

The Problem With Showrunner as Auteur – Sudeep Sharma

Auteurism has been one of the defining theoretical ideas of media studies. Auteurism is an incredibly helpful tool, giving industry, critics, academia and audiences a way to talk about films as aesthetic creations produced as an expression of an individual vision that develops along with the life and experiences of that individual. However, anyone with a cursory familiarity with film theory or film history know auteurism also reduces complex questions about texts with an overly simplistic formulation, ignoring the work of actors, writers, producers, studios, costume and art designers, marketing, and audiences in writing a text.

I mention all of this to foreground the recent turn in popular and academic writing on television focusing on the “showrunner”. Treating television series as the creation of a single individual has become more commonplace with the explosion of complex multi-season narrative arcs in American television. Shows like *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Killing*, *Mad Men*, and even *Two and a Half Men* are frequently theorized as the creation of idiosyncratic men and women who control the armies of cast and crew to achieve their vision. The analogy to film is clear as it elevates the work of television into an art form. Today “showrunner” is not only a well known term in the industry, with *The Hollywood Reporter* releasing an annual top 50 list, but also amongst savvy, enthusiastic fans of television. When Dan Harmon was removed as showrunner of *Community* the outcry online was massive. Harmon’s role as *Community* was so widely known fans debated online whether they should boycott the show as a form of protest.

While the showrunner as auteur is becoming a popular concept, the analogy suggests an almost willful misunderstanding of how television works as an industry and a sociocultural phenomenon. To go back to Harmon and *Community*, his comments following his removal focused on the unfairness of what happened to him and his overriding bitterness that NBC (the

broadcasters) and Sony (the producers) didn't appreciate him or his work. Without sounding like a corporate apologist, NBC and Sony seemed to appreciate Harmon in ordering three previous seasons of the show, but could not continue supporting him in the role because making the show his way was unsustainable. In one post-firing interview, Harmon said he didn't care if people watched, he just wanted the good *New York Times* review. Any artist, or fan of art, can appreciate that sentiment. In television it does not make much sense. We have to acknowledge NBC and Sony, the horrific "suits", are also creators and authors of television programming. As creators and artists, they obviously would like prestige and excellent reviews, yet the primary goal is getting viewers in order to sell ad space and possible syndication deals. Art is clearly possible on network television, but can one be called a television artist if they fundamentally reject the barriers of the form?

Seeing showrunners purely as auteurs ignores other realities of television beyond the need for ratings. Lena Durham's *Girls* premiered to wide acclaim but also to a persistent, much discussed racial critique in the popular press. Many wondered how a show set amongst 20-somethings in New York City could contain no minority characters save one or two one-dimensional bit parts. Separate from the veracity of this critique and all the well-written and thoughtful pieces about it, I think it is funny that this same thing could be said for a large majority of television shows. Research studies and historic works from a variety of sources have recorded for decades how minorities are under and misrepresented on television. *Two Broke Girls*, *Don't trust the B*** in Apartment 23* and *Are You There Chelsea?* are recent shows that have dealt in obvert racial stereotypes. However, the amount of media attention given to *Girls* and race has been treated as a self-contained event. Since *Girls* is presented as the work of a youthful, contemporary female artist on a premiere cable network, critics and audiences seem

moved to respond in a way they are not moved to respond to the same kind of racial politics occurring elsewhere on “non-artistic” television. The racial discussion is critical, but becomes de-institutionalized when we treat shows as only originating from the singular artist and not part of a larger complex of creation and meaning.

I see an embrace of the film auteur model for television showrunners as undermining the knowledge we have collectively about the medium and represents a reset of what we know about how television operates. Understanding showrunners, their work and their role in the industry is important, but we should be wary of looking at them as sole creators of an aesthetic experience and avoid overselling their influence in a medium that still is controlled by systemic structural forces beyond the individual.