

Producing the Television Pilot

Gallatin School of Individualized Study

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Television pilots are incredibly daunting to write. Writers are essentially given a few minutes to captivate their audience into a story—to spark interest and pique viewers’ curiosity to keep watching. The ways in which an audience becomes enraptured in a series through the pilot alone has always intrigued me. What is it about pilot episodes that motivates people to keep watching? What are both the creative elements and business strategies used to get people to turn off their phones and tune in to a work of art? Of course, pilots operate much differently than they used to just a few years ago with seasons now ordered as whole packages (typically by streaming services). Before though, pilots were a showrunner’s golden opportunity to prove that *their* story is one worth telling. It’s one chance for an audience (or a network) to catch a glimpse of a larger story aching to be shared. Throughout my time at Gallatin, I have allowed the concept of the pilot to steer my educational journey.

When I first arrived at NYU, I was confident in my passion for acting and the performing arts. I had made it to Tisch Drama—one of the most renowned acting programs in the country—and was ready to dedicate the next four years to training with some of the very best in the business. Yet, my academic journey ended up being nothing like I expected. As I soon started to realize, my love for storytelling was fueled by a desire to nurture stories from behind the scenes rather than in front of the camera. As a result, I decided to transfer to Gallatin where more of an emphasis is placed on the creation of stories across a variety of different mediums and genres. When I transferred to Gallatin, I found myself looking back on my first few years here at NYU with an appreciation for where Tisch was able to take me. I soon discovered that this part of my life (much like a television pilot) was purely experimental—it was the test phase that allowed me to experience all the entertainment industry had to offer. With this, I was able to

chart my education in the direction I wanted; a direction fueled by entertainment management, movie marketing, and television producing, to name a few.

Over the last four years, I have dedicated my undergraduate career to attempting to understand the entertainment industry's inner workings—even during my time at Tisch Drama. Surprisingly, the classes that felt completely detached from my concentration (like interdisciplinary seminars *Consumerism in Comparative Perspective* and *The Communication Revolution*) still had some ties that allowed me to connect the course's outcomes to the business of entertainment and media. That said, my coursework in television studies (Gallatin courses *Writing About Television Drama* and *Welcome to the Writers' Room* for example) helped to determine my rationale's overall theme. Within these niche courses, I was introduced to various texts and TV shows that navigated my intellectual inquiry into television's role within popular culture and its impact on the cultural zeitgeist. From Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised* to showrunner Michael Schur's *The Good Place*, I started to gain a well-rounded understanding of how television shows are built from the ground up.

I found myself intrigued by this new medium—one that seemingly capitalizes on Generation Z's short attention spans while still possessing a complexity and maturity derived from the world of film. This newfound interest is what propelled me to enroll in an independent study this semester primarily focused on deconstructing television pilots from various contemporary dramas. Through this exploration, I am continuing to learn exactly what it is that allows a pilot (and, in extension, a TV show) to strike a chord with the cultural zeitgeist. My research is helping me to analyze the specific narrative devices that grant a particular piece of media the power to become a cultural phenomenon.

With that in mind though, I knew it would be helpful for me to conceptualize the historical roots of storytelling—particularly as it relates to epics and plays written in the premodern era. Through the course entitled *Fate + Free Will in the Epic Tradition*, this quest is what led me to read one of the greatest pieces of ancient Greek literature: *The Odyssey* by Homer. In this outstanding epic spanning over twenty books long, I started to understand one of the most conventional structures used in contemporary media: the hero’s journey. Throughout Odysseus’ trip home to Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War, he comes face to face with both divine and mortal obstacles—minor antagonists that allow each chapter to act as an independent story within Odysseus’ larger character arc.

This cyclical structure repeats itself throughout *The Odyssey*, a pattern that allowed me to connect Homer with the art of television—the idea that a protagonist is often launched into a conflict (internal or external) mirroring the larger “journey” a series will explore from the very beginning. Within an episodic structure, characters are often confronted with immediate issues that subtly (if done well,) allow for them to slowly develop over time. In turn, it can be argued that the pilot’s role becomes paramount. A season’s first episode serves as an invitation to explore an unfolding world that is disrupted by a larger conflict demanding to be addressed. Just as readers of *The Odyssey* anticipate what mythical creature Odysseus will have to battle next, audiences and streamers look for narrative resilience within a television show—a key trait that ensures a series can sustain multiple episodes or seasons beyond the pilot.

To the same degree to which Odysseus fights off physical temptations (with the likes of the Sirens and Calypso), the protagonist of Dan Erickson’s thriller series *Severance* (2022–) battles corporate manipulation and memory control. Here, the hero’s journey is contemporized—Mark undergoes intellectual resistance against Lumon Industries, a deceitful

corporation that could be described as a modern-day Greek underworld where morality and ethics are deformed. During my third year, I was initially exposed to *Severance* through social media and friends, both of which had become enamored by the haunting story of severed worker Mark Scout and the cinematic visuals that accompany the twisting plotline. In summary, *Severance* follows a deeply conflicted protagonist whose identity is quite literally split right down the middle. Over the course of the pilot specifically, we're exposed to his subdued demeanor—resulting from the loss of his wife which drives him to undergo the severance procedure. After watching the first (and later, the second) season of *Severance*, I was immediately enchanted by the show's haunting tone that captivated millions of viewers.

Therefore, *Severance* ultimately proves that a successful television pilot can remain more restricted and ambiguous—hooking its audience through visual unease that explicitly counters the hasty exposition often seen in other television dramas of its time. With that in mind, one of the most significant lessons from my Tisch class *Producing for TV* was understanding that, in a post-cable era, pilots can serve as production templates that simply reveal the proposed universe's logistical scale and cinematic scope without losing the series' mysterious nature. When watching the pilot entitled “Good News About Hell,” it becomes quite apparent that Erickson (and director Ben Stiller) placed a strong emphasis on the sterile production design and steady pacing which dramatically increased the overall anticipation. In a culture that demands instant gratification and excessive consumption, it's refreshing to watch a restrained pilot that withholds major details until later in the series. That said, this seems to be the most crucial deterrent for TV audiences expecting to be handed everything on a silver platter.

What I also found compelling about *Severance* (and especially the pilot) was how closely its creative aesthetics aligned with its underlying business strategy. When the first season

premiered on Apple TV+ in 2022, the creative precision behind *Severance* fit perfectly within the streaming service's developing brand identity. At the time, Apple TV+ was a newer platform that hadn't quite found its stride yet. With the release of the second season, however, *Severance* became the most-watched television program for the streaming platform. This catapult to stardom for the prestige drama further exemplifies how a series' creative decisions can propel an entertainment company's market differentiation and consumer influence. To this day, I marvel at how the pilot of *Severance* does a spectacular job of introducing something—albeit chilling—new to the already oversaturated sea of content.

In a similar vein, showrunner Jesse Armstrong's corporate-driven *Succession* (2018–2023), and its pilot “Celebration,” in particular, is a prime example of a television drama that is perfectly aligned with the strategy of its parent network, HBO. Throughout my academic career, I have been introduced to *Succession* multiple times—having watched an episode from the fourth season in *Writing About Television Drama*, the pilot in *Welcome to the Writer's Room*, and ultimately, performing an analysis of the show in my independent study this semester.

What I began to understand is that *Succession* (like *Severance*) is a series that permitted HBO to continue building its reputation for producing high-quality, premium content featuring antiheroes who would not likely appear on more traditional television. The slate of Shakespearean-like characters is introduced in the pilot in a manner that allows for the audience to feel they are literally inside of the Roy kids' heads. At its core, *Succession's* pilot primarily focuses on Kendall Roy who is introduced to be the presumed heir to his father's media empire. His siblings (Connor, Roman, and Shiv) are later brought forward as we start to see the different personalities, relationships to power, and dynamics each sibling has towards each other. This style—which is very different from the likes of *Severance* which keeps viewers at arm's

length—allows the corporate world to feel digestible. The constant pokes and jabs made by all four of Logan Roy’s children blend a satirical tone with that of a darker setting, revealing HBO’s ability to invest in groundbreaking content that redefines what can be construed as “drama.”

Although the episode was not met with critical acclaim at first, “Celebration” echoes HBO’s dominance in the market for prestige television. At the time, *Succession* became HBO’s most successful drama since the release of *Game of Thrones* seven years prior. Not only that, but the pilot successfully satirizes the very industry its narrative is drawn—further revealing that television shows deserve the same critical analysis and attention often reserved for film.

As a body of work, *Succession* became everything I could possibly want in an episodic drama. From the morally ambiguous characters to the fast-paced structure mirroring everyday corporate life, I became incredibly intrigued by the narrative and questions being posed by the series. However, watching “Celebration” raised some interesting conclusions regarding the production and business of a television pilot. As an attempt to maintain their cultural capital, HBO took notice of Armstrong’s writing which possessed a cinematic quality that would allow them to continue investing in auteur-driven content. The sharp writing established by “Celebration,” in combination with the meta-commentary the series introduces, reaffirms HBO’s decision to remain an avant-garde platform that cherry-picks premium shows rather than distributing mass-appeal content.

In order to unpack the strategic decisions behind how shows like *Succession* make it to air, I read Felix Gillette and John Koblin’s book *It’s Not TV: The Spectacular Rise, Revolution, and Future of HBO* after being introduced to the text in *Television Programming and Concepts*. Within the authors’ analysis, I picked up on how HBO had to quickly adapt to finding their next pop culture hit after *The Sopranos* ended in 2007. After airing a multitude of shows—some of

which worked and some flopped—HBO found their footing with the novel-adapted, fantasy series *Game of Thrones*. *Game of Thrones* launched HBO to the top, prompting the greenlight for *Succession*—another television drama hyperfocused on exploring an empire-centric narrative with similar themes of power, control, and betrayal. This notion reasserts the moral ambiguity and cinematic restraint seen in “Celebration,” revealing HBO’s strength in telling character-driven narratives that are not merely genre spectacles.

As I wind down my undergraduate career here at NYU, I found it imperative to analyze the television industry not only from a creative or corporate perspective—which I have examined up until this point—but also from the consumer’s point of view, engaging in all of the content I have discussed so far. As a result, in my *Consumerism in Comparative Perspective* interdisciplinary seminar, I was introduced to James Watson’s work *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia*. At face value, this text might not have anything to do with television pilots and the entertainment industry at all—at least that’s what I thought. Yet, Watson’s commentary on how McDonald’s is localized across different regions and global contexts made me think about how television as a medium itself is a globalized product. When a domestically produced pilot airs, there is a brand associated with the show’s title and narrative. In turn, that story circulates internationally (especially with celebrated series like *Severance* and *Succession*) in the same fashion as Western exports like McDonald’s.

Continuing the conversation around HBO, this streaming platform adapts its technology and programming to appeal to regional tastes—echoing the cultural adaptation Watson describes within the fast-food industry. HBO established this international division HBO Asia, an East Asian entertainment service that primarily operates through licensing deals and partnerships as opposed to original programming. Although HBO has an extensive catalog of original

programming that could rival the likes of Netflix, there are censorship issues that prevent HBO's full collection from reaching some of the world's largest markets. Additionally, even though networks put a tremendous amount of effort into ensuring their brand and content are positively received, the true marker of success for these conglomerates is how audiences (both domestic and international) consume the—in my case, television—they're releasing.

When reading Watson's work, I started to recognize a parallel in the way both McDonald's and streaming platforms have to localize their products to appeal to regional customs—McDonald's through menu offerings and restaurant experience, and streaming platforms through dubbing, marketing, or even narrative adjustments to resonate with global viewers. As I learned in *Introduction to Marketing*, companies have to find the balance between localizing and globalizing their product or a mix between the two—recognizing the benefits and drawbacks of each marketing strategy. By modifying episodes to appeal to new regions, studios can enhance a series' longevity and scope. The localization of media across different markets speaks to how pilot episodes themselves act as a form of cultural translation—allowing for international audiences to engage with palatable programming that previously might not have been accessible. By understanding Watson's research and its connection to the entertainment industry, I started to gather that storytelling (and more specifically, television) can transcend borders, creating a universal form of language that contemporary technology made possible.

Looking back, one of the most significant conclusions I have been able to make throughout my studies is the idea that television pilots are so much more than just simply an introduction to the series' world. Yes, they can serve as narrative blueprints, but they can also help an entertainment company establish its brand identity and bridge different cultures together. Even though the industry itself is continuing to rapidly evolve, having a creative vision, business

strategy, and ability to engage with a global audience behind the screen has remained imperative to producing a successful television show. What makes these shows like *Severance* and *Succession* so prominent in today's cultural zeitgeist is not simply that they are written well (although the writing is quite phenomenal), it's that both Apple and HBO used these productions to develop their identities and shape how consumers perceive their brands globally. Even though both had strong reputations initially, the release of these shows under their well-respected names continue driving their expansive brands forward.

Television is often considered a new medium, but I would argue that it's been around for centuries. The epic of Odysseus proved it best: the cyclical structure of the hero's return to Ithaca sparked the foundation for serialized storytelling in contemporary media. Each trial he undergoes is a self-contained story that advances the larger narrative, much like a season of television. Similarly, both *Severance* and *Succession* inherit this historical rhythm—utilizing their pilots to establish the framework upon which questionable moralities and power manipulations unfold. By adopting this storytelling framework, studios can maintain a sustained brand identity that accurately reflects the type of stories they want to tell.

Just as a Greek epic unfolds through books, television allows for a narrative to extend beyond the traditional—cutting across cultural borders that further prove a story's strength and malleability. What I'm getting at here is that television pilots encompass far more than a linear story. My analysis into historical, creative, commercial, and sociological perspectives leads me to believe that this niche form of storytelling is in itself a cultural artifact—one that bridges both art and industry into a singular narrative.

In the same way that my research concludes how pilots can be understood through a plethora of academic disciplines, I have found that my journey at NYU—in both Tisch and

Gallatin—reflects a similar expansive scope. What I originally thought was my destiny to graduate from NYU with an undergraduate degree in Drama soon revealed itself to be not as straightforward as I had hoped. Yet, my experience in Gallatin has allowed me to explore the creative world through many different lenses—most of which I would have never encountered if I hadn't made what I consider a leap of faith. Just like a television pilot, there are so many nuances and layers to my academic journey that kept me twisting and turning in new directions each semester. With graduation in the near distance, the knowledge I have accumulated about the entertainment industry through these disciplines has equipped me with the necessary skills that will allow me to produce the stories I want to tell. I have since established a holistic understanding of the art of television, from the pilot all the way through to the finale's end credits.

Cut to black—until the next episode begins!

List of Works:

Pre-Modern/Early Modern

Phaedrus, Plato, 370 BCE
The Odyssey, Homer, circa 7th Century to 8th Century BCE [HIS]
Inferno, Dante Alighieri, 1321
A Midsummer Night's Dream, William Shakespeare, 1595
Hamlet, William Shakespeare, 1599
Poetics, Aristotle, 335 BCE
Romeo and Juliet, William Shakespeare, 1591

Modern Social and Natural Sciences

From Chaos to Clarity: Five Global Truths that Make Sense of a Messy Media World, Judy Franks, 2010
No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention, Erin Meyer and Reed Hastings, 2020 [CPC]
Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia, James Watson, 1997 [CPC]
Lead Us Into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism, James Twitchell, 1999 [HIS]

Modern Humanities

Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, Neil Postman, 1995
The Revolution Was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama Forever, Alan Sepinwall, 2012 [HIS]
It's Not TV: The Spectacular Rise, Revolution, and Future of HBO, Felix Gillette and John Koblin, 2022
How to be Perfect, Michael Schur, 2022 [CPC]
Little Fires Everywhere, Liz Tigelaar (showrunner), 2020 [CPC]

Area of Concentration

Succession, Jesse Armstrong (showrunner), 2019–2023
Scandal, Shonda Rhimes (showrunner), 2012–2018
Severance, Dan Erickson (showrunner), 2022–
“Michael's Gambit,” *The Good Place*, Michael Schur (writer), 2017
Producer to Producer: A Step-by-Step Guide to Low-Budget Independent Film Producing, Maureen Ryan, 2010
The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific, David Bianculli, 2016 [HIS]