

## **The State of American Network Television**

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I plan to focus on the status and stature of the television networks within the conglomerates' overall constellation of media holdings, and particularly in relation to their other "legacy structure," the major Hollywood studios. (It goes without saying, of course, that the holdings of the so-called Big Six media conglomerates include all of the major film studios as well as the broadcast networks, and that they dominate and effectively control both the independent film market, such as it is, and the robust cable television market.) The comparative status of these two flagship systems – i.e., the TV networks and the major Hollywood studios – is fascinating and quite illuminating on several counts, and it's also of increasing importance as the television and motion picture industries continue to converge.

One significant aspect involves the economic viability of these flagship systems and their respective contributions to the parent conglomerates' bottom line. Whereas the financial stakes for the movie studios vis-à-vis their parent companies are much lower than for the TV networks, the studios continue to generate record revenues year after year while the networks are a serious drain – serious enough, in fact, that Disney would consider unloading ABC. And in Comcast's acquisition of NBC Universal from GE, it's become evident that the company's cable networks (USA, Bravo, CNBC, et al.) are more valuable assets than its broadcast network. A mitigating factor here, however, is the prestige value of these flagships in and of themselves, as well as the capacity of the majors (networks and studios) to generate prestige productions in their respective culture industries.

Another key comparative aspect involves the conglomerates' second-tier television and motion picture companies – i.e., the cable networks and indie film divisions. A telling irony and deepening paradox here is that in the commercially robust film industry, the indie-film divisions have been decimated over the past five years and the genuine independent sector has imploded. Meanwhile the major studios intensify their commitment to blockbuster franchise filmmaking, advancing and reifying a form which is heavily indebted to TV series narrative.

In the television realm, conversely, the flagship broadcast networks are foundering while the second-tier networks are thriving both commercially and aesthetically. Moreover, top filmmaking talent with sufficient clout (and/or sufficient disdain for the Hollywood studio realm) are turning to the cable networks – as with Scorsese on Boardwalk Empire and Todd Haynes on Mildred Pierce. There are likely to be an increasing number of prestige event productions as well, with the major flagships and top talent collaborating on transmedia blockbusters – most notably, perhaps, in the recently announced NBC Universal project, in collaboration with Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment, on a television series/feature film franchise based on Stephen King's series of fantasy/horror/western novels, The Dark Tower.

These projects raise interesting questions about authorship and style in the television series realm, whose mode of production and creative protocols are quite different from those in the film industry. They raise questions, too, about the integration of the television and film operations within the conglomerates' media empires, as well as the ongoing and seemingly inevitable convergence of the television and film industries at large.