes per season. Each hour is shot in approximately eight to nine days. In comparison to most low-budget TV, this would be considered a luxurious schedule. Let us take a look at a typical production schedule for this type of series: while episode five is shooting, episode six is prepping and episodes one to four are in various stages of editing. At this time, scripts seven to twenty-four are in development, from various script-writing stages all the way down to a notion of a concept scribbled on a white board. In comparison, *The Avengers* spent twice the amount of time and money to shoot one ninety-five-page script.

For the cast and crew of television, each day is massive. A show's star can easily work 170 to 190 days per season, learn six to ten pages of dialogue every night, arrive on set at 6:00am or earlier for hair and makeup, shoot twelve to fourteen hours per day, and return to work only to find new pages awaiting. Days off are spent on publicity, re-

---

*The business model for television is first and foremost about the volume of material.*

shoots, and sound work. Given that one episode is prepping while another is shooting, it is impossible for one director to shoot all episodes. Few audience members realize that television directors rotate. This means a series with twenty-four episodes could have between ten to eighteen different directors, each learning the ropes of the show, getting to know the crew, the actors, and the style within a one-week period. These directors are then expected to shoot six to ten pages of script per day: action, drama, emotion, exposition, etc. Once completed, directors are given a limited number of days to edit prior to being rotated. This is where the concept of television director as hack comes into play. The circumstances do not invite Cecil B. DeMille-type auteurs. Instead, directors are expected to be expeditors for the TV machinery.

While the director is involved with a single or a few episodes per season, the producers, writers, and creators are busy supervising all twenty-four episodes—from writing through to production and broadcast. In television, they answer to two sets of executives, the network/broadcaster and the studio/financier (discrete entities often with differing agendas). With as many as a dozen executives on a show and so little time, any disagreement regarding content in a script can wind up slowing down the machine. The writers attempt to create a script that will appease everyone while the production team busy themselves with the physical shooting process. Each individual episode is budgeted prior to shooting and frequently requires modification to keep on track. The writer, now on the tenth draft, is left hairless and frustrated. Her eloquent baby is riddled with rushed

changes, and with the pressures of the next episode's script weighing her down, she may finally hit the point where getting it done trumps getting it right. At this time, the actors would like to see the scripts in advance to learn their lines and work out kinks. Their faces and reputations grace the screen, but the time crunch can leave them feeling marginalized—a stress that is only intensified by the rotating door of directors.

In this catch-22, directors frequently meet the actors for the first time on set, which could very well be the exhausted actor's 150<sup>th</sup> shoot day. There is no time to build trust, the essence of the actor-director relationship. In a classic conflict of positions, the actors will know the role better than the director, who has now become a marginalized party. At this stage, the director risks falling back into the expeditor trap of answering production demands: be on time, on budget, and on schedule (hence, the hack). The final obstacle for the TV director is the editorial process. The minimum time a director is guaranteed on a feature film is ten weeks, versus the two to three days given per TV episode. The producer, who by this time is already massively overworked from supervising the entire production, then takes over.

Internationally, the television methodology is quite different. The higher quality of some British shows results from a model of fewer episodes per series. These shows might only consist of three, four, or six episodes and do not go into production until all the scripts are completed. This way, a high profile actor such as Dame Judi Dench, for example, will know exactly what scripts she is committing to. In addition, this limited time period allows an actor to perform in a television series and feature films within the same year (a rarity for most North American stars). In Britain, actors make the transition from television to film with relative ease. North American television stars, on the other hand, have onerous time commitments that often include multi-season contracts. As a result, it is difficult for them to build a body of other work. A series with limited episodes works well for directors who, if not assigned to direct the entire series, can work closely with the other directors to make the process (and final product) creative, cohesive, and collaborative. That being said, the financial model of a limited series is significantly less lucrative than that of a US network, which, with over twenty-two episodes, can be sold in large volume orders.

In many ways, networks such as HBO, Showtime, and Netflix have started adhering to the UK model of fewer episodes for greater quality. *Breaking Bad*'s fifth and final season is a good example of this trend, with its fractured season format dividing sixteen episodes over two summers. Fewer episodes per season permits networks to

entice higher profile directors and cast members, emphasizing quality over quantity. This all sounds like the new ideal—network shows continue their economic models devoted to large quantity while cable outfits cater to smaller, more diversified audiences. In a perfect world, these niche markets would be better served and would create greater opportunities for diversity, and opportunities for emerging and minority directors.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this system has already proven to be flawed, especially where directors are concerned. The attractive format of a limited series with greater involvement of the directors is almost exclusively available to the experienced names. If David Fincher and Martin Scorsese take over these niche projects, younger and less established directors are deprived of opportunities to hone their craft, expand their creativity and experiment. If newer directors work on an episode of television, they barely have a moment to work with actors. They do not design the show, choose the color palette, work with composers, complete visual effects, or mold their shows in editorial. Episodic television loses the director from the process at a critical juncture as practicality trumps creativity.

While Netflix is having what appears to be an economically unsustainable love affair with a new model of television—the high budget; binge viewing; released-all-at-once series—the rest of TV remains the high-volume, budget-led, time-squeezed product. Directors need a venue to create the whole picture. They need to make feature films where they are the creator: respected, supported, and allowed to fulfill their visionary dreams. If they are not to become a dying breed, television needs to embrace them as the creative spirits they are.

The survival of mid-level features may lie in supporting projects for the 55% majority of its ticket-buying audience: women. Directors may look to television and look away quickly as they are forced into the role of expeditors (hacks) while the glamour roles are going to those who are pre-established. As such, the struggling newcomers are relegated to paying for their own movies or working for their five seconds of fame as YouTube sensations. To enhance its growth and success, the television model must shift to one that respects its directors, champions new ones, embraces minorities, views woman on equal footing, and encourages all directors to bring in fresh visions and expand their creativity.

---

1. Minority and women directors are so underemployed in production roles in the entertainment industry that there have been discussions with the American Civil Liberties Union about taking on a court case against the industry.