

**The Rise of The Anti-Hero: Pushing Network Boundaries in The
Contemporary U.S. Television**

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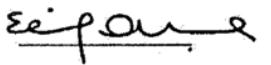
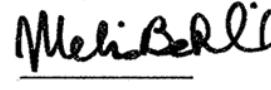
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Television

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ABSTRACT

THE RISE OF THE ANTI-HERO: PUSHING NETWORK BOUNDARIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY U.S. TELEVISION

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Master of Arts in Cinema and Television

Advisor: Dr. Elif Akçalı

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The proliferation of networks using narrowcasting for their original drama serials in the United States proved that protagonist types different from conventional heroes can appeal to their target audiences. While this success of anti-hero narratives in television serials starting from late 1990s raises the question of “quality television”, developing audience measurement models of networks make alternative narratives based on anti-heroes become widespread on the U.S. television industry. This thesis examines the development of the anti-hero on the U.S. television by focusing on the protagonists of pay-cable serials *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Dexter* (2006-2013), basic cable serials *The Shield* (2002-2008) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and video-on-demand serials *House of Cards* (2013-) and *Hand of God* (2014-). In brief, this thesis argues that the use of anti-hero narratives in television is directly related to the narrowcasting strategy of networks and their target audience groups, shaping a template for growing networks and newly formed distribution services to enhance the brand of their corporations. In return, the anti-hero narratives push the boundaries of conventional hero in television with the protagonists becoming morally less tolerable and more complex, introducing diversity to television serials and paving the way even for mainstream broadcast networks to develop serials based on such protagonists.

Keywords: Anti-hero, Quality Television, Narrowcasting, Cable Television, Video-on-Demand, Serial

ÖZET

ANTİ-KAHRAMANIN YÜKSELİŞİ: ÇAĞDAŞ AMERİKAN TELEVİZYONUNDA KONVANSİYONEL SINIRLARI ZORLAMAK

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Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nde özgün drama dizileri için daraltılmış yayıncılığı kullanan televizyon kanallarının yaygınlaşması, konvansiyonel kahramanlardan farklılaşan bir ana karakter türünün bu kanalların hedef seyircilerine hitap edebileceğini kanıtlamıştır. 1990’lı yılların sonundan itibaren televizyonda başarı gösteren anti-kahraman anlatıları “kaliteli televizyon” tartışmasına neden olurken, kanalların gelişen seyirci ölçüm modelleri anti-kahramanlar üzerine kurulu alternatif anlatıları Amerikan televizyon endüstrisinde yaygın kılmıştır. Bu tez, özel üyelik gerektiren kablolu yayın kanallarının *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) ve *Dexter* (2006-2013), normal kablolu yayın kanallarının *The Shield* (2002-2008) ve *Mad Men* (2007-2015), ve isteğe bağlı video (VOD) kanallarının *House of Cards* (2013-) ile *Hand of God* (2014-) dizilerinin kahramanlarını ele alarak anti-kahramanın Amerikan televizyonundaki gelişimini inceler. Tez kısaca, anti-kahraman anlatılarının kanalların daraltılmış yayıncılık anlayışı ve bu kanalların hedef seyircileriyle doğrudan bağlantılı olduğunu ve bu anlatıların büyüyen kanallara ve yeni şekillenen dağıtım yöntemlerine marka değerlerini yükseltmek açısından bir şablon oluşturduğunu tartışır. Karşılığında, ahlaki olarak daha zor tahammül edilebilir ve daha karmaşık bir hale gelen ana karakterler ile, anti-kahraman anlatıları televizyonun konvansiyonel kahraman sınırlarını zorlamakta, televizyon dizilerine çeşitlilik katmakta ve anaakım kitlesel yayın kanallarının dahi bu tür ana karakterler üzerine kurulu diziler geliştirmesine yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anti-kahraman, Amerikan Televizyonu, Kaliteli Televizyon,
Daraltılmış Yayıncılık, Kablolu Televizyon, İsteğe Bağlı Video, Dizi

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Abstract

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Data can only tell you what people have liked before, not what they don’t know they are going to like in the future.”

John Landgraf – The President of FX Network (Carr 2013)

The opening scene of *The Godfather* (1972) includes an unfamiliar element surrounded by brutal mafia characters: An easily recognizable cat, on the lap of the leader of the Corleone family, enjoying the delicate touches of Don Corleone, who is about to help a citizen through a violent act. Surely this is not a coincidental choice, as every event and attitude in a scene matters one way or another; especially in opening scenes the audience meet the protagonist, and gets engaged with the arc that leads to the cathartic moment to release the tension built up in the story. “Events in a screenplay are specifically designed to bring out the truth about the characters so that we, the reader and audience, can transcend our ordinary lives and achieve a connection, or bond, between ‘them and us.’ We see ourselves in them and enjoy a moment, perhaps, of recognition and understanding” (Field 2005). Liking the hero is considered as the key necessity for the audience to like a story in hundreds of screenwriting guide books published every single year. In fact, one of the most famous of these, *Save the Cat!* by Blake Synder, defines the opening scene as “the scene where we meet the hero and the hero does something — like saving a cat — that defines who he is and makes us, the audience, like him” (Synder 2005). If these assumptions and strategies used to make audiences follow stories through the screening time are true, then how do we explain the popularity of Netflix’s drama serial¹ *House of Cards*’ (2013-) with its contradictory opening scene, in which the

¹ The common contemporary term used for episodic television narratives is “series”, but the older form of episodic narratives almost over time. Kozloff distinguishes the terms as follow: “Series refers to those shows whose characters and setting are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual

protagonist Francis Underwood kills a dog with his bare hands and declares his ruthlessness in a monologue on “unnecessary pain”?

Francis Underwood’s arrival in television was not sudden; *House of Cards* was not an overlooked project lying on the desk of a Netflix executive or a brave innovation encouraged by Netflix’s establishment of online video-on-demand (VOD) distribution system. A similar but much more likeable contradictory protagonist, Tony Soprano, was announcing the changing face of television drama when the pilot episode of Home Box Office’s (HBO) mob drama *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) aired. Time Warner’s HBO started to produce original one-hour drama serials for subscribers with *Oz* (1997-2003), but the meeting of pay-cable system and drama serials made its real impact with *The Sopranos*. HBO and *The Sopranos* received sixteen nominations in Primetime Emmy Awards of 1999, leaving other television network directors wondering how television could welcome a hardly likeable, mob-type killer protagonist as Tony Soprano, and how HBO brought success and popularity to a serial based on a character that differentiates from the conventional hero which was regarded as key to success for television serials.

The Sopranos lead the way that soon was followed by other networks with more common distribution practices, bringing similar television serials to a higher proportion of the U.S. audience. Another premium cable network Showtime decided to give the controversial protagonist type a chance with Nancy Botwin of *Weeds* (2005-2012) and the serial killer protagonist of *Dexter* (2006-2013). The basic cable network FX introduced the corrupt and violent leading character Vic Mackey in *The Shield* (2002-2008), while AMC received six awards in Primetime Emmy Awards in

episode. By contrast, in a serial the story and the discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus” (Kozloff 1992 in Potter and Marshall 2009).

2008 for the first season of its first original drama *Mad Men* (2007-2015) with its pragmatist protagonist Don Draper. The arrival of VOD enabled Netflix with its first original co-production *Lilyhammer* (2012-2014), to announce that the day has come for online serials that have high production to look for the same outcome for VOD as pay-cable had. The common strategy of these networks is “narrowcasting”, which is different from “broadcasting”²: Targeting upper-middle class and high class 18-49-years-old demographic group which matters most for the profit of their subscription systems or their advertisers, and leaving out the concerns of other demographic groups (Lotz, 2007). Narrowcasting lets the networks step out of conventions and thus allows the unusual, less likeable protagonist, the anti-hero to appear in television.

The proliferation of networks using narrowcasting for their television dramas in the United States proved that protagonist types different from classical heroes can appeal to their target audiences. While this success of anti-hero narratives in television serials starting from late 1990s raises the question of “quality television” again³, networks’ developing audience measurement models make alternative narratives based on anti-heroes become widespread even in basic cable and satellite networks which target a wider variety of audiences. As I will discuss, the course of the anti-hero in contemporary television indicates that future anti-heroes in television

² Broadcast networks mainly include networks that use over-the-air distribution for telecasting, such as CBS, NBC and ABC. Subscription channels that use a cable system for telecasting such as HBO and Showtime are called pay-cable networks, whilst cable channels which do not demand subscription and could also be reached through satellite devices including FX and AMC are called basic cable networks. Finally, as it stands, online distribution system networks such as Netflix and Amazon use is named as video-on-demand (VOD).

³ The term first used by Feuer et al. (1984) after the change in audience measurement systems in the U.S. television industry.

will be pushing the boundaries even further while moving also to broadcast networks.

This thesis examines the development of the anti-hero in television starting from the late 1990s, as it becomes edgier in each new anti-hero centered serial that networks and new distribution types introduce. After briefly covering the anti-hero in cinema, the first chapter focuses on the audience measurement models of networks that let them target specific audience groups by analyzing their demands and preferences before giving the green light to production process of the serials. Since networks that use anti-hero narratives intend to label their brand as “quality television”, recent approaches on quality in television are studied to develop a better understanding of the rise of anti-hero narratives in television.

Second chapter focuses on the course of the anti-hero and its development through analyses of the protagonists of drama serials produced by networks that use different distribution practices. Pay-cable television networks HBO and Showtime’s drama serials *The Sopranos* and *Dexter* are analyzed through character arcs and viewers’ reactions to significant anti-heroic choices of protagonists that are observed in various discussion boards. It then continues with a discussion of basic cable and satellite networks’ drama serials, focusing on AMC’s *Mad Men* and FX’s *The Shield*. Before concluding and forecasting next steps in the anti-hero’s television path, the fictional, malicious U.S. president Francis Underwood (*House of Cards*) is examined to discuss the way Netflix lets another anti-hero to promote the newly established distribution system VOD and Amazon’s *Hand of God* (2014-) is analyzed to understand how the contemporary television anti-hero goes on developing with another VOD network.

The anti-hero in contemporary U.S. television serials has been discussed in

several researches. Margrethe Bruun Vaage focuses on cable anti-heroes in context of audience engagement (2016). Similarly, Shafer and Raney study how the audience enjoy anti-hero narratives despite the morality controversy (2012). Chloe Liddy-Judge focuses on cable anti-heroes from a different approach and identify the paranoia caused by September 11 events, the confusion surrounding twenty first century masculinity, and the growing alienation of the individual in the U.S. as key factors that have contributed the rise of the television anti-hero (2013). Similarly, Ashley Donnelly identifies the recent events such as September 11 in the U.S. as factors causing the appearance of the anti-hero in television: “A new line needed to be drawn between good and bad violence, thus a new fixation on vigilante justice emerged in popular media” (2012). Some suggest that the rise of the anti-hero in contemporary television is also related to the growing individualism and narcissism in today’s society. Slavoj Žižek defines the latest form of the libidinal structure of the subject in today’s society as “pathological narcissist”: “Instead of the integration of a symbolic law, we have a multitude of rules to follow—rules of accommodation telling us ‘how to succeed’. The narcissistic subject knows only the ‘rules of the (social) game’ enabling him to manipulate others; social relations constitute for him a playing field in which he assumes ‘roles,’ not proper symbolic mandates; he stays clear of any kind of binding commitment that would imply a proper symbolic identification. He is a radical conformist who paradoxically experiences himself as an outlaw” (1992). Žižek’s concept of pathological narcissist could also be traced in anti-hero examples of existentialist authors Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Their anti-heroes are alienated from others and only interested in their self-interest, and their narcissistic characteristic shows similarities to contemporary television anti-heroes’ characteristics that I will discuss. Nevertheless, such anti-heroes have not

appeared in television until the industrial shifts in the distribution systems and audience targeting strategies, yet the anti-hero of contemporary television has not been studied in industrial sense. Thus, it is also important to develop an understanding toward the relationship of the course of the anti-hero and the changing telecasting approaches, and this thesis is limited to the industrial factors that pave the way to the contemporary television anti-heroes, and the way these contemporary television narratives engage the audience to serials despite their anti-heroes' malicious manners.

In brief, this thesis argues that the use of anti-hero narratives in television is directly related to narrowcasting and network's target audience groups, shaping a template for growing networks and newly formed distribution services to enhance the brand of their corporations. In return, the anti-hero narratives push the boundaries of conventional hero in television with the protagonists becoming morally less tolerable and more complex, introducing diversity to television serials and paving the way even for mainstream broadcast networks to develop serials based on such protagonists.

2. TELEVISION WELCOMES THE ANTI-HERO

2.1 The Rise of The Anti-Hero

In Hollywood, there are examples of protagonists with anti-heroic tendencies in film-noir and Westerns, which turn to immorality and violence to survive in a “modernizing” America. As Kevin Stoehr argues, film-noir examples of 1940s reflected the despair of hero to function in a conventionally heroic way where the conventional rules collapsed in modern Western society after World War I. “In most classic noir films there is an underlying devolution or dehumanization of the main character, usually characterized by an internal descent into immorality and even amoral indifference” (2013). With examples such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *They Live by Night* (1948) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), film-noir anti-heroes usually falls in immorality not because of their personalities but because of external reasons such as impelling villains or fate (Stoehr 2013). Similar to film-noir protagonists’ despair, anti-heroes of Westerns in the 1960s are “doomed in a West that could not survive civilizing America,” and they “turned to violence as mercenaries (*The Magnificent Seven*, 1960), outlaws (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969), or sociopathic killers (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969)” (Mc Donogh, Gregg, and Wong, 2001, in Liddy-Judge 2013). Later, sympathetic and justified anti-hero found its body in Dustin Hoffman’s likeable figure in the late 1960s, such as in *The Graduate* (1967) and in *Little Big Man* (1971). Lenburg defines filmic anti-heroes as “sympathetic, defenseless characters ensnared in situations that often reflect the world’s complex realities”, approving Hoffman’s characters as anti-heroes (1983: 11 in Liddy Judge 2013). Beginning from the mid 1960s, New Hollywood’s authorial approach to cinema and filmmakers’ challenge over classical norms also showed itself through prominent pieces such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *The Godfather* (1972) and

Scarface (1983). Although these film-noir, Western and New Hollywood productions consist of anti-heroic protagonists deviated from classical norms, they still favor “save the cat” strategies to make audiences follow the films throughout the entire screening, leaving the experimental attempts on hero conventions to independents and world cinema.

Perhaps the first example that “kills” this likeable approach to anti-heroism and gives its character abstruse brutality is Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976)⁴. Writer Paul Schrader’s protagonist Travis Bickle is a mentally unstable taxi driver in New York City, who is ambiguously presented through his mental breakdowns carried from Vietnam War, which makes him a hard case to understand and feel with, owing to his bizarre violent acts. Nevertheless, the final act of the film in which Travis actively tries to save a young prostitute from evil dominant men, or allegorically from the corrupted system, justifies his violent acts and lets the audience have sympathy towards this anti-heroic figure. Still, Travis’ rebellion makes him an anti-heroic character, as Chris Rojek approves by his definition of anti-hero: “The anti-hero may be defined as an individual who perceives the codes and mores governing respectable culture as hallucinations” (2001: 161). In contrast to anti-hero, classical hero fights in the governing culture boundaries and can even sacrifice himself in respect to codes of it. “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself,” Joseph Campbell defines (Campbell and Moyers 2011). If the classical hero respects the moral codes and sticks to “rules” of classical Hollywood narrative practices, the protagonist who does not meet the governing culture’s moral codes and does not accept the call for adventure for a

⁴ Terence Winter, the writing cast member of *The Sopranos*, points out that *Taxi Driver* is the film that made him realize he wants to write for screen, later inspiring him to contribute the development of first remarkable anti-hero of television, with Tony Soprano (Winter 2013).

cause that approves the respectable culture's hero expectations, but only for his own individualistic needs and desires, could be defined as anti-hero. Despite the classical hero, anti-hero acts only on account of himself in a manner distinguished from governing culture's moral and legal codes, without justifying his malicious flaws by intentionally serving a greater good, except when he is in denial to cover his egoist motives because of a greater cause delusion, like Travis is.

Anti-hero's root could be traced in tragic heroes, who choose their flaws rather than an opportunity to change, as in Greek or Shakespearean tragedy (Tobin 2000). The habit of tragedy is sympathy towards evil regardless of the violation of the law, as Bataille puts it in context with Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*: "The tragic author agreed with the law, the transgression of which he described, but he based all emotional impact on communicating the sympathy which he felt for the transgressor" (1973). Despite the affection towards tragic heroes, in the end the hero is destined to fail and die in tragedy, just as certain anti-hero examples in the contemporary U.S. television. What differentiates contemporary U.S. television anti-heroes from tragic heroes is that these recent narratives do not discredit their protagonists' flaw for a moral outcome; even though several examples conclude with the protagonist's failure, these anti-heroes fail or die without regretting their malicious manner.

Such unconventional protagonists were not in television except rare situational comedies such as *Married with Children* (1987-1997), in which Al Bundy, the father of a common American family, is an unloving husband to his wife and his two children. For drama serials, the classical hero that acts in a good manner to reach his/her goal was the choice of creators and networks, especially due to commercial reasons that entail audiences liking the hero to go on following the

serials (Cantor 1971: 173 in Pearson 2005). Thus far, television serials appealed to average mass audience, letting no maneuver for alternative storylines except those that carried no risk in terms of share and ratings. “Television’s homogeneous quality is usually attributed to the fact that programming is conceived, produced, and broadcast in an effort to attract as many viewers as possible. Given this overriding concern with maximizing audiences, programmers are loath to present anything that might offend or alienate even a modest portion of the audience. Rather, they resort to formulas and themes that can be easily accepted by the broadest possible audience” (Webster 1986).

The content quality of television productions and narratives under the influence of broadcasting schemas, James Webster explains, began to reshape with industrial changes based on distribution and advertisement methods. Roberta Pearson divides television eras in the U.S. into three according to industrial alterations. Pearson argues that the first era of television, from 1950s to early 1980s, is “TVI”, in which the hegemony of big three networks CBS, NBC and ABC is reflected to productions through the strategy of aiming the average audience in the least risky way. While varying branding strategies of arriving networks and the expansion of television channels propound “TVII” until the late 1990s, the arrival of digital distribution and extending audience fragmentation strategies from then on generates “TVIII” (Pearson 2011). The subscription based telecasting system of pay-cable initiates the TVIII when Time Warner’s HBO begins creating original content through its first television serials *Oz* and *The Sopranos*. The decisive distinction that lets a contradictory protagonist as Tony Soprano come to life on small screen, is HBO’s unprecedented strategy of narrowcasting, Robin Nelson writes:

Subscription channels, such as HBO, rely primarily on the income from subscribers. Thus they have to offer, to a target audience with excess disposable income, products which are typically unavailable elsewhere and to keep the audience happy such that they will renew their subscriptions. [...] But, in respect of TV drama, since they are trying to attract a “blue-chip” demographic which is likely to be college-educated and thus have the more sophisticated taste formation of those with cultural as well as economic capital, they may invest in “high-end” products. The evidence of HBO Premium is a case in point. [...] A much more direct relationship is created between producer and viewer for such programming than the former indirect relationship between them, mediated as it was through company executives negotiating with advertising agents (Nelson, 2007).

At the time of this newly established distribution form, even David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos* was not aware what this could mean for the quality of television serials, remarking the approach HBO reflected also on the creation process unlike the previous examples in television: “In network television, you’re bought for 13 episodes. [...] You still have like eight episodes to do as the show debuts. And people are reacting to it. That’s not the way it was with *The Sopranos*. We had all the shows finished and in the can before anybody saw anything. [...] It had been such a different kind of experience that we thought, ‘Well, it’s been too much fun. [...] This will be rejected by the audience. Or it won’t be successful enough for HBO to continue it.’ And we were wrong” (Lawson 2007 in McCabe and Akass 2007).

The point Chase left out of account was the changing audience fragmentation, ascending importance of audience-network interaction and the network’s strategy to calculate the demands of the audience. These casted a spell on other narrowcast networks and distribution services to acknowledge Tony Soprano as a template to develop their brand-determining original contents, from FX’s “Machiavellian sociopath” Vic Mackey (*The Shield*) to AMC’s “self-loathing narcissist” Don Draper (*Mad Men*) or Netflix’s pragmatist Francis Underwood (*House of Cards*) (DeFino

2014). As Dean DeFino suggests, HBO “has introduced a level of narrative, character, and thematic sophistication that has spread across the channel spectrum” and the anti-hero narrative uptrend in contemporary television “owes a direct debt to HBO”⁵, but moreover, this debt is owed to the audience measurement and targeting characteristic of “TVIII”.

2.2 Audience Measurement in Narrowcasting

As mentioned before, HBO already had a group of subscribers base that were willing to pay more than necessary for basic cable services to enjoy its movie castings and live television coverages (Jaramillo 2002). HBO’s subscribers data was crucial for the network in the course of developing marketing strategies and creating original content according to the demands of their higher class audience, which was reflected in HBO’s catch phrase, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO”. Until “TVIII”, the classical network system of the U.S. television industry was in control of the hegemony of big three networks CBS, ABC and NBC, in a system that was similar to the vertical integration of Hollywood before 1948. According to Michele Hilmes, the network executives’ audience targeting strategies limited the creators’ works to generally approved patterns. “With a system that attracted a national audience and a market so neatly divided between the nets, few openings existed for creative, innovative productions that challenged the bland, formulaic network patterns” (2002). The theory of “Least Objectionable Programming” (LOP) forms the basis of the assumption that the mass audience would not show interest in a format or

⁵ Terence Winter approves DeFino: “[*The Sopranos*] changed television. I think it really changed the landscape completely. So many shows coming after -certainly including my own- owe debt to *The Sopranos*. David [Chase] just raised the bar completely. Before that, you didn’t tell stories in such a manner, you didn’t cast people look like that, you didn’t have darker protagonists everybody from Don Draper to Vic Mackay to Walter White to Nucky [Thompson, *Boardwalk Empire*]. It just raised the bar –changed the medium of television” (2013).

narrative pushing the boundaries of existing patterns. The owner of LOP theory, vice-president of programming at NBC in 1977-9, Paul Klein, suggested that viewers would switch to another channel if they found a programme objectionable and thus a show merely had to be “least objectionable among a segment of the audience” to succeed (Morgenstern 1979 in Cantor 1971).

A slight change in the approach of mainstream broadcast networks appeared only after the establishment of audience information systems demonstrating the change in media consumption habits, as Philip Napoli points out the research of Barnes and Thomson (1988): “Advances in the processing and analysis of audience data spurred advertisers and content providers to begin targeting audiences at the individual, rather than the household level, in reflection of the fragmenting of the media audience that was already taking place. Absent audience currencies that accounted for this fragmentation, the audience marketplace would have continued to operate under the established conceptualization of the media audience” (2010: 152). With the contributing factor of new networks joining the marketplace in the era of “TVII”, networks’ adaptation to audience measurement and targeting strategies became a convention in 1990s. Alisa Perren clarifies struggles of big three networks’ to place their brand according to specific audience segmentations while three new networks⁶ raise the competition in the industry by directly targeting different demographic groups. Nevertheless, none of these broadcast networks were aiming for audience groups according to their socio-economic status but their age, gender or race, therefore still paying regard to concerns over narrative preferences of mass audience (2003: 111).⁷

⁶ FOX, Warner Bros and UPN.

⁷ Fox at first to African-Americans, Warner Bros to twelve to 34-year-olds, particularly females, and UPN to African-American and young male viewers.

The era of “TVIII” with further audience segmentation strategies was influenced by pay-cable and developing digital means⁸; perhaps HBO’s contingency pushed networks to focus on demands of audiences rather than sticking to formulas that were working in classical narrative patterns but missing possible opportunities of attracting audiences through original “hits” like *The Sopranos*. New techniques of audience measurement have helped a new type of distribution system, VOD, to join television industry by Netflix’s decision of creating original content for its subscribers. Netflix was after what HBO did with its integration into television serials, by creating content that is not available in broadcast networks, for an audience that is willing to pay for its quality. Right alongside, Netflix’s intention was to make its audience stick with the service instead of subscribing to HBO’s online VOD service HBOGO. Netflix has found enough proportion of upscale audience to follow HBO’s narrative formulas to receive a share; mainstream networks’ persistence on targeting mass audiences was bringing alternative networks more audience. “The absolutism of the 18– 49 key demographic backfired in the best of ways. Instead of minimising the audience migration to cable, the broadcasters’ obsession for younger viewers maximised it. [...] Instead of marginalising the competition, the broadcast networks had given cable centre stage. And television has never been better” (Dunne 2007 in McCabe and Akass 2007).

Netflix used its subscribers data⁹ and followed the HBO example to give the audience what they cannot reach in other services: A protagonist who is edgier than

⁸ While cross-platform measurement company ComScore brings into use its digital audience measurement system Media Metrix 360 for media including television networks (“ComScore Announces” 2009), Tom Kenny mentions an anecdote told by the producer of *Game of Thrones* (2011-) in a press screening to put social media in the frame, by conveying how producers use Twitter to evaluate the audience reactions to scenes and the storyline (Kenny 2013).

⁹ The leading actor Kevin Spacey and the director of the pilot episode David Fincher of *House of Cards* were both very popular on the service (N. 2015). And Netflix’s chief communications officer states that they “have a direct relationship with consumers, we know what people like to watch and

most anti-heroes in television, Francis Underwood of *House of Cards*. The show's popularity proved Netflix's audience measurement system and the "HBO formula" right, greenlighting Netflix to use its data expertise to create and promote other serials, while serving as a model for Amazon to start creating original serials for its VOD platform Amazon Prime. Costello and Moore's study indicates the reason for eagerness of online commerce and VOD services' to choose serials while joining television flock, in their examination of online audience activity:

Although respondents were not asked to identify the titles of their favorite shows, they often volunteered this information, including descriptive analyses of program qualities perceived as important to the fan community. These fans expressed a resounding preference for programs that make them think. Serialized dramas were mentioned more often than any other type of program genre. Participants spoke consistently of a penchant for stories with plotline arcs, interesting characters played by strong leads, and challenging themes. Such programs did not always follow the usual formulas in storyline and setting (2007: 131).

Such indications lead the cable networks to create serials consisting unusual, "complicated" characters most of which tend to have anti-heroic attributes, located in story arcs that are different from those of "TVI" and "TVII's. While newly growing networks follow this fresh pattern of television serials, the president of HBO International Simon Sutton consolidates the company's approach by stating that HBO "proved that audiences are drawn to quality, [and] the strategy of HBO Premium will continue to be to produce signature series with 'a strong, unique creative vision'" (Nelson 2007).

Sutton's proposition of "quality" has been directly related to the target audience demographic of such networks, since the high class demographic is not

that helps us understand how big the interest is going to be for a given show. It gave us some confidence that we could find an audience for a show like *House of Cards*" (Carr 2013).

only considered as wealthy, but also well-educated (DeFino 2014). Demographics became important for television networks during the “TVII” era. Feuer et al. (1984) uses the term “quality television” for productions targeting “high class” audiences, which is a term I discuss further below to develop a better understanding of the rise of anti-hero narratives in television.

2.3 Quality Television

The notion of quality television did not emerge until the 1980s even though audience measurement practices were introduced to television in the early 1970s, allowing networks to analyze their audiences based on their demographic data and providing a basis for executives to develop television programmes according to this data to aim for higher views and commercial proportion. Targeting higher possible audience share was still the main strategy and the LOP theory, adopted by many networks, gave no maneuver to offbeat productions that exceeded the boundaries of network formulas even if they favored familiar contents. No matter which specific demographic group was the target of shows such as ABC’s *Full House* (1987-1995) or NBC’s *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) that appeal to advertisers by the agency of happy families were the safe choices of network executives (Gray 2008). The common approach of targeting the wider possible audience mass equated big networks in terms of quality their productions generate, presenting “no significant difference in what a viewer can see on ABC, CBS, or NBC” (Webster 1986).

When the increasing number of basic cable networks contributed the industry by forcing telecasters to compete for high class viewers (DeFino 2014) and made the socio-economic status of audiences matter for networks more than race or gender, the increasing distinction between the programmes generated by narrowcasting and

broadcasting practices brought “quality television” term forth. Feuer et al. put emphasis on the tension between art and commerce in television by firstly suggesting the term quality television (1984), while Nelson takes Adorno’s modernist critique of the American cultural industries to oppose him by suggesting that “commercial product might be capable of that unassimilable difference which would afford it to be counter-cultural, to make a critique, that is, of the dominant -and in Adorno’s view-oppressive bourgeois culture” in the light of contemporary “high-end” television drama (2007: 165). Shortly before the emergence of first original television serials of pay-cable network HBO, Robert Thompson developed the term “quality television” as “not regular television”, and further clarified this term: “A large ensemble cast, a memory, a new genre by mixing old ones, a tendency to be literary and writer-based, textual self-consciousness, subject matter tending towards the controversial, aspiration toward ‘realism’, a quality pedigree, attracting an audience with blue-chip demographics” (1996: 14-15).

Feuer links HBO to cinema, pointing out that HBO aligns its content with cinema by branding itself as a mode of art rather than “regular television”¹⁰, and Nelson supports Feuer, following *The Sopranos* example again: “Shot on film, *The Sopranos* aspires to the quality of its mob-movie predecessors, and its production values are cinematically high. But with six seasons and eighty-three episodes, *The Sopranos* is unmistakably a television product” (2007: 180). *The Sopranos* is a television product as Nelson writes, but it is a product of pay-cable network HBO that defines itself as “not TV” and was dependent on movies for its promotion (McMurria 2003) before joining the original serial scope. Hence, *The Sopranos* is

¹⁰ Unpublished keynote paper delivered by Jane Feuer at the American Quality Television Conference, Trinity College, Dublin, April 2005 (in Nelson 2007).

launched by HBO because of the network's target audience's interests, taking cinema as a visual narrative framework to please the demand of its paying subscribers.

Jonathan Gray describes *The Sopranos*' cinematic aspect as follows:

Visually, the show is a tour de force, filmed with great care and attention to minute details from shot composition to light play and contrast. Moreover, Chase's scripts often make use of dream sequences, rich with symbolism and foreboding, and Tony's shrink sessions quite often follow their own impressionist and symbolic path. In a medium often scared of the non-representational, and long weary of telling a story on any level other than the obvious surface, *The Sopranos* habitually strived to challenge and push the medium. [...] It was *The Sopranos*' cinematic feel that helped HBO considerably with its brand mantra, "It's not television, it's HBO" (Gray 2008).

The Sopranos sets its cinematic mood immediately in the first scene of the pilot episode, in which the protagonist Tony Soprano stares at a little sculpture, silent and curious, in the waiting room of his therapist Dr. Melfi. The scene positions the protagonist as a character getting into a different universe, a different narration that is more close to modernist cinema as Nelson indicates. The sculpture signals a visual and narrative style that will reveal the complex side of a television protagonist in a way that has never been done before in television. The shot frames Tony in between the legs of the female body sculpture and the narration foreshadows Tony's relation with women making an intertextual reference to the shot in which *The Graduate*'s anti-heroic protagonist Benjamin is framed by Mrs. Robinson's leg. McCabe and Akass state that *The Sopranos* uses intertextuality in a self-conscious way to fiddle with its mixed genres to produce a complex seeing (2002: 146-61), while Deborah Jaramillo emphasizes the notion of authorship and HBO's non-commercial advantage to link *The Sopranos* to cinema and quality television. "The 'quality' of the cinema is called 'art,' a classification that supposedly negotiates no tension between economics and aesthetics. The belief that there is no appearance of

commerce in art is a reflection fitting for *The Sopranos*, since the program is never interrupted by commercial breaks” (Jaramillo 2002).

Another aspect that raised production quality was HBO’s program scheduling strategy that defied broadcasting norms. Despite the previous examples, HBO decreased the usual number of episodes produced per season and expanded gaps between seasons. This flexibility handed the creators the chance to develop their serials in a more detailed way and to have longer writing periods, letting the artistic innovation blossom for both creators and rest of the crew (Lotz 2007) in a way similar to auteur cinema.

The auteur serials HBO introduced gave sophisticated texts a lift to television, and such texts abandoned the formulas used by previous television serials, going self-consciously critical, and demanding “viewers to refocus their own ways of seeing by disturbing their bearings” (Nelson 2007). DeFino considers such programming’s ability of making the audience think about the images is the defining mark of televisual art and quality television (2014: 22). The target audience of pay-cable networks expect their service provider to present them a challenging, distinguished content which does not settle for the LOP approach, since these audiences pay additional fee just for exceptional productions (Edgerton 2013). Furthermore, the audience of cable television who subscribed to pay-cable mostly for movies rather than settling for formulaic broadcast programming consider themselves as “quality” viewers, and they do “not only construct themselves as ‘quality readers’ but also police the boundary of such a readership (Bury 2008).”

These “quality readers” were critical of regular television compared to cinema before *The Sopranos* effect. Nelson expresses the general tendency of

evaluating cinema higher than television partly based on the resolution quality and production value distinction between the two medium especially in the British and American cinema and television industries (2007). Nevertheless, both resolution and production disadvantage of television has decreased over the past decade due to technologic developments, the spreading of high definition televisions and descending production expenses. Alexander Dhoest underlines the necessity to consider the industrial changes that partially made the wave of quality television possible such as digitalization that allows higher visual quality with lower costs while effecting the globalised television market to address higher educated and wealthy viewers (2014: 5). The artistic preferences pay-cable audience conditioned HBO to take an auteur based approach with Chase's *The Sopranos* to adopt cinema's characteristics to television. In light of Bourdieu's remark (1984), Gray considers artistic innovation as a codeword for high art that culturally exploits the upper middle class, and he claims that such innovations also attract the interest of advertisers to reach wealthy and educated upper-middle-class audience (2008: 35). Therefore, the basic cable networks and even broadcast networks were influenced by HBO's strategies that revived the quality television discourse in the TVIII era and "whatever exactly quality TV comprises, channels want to be associated with it and, network, cable or subscription, they have rebranded themselves accordingly" (Nelson 2007). These networks began to follow pay cable's short season models¹¹, and As Jermyn and Holmes approves, they demonstrated a willingness to move into edgier, more complex narratives common in "quality" serials (2006).

¹¹ While basic cable networks aired thirteen episodes per season for their foremost serials such as *The Shield*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*; FOX's *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) ran for two seasons at fourteen and thirteen episodes, ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010) and NBC's *Heroes* (2006-2010) both began with twenty-four episodes per season but then settled into mid-teens (DeFino 2014).

HBO's domino effect lead to attracting film writers and directors to television thanks to creator-based approach of quality television rebranding strategies, making primarily HBO and others a ground for names such as Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg to tell long-running, "novelesque" stories without sacrificing their artistic styles. As DeFino argues, "Because long-form television narrative allows for a complexity of character and plot unavailable to the shorter-form feature film, talented writers, directors and producers may now find television work more appealing and fulfilling than film work" (2014: 8). By praising the moral complexity of *The Sopranos* and comparing it to cinema, Scott even suggests that the U.S. cinema and television have now swapped their seats, as scripted television serials are now more daring and "willing to risk giving offense" (Scott 2010 in Edgerton 2013).

Consequently, HBO's distinctive, quality programming strategy to appeal its audience welcomed a greater degree of "realism" (Littleton 1999 in Jaramillo 2002) that is willing to introduce complex narratives and characters which move to darker and edgier territories, thus not only changing the outlook of the medium but opening the television serial door for anti-heroes. By the encouragement of *The Sopranos*, networks looked for narratives with morally complex character developments and flexed their formula-oriented judgements. Eventually, the concept of quality television became almost identical with complex, edgy protagonists and mostly anti-heroes, adapting other pay-cable networks such as Showtime, basic cable networks such as FX, AMC and others to follow HBO by developing anti-hero narratives to link their brands to quality in an attempt to reach sophisticated, high class audiences.

HBO initiated quality television narratives under the influence of audience measurement practices, which reinvigorated contents by getting closer to feature film narratives, even eliminating story arc clichés of "old television". When talking about

the story of *Boardwalk Empire*'s second season, in which the anti-heroic protagonist Nucky kills the heroic second-leading character of the serial¹², the creator Winter makes the distinguished perception of “old television” clear: “[I thought] If Nucky doesn’t kill this kid by the end of the season, I don’t believe this. This is bullshit, this is television. And I didn’t want it to be television –it’s television of course, but I didn’t want it to feel like ‘television’ show. It just had to feel real” (Winter 2013). In order to be labeled as quality television while diversifying themselves from other quality television examples, networks and their creators welcomed the anti-hero and they pushed the formulaic boundaries of “old television” heroes further. To sum up, developing audience measurement systems paved the way for narrowcasting and quality television approach that targets upper-middle and high class audiences, and the necessity of morally complex characters for quality television lead to anti-heroic protagonists. In the following section, I examine the inclusive arc of the anti-hero in contemporary U.S. television, from pay-cable’s early anti-hero examples to VOD’s recently advancing anti-heroes.

¹² Season 2, Episode 12.

3. THE COURSE OF THE ANTI-HERO IN TELEVISION

Anti-hero narratives spreaded across other television networks and distribution practices after HBO's *The Sopranos* proved complex characters are accepted by target audience of subscription-based telecasters. From cable to satellite to online VOD services, anti-hero narratives were confirming HBO's decision to greenlight *The Sopranos* whilst the characteristics of anti-heroes and their relation to audience have become riskier throughout the anti-hero's evolvement in television. This section focuses on the features of first prominent anti-heroes of each telecasting types and networks in terms of their anti-heroic characteristics and the way they build a connection with the audience despite their malicious manners.

3.1 Pay-Cable Networks Introduce The Anti-Hero: HBO's *The Sopranos* and Showtime's *Dexter*

HBO's particular strategy to create original serials that carry quality television attributes linking the network's brand to cinema and especially modernist European cinema that appeals to their target audience demographic, manifested itself by *The Sopranos*. While the mixture of soap opera and mob drama genres formed a kind of narrative that was different than regular network serials for the audience of pay-cable television, HBO's no commercial break policy rendered it as an unprecedeted television serial. The idea of a delusional conventional television persona that was presented in the serial is what particularly differentiates *The Sopranos* from the rest of the examples. Heroes in classical television serials idealize goal oriented essentials of American dream to obtain economical and social success as well as happiness; Tony Soprano, on the other hand, is in anxiety about the purpose of life despite having already achieved both materialistic and family-

oriented goals of the dream. His reasoning reveals how his way of thinking differentiates from conventional heroes': "If all this shit's for nothing, then why do I got to think about it?"¹³ As Nelson suggests, perhaps his anxiety over life despite what he materialistically owns is a substantial aspect that attracts the upper-middle class U.S. audience, no matter how anti-heroic he is: "Like the AB1 males at whom *The Sopranos* is perhaps primarily aimed, Tony Soprano apparently has it all. He is extremely affluent. He has family. [...] He carries all the hallmarks of success as defined in the USA. And yet he is unfulfilled, unhappy" (Nelson 2007).

The Sopranos writer and *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner indicates that the regular approach of television stands for reassurance of audience's lives: "It's an escape that reconfirms [that your life is OK]. I am not reconfirming that you are OK. I am reconfirming that you are having a hard time" (in Lavery 2011). In contrast to regular television heroes, Tony Soprano shares the struggles and unhappiness of its viewers by revealing his frustrations in his psychotherapist Dr. Melfi's office. Christopher Vincent similarly observes: "It appeals to so many fans because it addresses those feelings of isolation and gets them out in the open where they can be wrestled with on a level playing field. In one way or another, fans of the show identify with this sense of crisis whether in their jobs or at home, in their relationships or within themselves. Where mainstream popular entertainment is typically satisfied with sweeping the difficult issues under the rug, Melfi provides an alternative, a treatment solution" (2008). *The Sopranos* opens and unfolds in Melfi's office; thus, it introduces the anti-hero to U.S. audience in a highly empathetic way which provides a basis for such a protagonist to be in television. Possibly as a precaution for audience's attitude towards him, we are introduced to Tony's feelings

¹³ Season 1, Episode 3.

and anxiety before the first immoral act he commits in the serial, through the psychotherapy scene that sets the mood of the serial. Moreover, we witness his first violent act under the influence of his voice-over. When the audience gets used to him close to the mid point of the pilot episode, we no longer hear his voice-over for the rest of the serial. Similarly, that is the scene he is presented as a dark mob character in the business, under a high contrast lighting.

The Sopranos can be compared to its cinema antecedents *The Godfather* (1972) and *Goodfellas* (1990) in terms of its narrative. However, while both *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* lead the audience to the cathartic moment in which pity arises along with moral outcome, *The Sopranos* lacks a similar cathartic punishment moment for its immoral protagonist, thus leaving the audience alone with their attitude towards the protagonist without the cathartic release. In fact, let alone the cathartic moment, the finale of the serial even lacks a clear conclusion: The scene ends with a cut to black after Tony Soprano meets with his family for a dine out during which an incoming life-threatening danger is hinted. Piluso argues that “On the precipice of release, at the last second Chase cuts to black, and pity and terror collapse inward in the audience psyche” (2011). In this sense, *The Sopranos* even pushes the conventional cinema boundaries by not letting its audience to get away with the release of their feelings toward immoral characters and situations and basicly raising a question to us: After witnessing all the crimes he committed and struggles he had, do we feel like he deserves a death punishment or do we desire to see him keeping on with his business and his cosy family dinner?

The answer unfolds through the way the audience’s relationship with Tony is established. Although *The Sopranos* diverges from *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* in terms of a classical Hollywood conclusion, as mentioned before, through touching

upon Tony's psychotherapy sessions, it does not specifically differentiate from conventional formulas. Similar to Don Corleone's "save the cat" recipe, in the pilot episode, Tony Soprano goes to the psychiatrist's office after he has a panic attack triggered by the ducks he adored flying away from his garden. He even cries over the ducks after Dr. Melfi helps him realize that the reason behind his panic attack is his constant fear of losing his family. He steals from his friends, bribes officials, even kills his relatives, cheats on his wife, pushes people to commit suicide, and more. Yet, every now and then Tony Soprano shows compassion to children and especially animals. Tony uses his compassion toward animals and children beside the therapy for his conscience¹⁴; the serial uses these to make him tolerable and sympathetic despite all the downsides of his character. Right alongside, similar to *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*, he shares the conservative values of Italian American community and respects the codes of mafia. Franco Ricci describes Tony as a "loveable beast", "a veritable mixture of fatherly Don Corleone sweetness (*The Godfather*) and Tommy DeVito ruthlessness (*Goodfellas*)" (2014: 164), who represents "the historical culmination of a long process of assimilation of Hollywood Italian images into the mainstream of American popular culture" (Bondanella 2004). Following these early examples, he takes advantage of the gaps in the legal system and maintains justice in his own way within the codes of the Italian mafia precedent. Thus, the audience is invited to question the justice system and to cheer for Tony to punish unethical and immoral acts swiftly and directly. Moreover, as Barbara Villez underlines, the contrast between Tony's criminal victims and noncriminals who get away with their immoral acts due to the mechanism of justice system, orients the

¹⁴ "The criminal's sentimentality reveals itself in compassion for babies and pets. [...] Therapy has potential for non-criminals, for criminals it becomes one more criminal operation," reads Dr. Melfi from Samuel Yochelson's *The Criminal Personality*, before abandoning the therapy with Tony (Season 6, Episode 20).

audience to feel with Tony and his effective action-based justice practice (2011: 225-226). Perhaps *The Sopranos* do this most distinctly by putting Dr. Melfi in the position of a rape victim who fails to maintain punishment for her suspect through official system, therefore hesitates whether to use the practice of his client Tony.¹⁵ Margrethe Vaage mentions Joshua Greene's pro-social punishment label which is also referred to as altruistic punishment, to clarify such states the audience find themselves in: "As humans we have an in-built willingness to punish wrongdoers, even if nothing wrong has been done to us personally" (2016). Responsively, the audience asked the rapist's head, some fans declaring their desire "to see that guy get his justice Soprano style" (JohnnyBoySoprano 2004), but the serial never fulfilled this desire as Dr. Melfi chooses to leave the case to the officials.

Despite his heritage-oriented mafia values, Tony does not avoid to commit crimes within his own family. In such cases, the serial uses another classical narrative practice by making his temporary antagonists worse, or less preferable than the protagonist (Synder 2005). Tony kills his best friend Salvatore Bonpensiero brutally by multiple gunshots, but his action is justified as Bonpensiero had been talking to FBI as an informant.¹⁶ Tony strangles one of his men Ralph Cifaretto to death, but he had been guilty over the death of the horse Tony adored.¹⁷

The broadcast network protagonists that carry flawed attributes similar to anti-heroes before and after *The Sopranos* do not usually stick to their anti-heroic manners or their self-interest throughout the serials. They either overcome their flaws and become heroic like *NYPD Blue*'s (1993-2005) Detective Andy Sipowicz, or they use their immoral manners to serve for a greater good like *24*'s (2001-2010) Jack

¹⁵ Season 3, Episode 4.

¹⁶ Season 2, Episode 11.

¹⁷ Season 4, Episode 7.

Bauer and *House M.D.*'s (2004-2012) Gregory House intentionally. What truly makes Tony Soprano the first anti-hero of contemporary television is his self-centered anti-heroism that does not intentionally turn into a heroic manner through the character arc. Even though his criminal justice system convinces the audience to cheer for him in some occasions, maintaining justice never becomes his priority over his self-interest and the audience witness this in his psychotherapy sessions. "Tony was not only a bad guy, but an increasingly unapologetic one as the series aged. Where previous dramas had humanized edgy characters over time, *The Sopranos* did the opposite," states Alan Sepinwall (2012).

However, HBO executives were not confident of a positive audience reaction to Tony in the beginning, and they were reluctant to let the creator Chase to make him commit his first murder in the fifth episode. "It's too early, the audience will hate him," thought HBO programming chief Chris Albrecht (Oxford 2002). But Chase was sure that what really matters for the audience is the respect they have for the account of protagonist's power: "We need to see him support the code. If he doesn't kill the guy, the audience is going to lose respect for him." And for Chase, that is the episode that notably differentiated *The Sopranos* from all others (Wallace 2010).

Aaron Toscano considers the anti-hero's potency as the specific attribute paving the way for audience identification.¹⁸ "Although Tony's illegitimacy makes identifying with him complicated, his power is a fantasy indulgence and, especially for male audiences, normative characterization" (2014). Tony is powerful, and he is

¹⁸ Although Carroll prefers "pro-attitude" over the term "identification" to define audience's attitude towards protagonists since he defines "identify" as "to have the same feelings and motivations" with the character (2013), Toscano objects: "Identification does not require the viewer to have the same feelings. Identification is an ego completion of the viewer, not an identical reconstruction" (2014).

able to solve complicated family and business problems. He always has a plan to cover for his losses -except his anxiety- and he usually gets whatever he wants that most of the audiences are unable to get. “Tony represents the symbolic realization of deep repressed fantasies, especially for the males in the audience,” states Noël Carroll. “They wish to be as unrestrained as Tony. Insofar as he enacts their dreams, they give him a pass. That is the basis of our pro-attitude toward Tony. Our sympathy for Soprano is nothing but our egoistical love of our own egoism” (2013: 238). For Carroll, our attitude towards Tony is not related to sympathy but instead fascination and alliance, only because we are exposed to his justifications and the other characters are morally “either worse or irrelevant” (2013: 242-243). Yet, even though the protagonist is morally more preferable than the others, his morality still conflicts with the morality of the audience and this leads the audience to question their engagement to the narrative through “reality checks”. As Vaage observes: “During reality checks, the antihero series momentarily changes from a sympathetic narrative to a distanced and ambiguous one, in Carl Plantinga’s terminology, meaning that the antihero series temporarily becomes a narrative in which one does not sympathize strongly with anyone” (Vaage 2016). Correspondingly, Raney and Janicke argue that the role of sympathy in audience engagement to anti-hero narratives is less important compared to conventional hero narratives, as the audience abandon their morality concept during the viewing since moral judgement hinders the enjoyment level (2013). Conversely, Schlütz, Schneider and Zehrfeld consider liking the anti-hero the key factor, as caring for the immoral protagonist leads the audience to overcome the disapproved attributes and actions. “This reduces cognitive dissonance and helps you to continue enjoying the show” (2014: 128). Having

browsed through the audience reactions to the end of *The Sopranos*,¹⁹ I disagree with eliminating the likeable aspect of Tony in identification context.

One way or another, during *The Sopranos'* airing slots, HBO occasionally beat its cable rivals and broadcast networks despite pay-cable's numerical disadvantage against others, drawing 13.4 million viewers for the opening of fourth season (Castleman and Podrazik 2003) and becoming second most watched television show of the week including all broadcast shows after the serial finale aired. Whilst the “big three” ABC, FOX and CBS are all available for over 100 million viewers in the U.S., *The Sopranos* finale attracted more audience than their shows even though HBO had been serving approximately 30 million households with an extra fee at the time (“Sopranos Ratings” 2007). Moreover, the absorbing popularity of the unfamiliar protagonist in television indicated that “the underlying assumptions that had driven television for six decades were no longer in effect” (Castleman and Podrazik 2003 in Edgerton 2013).

“I love Dexter, and, if loving him is wrong, I don’t want to be right (2007),” confesses Bambi Haggins about *Dexter*, another pay-cable anti-hero narrative. *The Sopranos* helped HBO to expand brand’s subscription base and reputation, and their pay-cable rival Showtime had to take HBO’s programming strategy under consideration to keep up. Robert Greenblatt, who previously produced *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) for HBO, was hired as the head of original programming by Showtime in 2003 and acquired two anti-hero narratives out of his first three: Jenji Kohan’s *Weeds* which is based on an anti-hero who sells weeds for a living while being a sexually active egoist rather than a good mother, and James Manor Jr’s

¹⁹ “Even though our conscious knows Tony was in deed bad -you grow to love him. ... I try to imagine him not dying,” states a fan (Feliciano 2010).

Dexter which brought Showtime 2.4 million average viewers per week (Streib and Pomerantz 2008). Manos had previously written an episode for *The Sopranos*, the first episode Tony Soprano committed his first murder²⁰, and was surely aware of what the complex characters of quality television brought to HBO.²¹

Based on Jeff Lindsay's novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, the protagonist Dexter Morgan's character is presented as another "cute killer" after Tony Soprano, who works as a blood analyst in Miami Police Department to cover his blood thirsty sociopathic personality while collecting blood samples of his victims which he finds guilty of serious crimes and kills mostly during nights. Just as Tony Soprano's loyalty to Italian heritage, he respects a code that is set by his father Harry: Only harm criminals who harm innocents. Nevertheless, he does not serve for a greater good through this code. Even though the education he got from Harry usually limits his violence to criminals, he rather serves his thirst for blood in a self-centered way. While his sociopathic serial killer persona that is shown right in the opening makes him a much more difficult character to identify with compared to Tony, his sincere voice-over used throughout the serial beginning from the first shot makes him accessible. He is a lonely protagonist who only has a half-sister and a new girlfriend close to him, and he cannot disclose his real personality to either. Only the audience knows his secret, which he names "dark passenger". This special feeling he bestows us, assists us to tolerate his flaws. Voice-over keeps us close to him, lets us hear how he enjoys killing, and how much he needs to collect blood samples while revealing us his apathetic self-concept. "We feel as though we are with him in all his choices"

²⁰ Season 1, Episode 5.

²¹ "I think that the public was ready for a show about a serial killer because of a show like *The Sopranos* and because of *The Shield*, because you started seeing a real anti-hero," states Manos in an interview (Howard 2010: 16).

(Byers 2010) and this even transfers a feeling of guilt for some audiences, especially when he gets close to break Harry's justifying code. While there is no code-breaker action Dexter commits in the first three seasons of the serial, after gaining popularity by the fourth season, the show becomes more compelling, as Dexter kills a biker who only verbally abuses him. This incident pushes the audience to justify his action by relying on his frustration over his wife's death or labelling the biker as "rude" and "redneck" (Gregoriou 2012: 280). After three seasons of close alliance, Dexter gets the benefit of fan loyalty. Peters argues that the anxiety and tension within us over revelation of his inner personality and his capability against it are also effective in our commitment. "We are beguiled by their detachment from the often almost overwhelming anxieties that we experience" (2014).

Unlike most sociopathic killers in the serial, he does not reflect abnormal characteristics that could draw the audience away from him, and similarly, in each season he faces a specific antagonist whose character assembles worse components than his. In this respect, the character structures show similarities with those of *The Sopranos*. The most important one is the antagonist of the first season, "Ice Truck Killer", as he reveals the justifying reason of Dexter's killer instinct. As Dexter's long missing brother, "Ice Truck Killer" had been with him in the container in which their mother had been murdered. Having witnessed his mother's murder and gotten stuck in a container full of her blood, Dexter has a clear reason to be fascinated by blood and to feel inside a hunger to kill, and he is able to channel his malicious urge to other murderers, which makes him even sympathetic. "Understanding why someone does something we consider abnormal helps us to rationalize the occurrence," states Ashley Donnelly and adds that also understanding his difference to us functions as a comforting fact to acknowledge him on the side of "otherness",

posing “no threat to our conceptualizations of what is right and wrong”, therefore disengaging our moral self-concept and giving us “the license to empower the voice within us all that cries out for brutal, bloody, visceral justice” (2012). Such narratives, in a wider context, render violence tolerable by attaching it to “other” and denies alliance responsibility of spectators (Leitch 2001 in Howard 2010: 136). Disclaiming guilty feelings linked to being allied to a serial killer, the audience cheers for him to do what the justice system cannot do, as Dexter is occasionally in competition with the police department to give criminals the fatal punishment instead of jail time. In this sense, Dexter’s criminal justice system shows similarity with Tony Soprano’s. “In a perfect world, [Dexter] would be given a [medal] for his fine vigilante work. I would consider [it] community service,” writes a viewer (Gregoriou 2012: 275). Similarly, the president of entertainment at Showtime, Bob Greenblatt, defends that Dexter “kills people who deserve to be killed” and “there is a fine line between vigilantism and murder (Smith 2008 in Byers 2010).” In light of the justice assurance of Dexter, David Schmid claims that the audience identifies with Dexter “not in spite of Dexter’s murders, but because of them (2010).” Yet, the research on audience enjoyment of the serial by Schlütz, Schneider and Zehrfeld reveals that most of the respondents report an empathic feeling towards Dexter rather than a desire to be like him (2014: 127), approving Donnelly’s arguments based on “otherness”.

The otherness hallmark and Dexter’s justice vigilance give him a superheroic aura, and indeed conventional superheroes and Dexter have a lot in common, as Dexter admits in voice-over: “Tragic beginnings, secret identities, part-human, part-mutant...”²² But unlike superheroes, Dexter does not intentionally serve a greater

²² Season 2, Episode 5.

good by maintaining justice in his territory Miami, he rather serves his own irresistible needs to survive, as his voice-over narration reflects his spiritual release just after he kills a victim: “I just know there’s something dark in me. [...] And when he’s driving, I feel... alive.”²³

The popularity of the serial once again proved that anti-hero narratives could survive in television and in fact improve their networks’ numbers and reputation. “Shrink Wrap” is the most watched drama episode ever for Showtime (Nicholson 2007), while the finale of the serial drew 2.8 million viewers to break its own record (Hibberd 2013). Dexter adopted a unique approach to television’s crime serial formulas by unsettling the heroic image of American security unit.

Reinforcing the televisual way *The Sopranos* and *Dexter* paved, both HBO and Showtime proceed to replace their hit shows with further anti-hero narratives. Whilst HBO hired *The Sopranos* writer Terence Winter to create yet another mob drama *Boardwalk Empire* centered on the corrupt politician Nucky Thompson²⁴ and got Martin Scorsese to direct the pilot episode to stick to their quality television label, Showtime filled *Dexter*’s shoes by *Ray Donovan* (2013-), in which a wicked “fixer” solves the criminal problems of Hollywood celebrities without any sense of empathy and antagonizes whoever crosses his path including family members. Shafer and Raney argue that “Through repeated viewing of antihero stories, viewers can learn that plot pattern and develop corresponding cognitive structures that are activated when such stories are later viewed” (2012). Consequently, basic cable and

²³ Season 2, Episode 3.

²⁴ For HBO in particular, Nucky’s anti-heroism is a further step for the anti-hero’s course. Except rare flashbacks indicating the protagonist’s childhood poverty, no narration devices or narrative strategies are used to justify his actions or to make the audience sympathize him. Yet, *Boardwalk Empire* achieved to succeed and Nucky is presented as a powerful man despite his flaws, approving Edelstein: “Americans enjoy winning and elation, not losing and frustration. One can be an anti-hero, but in the United States one has to be a successful anti-hero” (1996: 19).

satellite networks adapted their original drama content strategy to pay-cable sample by counting on HBO’s quality re-branding, and Showtime’s approval of complex character’s distinguishing impact on audiences.

3.2 Basic Cable and Satellite Networks Acknowledge The Anti-Hero: FX’s *The Shield* and AMC’s *Mad Men*

Pay-cable networks’ narrowcasting strategies that lead to the successes of *The Sopranos* and *Dexter* were followed by basic cable networks that are also available to satellite users²⁵ in an attempt to improve their reputation and to widen their audience base within upper-middle and high classes. Low profile networks such as FX and AMC imitate HBO’s book to attract advertisers who look for audiences that are willing and able to pay more for products. The adjustment occurred in 2002, when Shawn Ryan’s *The Shield* appeared on FX. FX’s president’s aim at the time was to find a balance between broadcast networks and pay-cable networks with contents that provide moral ambiguity that HBO brought to television and to brand FX “as the HBO of basic cable” (Levin 2007 in Edgerton 2013).

Similar to *Dexter*, *The Shield* puts the anti-hero at the core of society’s security unit which had been the trustworthy, potent and heroic guard unit of public in television until then (White 2012). The “strike team” of the police department in Los Angeles, lead by Vic Mackey, occupies the center of the department in charge of on-location operations that are related to serious crimes such as drug dealing. Vic and his crew’s proven success provides them an unofficial power on the authorities of the department, and they take advantage of this power to wield it for their self-

²⁵ Basic cable and satellite distributions’ subscriptions cost much less than pay-cable’s, thus, they depend on advertising revenue.

interests. Under Vic's influence, they take drugs out of dealers' hands for their personal usage or to make money, they torture suspects whether they are guilty or not, they plant false evidences, and they harass their co-workers. Unlike Dexter, the leader Vic displays a violent attitude without any vital reason to justify his actions. Whilst the previous police serials generated a formula for the genre in which the criminals and villains are brought to justice at the end of each episode and safety is ensured for the society, Vic's continuous anti-heroism without punishment "recasts the moral/ethical basis of the cop show" (White 2012).

The anti-hero's moral ambiguity in *The Shield* helped its producers to adapt HBO's strategy to cop shows and the serial's unusual narration marked it as a new sample of quality television. Unlike broadcast conventions, the serial counts on the realistic impression of hand-held camera and instant zooms to capture the fast rhythm at the police department. Despite the narrational differences with *The Sopranos* by means of its unconventional approach, *The Shield* is considered as "the most HBO-influenced show to air outside of a subscription network" (Lotz 2007: 184).²⁶

Glyn White argues that this quick and active narration limits the audience's ability to distance themselves from the anti-hero (2012), but the rapid introduction of Vic's immoral character in the pilot episode shows no intention to create any sympathy towards him: Vic sticks around the police department as a repulsive muscleman who rags and sexually abuses his co-workers without any implication of memory-driven motivation like Dexter's, or of justification as Tony Soprano's

²⁶ FX executive Kevin Reilly approves HBO comparisons: " 'HBO for basic cable' was our mantra from inside. If we led with a cop show, would it just feel too familiar no matter what we did? [...] Then on top of it, there was an anti-hero in the lead; nobody had ever done that with a cop on television" (in Sepinwall 2012).

ducks. He even kills his own squad member to prevent the possibility of espionage. Nevertheless, he is presented as a powerful cop with his own ways to ensure justice, which is perhaps his most attractive character trait similar to Dexter and Tony Soprano. Vic speeds up the slow pace of the justice system by interrogating suspects inappropriately and appeals to audiences who are in disbelief towards the bureaucratic complications of the system, as long as he reveals glimpses of “humanity” at times.

In this sense, *The Shield*’s writers take caution by systematically organizing Vic’s actions. While he displays a pure malicious presence in the pilot episode, constant close-ups on his face reveals his conscience in the aftermath of his co-worker’s death in the following episode. He keeps his calm on the immoral action he took, but he saves a baby from drowning in a swimming pool in the third episode. He cheats on his wife in the fifth episode, but takes full responsibility on the operation of an illegally institutionalized pedophilia case and succeeds in the following episode, and so on. Such humane incidents differentiate Vic from Tony Soprano and Dexter as he serves for a greater good at times without any selfish reason, and this softens his anti-heroism. Nevertheless, as the first protagonist example of malicious cop in television who sticks to his immorality throughout the story, he crosses the boundaries of conventional television heroes and carries anti-heroic means.

The Anti-hero’s move to basic cable was not only a matter of narrative strategies to justify protagonist’s actions. Unlike pay-cable networks, FX depended on advertisers and struggled with efforts initiated by groups opposed to violence on screen, such as Parent’s Television Council, to boycott *The Shield*’s advertisers in order to prevent them from supporting the serial. As Amanda Lotz summarizes, such groups succeeded to scare many advertisers away, but the serial’s audience continued

to grow and new advertisers who aimed for upscale audiences replaced the slot. “Whereas conventional wisdom suggested that the protest of advocacy groups would result not only in advertisers pulling support from the series but also the end for the show, as had been the case in the network era, the old rules have been rewritten” (2007: 185). *The Shield* proved that such programming could survive also in a distribution practice that depends on advertisers. The serial never averaged more viewers than broadcast shows, but its 1.8 million viewers out of 2.8 million average belonged to a much more important, 18-49-years old demographic for advertisers (Martin 2006).

Vic’s anti-heroic character helped actor Michael Chiklis to win FX’s first ever Primetime Emmy Award in 2002 and *The Shield* helped the network to raise its profile by this rebranding based on narrowcasting and edgy programming. This success indicated that such programming strategy was effective also for networks that use distribution practices other than pay-cable. “Before *The Shield*, producers had good cause be wary of original cable productions, but cases such as *The Shield* illustrated the different possibilities available to producers willing to forgo the conventions of broadcast production,” states Lotz (2007: 231).

In the final, Vic ends up losing his job, his brother-like best squad friend committing suicide and the other being sent to jail, his wife and little child running away through witness protection. The camera quietly zooms-in on his face in the final scene as if anticipating remorseful tears, which would give us a cathartic release by discrediting Vic’s anti-heroism, but it shows him keeping his determination and taking his gun before leaving his new white-collar job to carry on his anti-heroic manner. Just like other contemporary television anti-heroes, he does not repent his “flaws”.

AMC's *Mad Men* takes up where Vic leaves off, with its white-collared advertiser protagonist Don Draper. Similar to HBO, before beginning to recruit original programmes, AMC was a network focusing on theatrically released movies in its programme schedule. Arriving to 2006, AMC executives including the newly hired Charles Collier were convinced to rebrand the network by airing quality originals that are consonant with their movie library (Brodesser-Akner 2007), and they were aiming to raise their moviegoer audience numbers as well as keeping those present. To that end, they adopted the same formula as pay-cable and FX by their first original drama *Mad Men*. "AMC will tell you directly that they just took a page from our playbook and chased after that very same model," claims FX executive Landgraf (Sepinwall 2012), while the creator Matthew Weiner reveals that "quality is a commercial decision" for AMC (2008a) and "they had a very clear agenda and a lot of it was trying to produce shows like HBO" (2008b). In the grip of *The Sopranos* director Alan Taylor and its cinematographer Phil Abraham, *Mad Men* pilot is shot on 35mm and the serial has a cinematic visual style which alters it to fit quality television label (Edgerton 2011).

Mad Men did not only replicate previous quality serials for the purpose of enhancing AMC's brand value; it transferred anti-heroism into a non-violent, common and familiar figure with Don Draper. Don stands out from previous television anti-heroes by means of the conflicts he finds himself in; despite the violent mob, the serial killer and the cop, he does not primarily crusade against justice system, business competitors, antagonists or any kind of outer world antagonism. His conflict is an extremely inner one: Denial of his real identity as a lower class orphan and his struggle to find happiness in his posterior high class life that he obtained after stealing the identity of a friend who died in the army. His

struggle is the “inability to find any meaningful direction in his own life or in any of human existence,” as Harold Lubin explains the characteristic of the literary anti-hero (1968: 311 in Liddy-Judge 2013). Don considers the existence of any kind of system in life a delusion, stating “the universe is indifferent to us”²⁷, and he becomes anti-heroic by denying common morality and by attempting every possible self-interested act to find a meaning to keep on existing. “I have been watching my life. It’s right there. I keep scratching at it, trying to get into it. I can’t,” he reveals in an “unmanly” way, which is unlikely for conventional television heroes to experience or admit. Similar to previous television anti-hero narratives’ strategy to exclude any character that is more immoral than the protagonist, there is no other character in *Mad Men* who is less self-interested. “These characters abandon not only family but also normal friendships, in or outside of the office, and any involvement in their community beyond what benefits their self-interest,” argues Christie L. Maloyed (2014) and Don’s actions approve his account: He cheats on his wife in numerous occasions in search of relief; he denies his past by refusing his step-brother’s calls for reunion and conduces his suicide; he constantly keeps his distance even from his closest co-workers to protect his strong image.

Nevertheless, *Mad Men* sticks to the powerful figure of the television anti-hero by not revealing Don’s helplessness towards his existential crisis in the pilot episode. He displays a powerful figure in suit who easily comes up with creative ideas in advertising; he uses every weak and flawed character at workplace; and he easily charms women. Tony Soprano’s ducks and children are replaced by the social realities of the time: As a white man living in 1950s America, Don does not discriminate black people and women unlike other reputable characters in the

²⁷ Season 1, Episode 8.

advertising agency, which makes him more preferable than others for the audience. His inner conflicts that signal “weakness” arrive in the following episodes alongside flashbacks that reveal his pitiful childhood, to make his weaknesses reasonable for the audience. Even so, he never finds himself in an inferior position regarding his social life; every time his image is wounded by a rejection of his business ideas or by broken relationships, his business trips that bring successful deals and love affairs help him to regain confidence and reputation. Whenever his powerful figure is harmed, flashbacks stand for audience’s empathy, and whenever he reveals his amorality, he presents a much stronger character. Don never loses, and *Mad Men* never takes the risk of losing audience’s empathy and respect at the same time.

Similar to *The Shield*, the amoral aspects of *Mad Men* made it hard to convince advertisers to sponsor the serial despite the serial’s advertisement background (Brodesser-Akner 2007). Regardless, it increased AMC’s prime-time viewers by 27 percent (Umstead 2008 in Edgerton 2011) and a third of its regular audience belonged to a class of people who earn over \$100,000 a year. AMC acquired another edgy anti-hero serial *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013)²⁸ and “two shows that celebrate bad behavior (drug dealing and lechery) helped AMC attract an audience both younger and richer” (Lowry 2008), moving the network to “elite’s league” right alongside pay-cable networks.

Mad Men’s fifth season premiere drew 20 percent more viewers than the previous season’s debut after Netflix added all of its seasons into its streaming library in 2012 (“Netflix Helps” 2012). Perhaps with the contribution of this

²⁸ *Breaking Bad*’s protagonist Walter White evolves into an anti-hero after he is presented as a decent family man and a teacher in the pilot. His terminal illness, his disabled son and his low income justify his motives to get involved in drug dealing. Once he steps into anti-heroism, he possesses a fascinating power that alienates him from his family and from his essential aim.

encouragement, 2012 became the year that Netflix got involved in original programming using the same formula as pay-cable and basic cable did.

3.3 Anti-Hero-On-Demand: Netflix's *House of Cards* and Amazon's *Hand of God*

Having served its customers as a DVD-by-mail service since 1998, Netflix began online streaming through licensing movie studios' and television networks' contents in 2007. Netflix subscribers now were able to stream movies and serials wherever, whenever and on whichever device they wanted, a service explained by the term “video-on-demand (VOD)”. Although the company did not have a low profit rate, the increasing cost of licensing over years pushed Netflix to produce its own content to depend less on third parties and, as the network's executive Ted Sarandos states, “to become HBO faster than HBO can become Netflix” (Hass 2013).²⁹ To this end, Netflix co-produced its first original serial *Lilyhammer*³⁰ in partnership with NRK. But the real peak of the network came with the political drama *House of Cards*, whose first season episodes were launched on the service all at once. This was a brand new approach on televisual storytelling since there was no longer a waiting time between the episodes, and the subscribers of Netflix could “binge-watch” the serial. Sarandos declares that *House of Cards* was developed to be watched at once, or in multiple episodes. “It had to hold up to a different level of

²⁹ “While per-show licenses will never surpass the cost of original producing a series, their increases will make ongoing investments in *House of Cards* less expensive on a differential basis,” states Matthew Ball (in Salmon 2013).

³⁰ Written and starred by *The Sopranos* actor Steven Van Zandt, *Lilyhammer* shows the signs of HBO influence with its narrative: A mobster called “Frankie the Fixer”, who resembles the henchman of Tony Soprano, migrates to Norway under witness protection program and looks to establish his new business. Resembling Tony Soprano’s ducks, he loses his beloved fancy dog Lily in the first ten minutes of the pilot.

continuity and logic scrutiny, which is one of the things that makes the show so strong” (N. 2015). This approach makes “summary satisfaction” of the audience more important than “transactional satisfaction”³¹ for Netflix, thus allowing for “a richer narrative, since story arcs no longer had to be neatly resolved at the end of each installment” (N. 2015). This also allows both network executives and audiences to be more patient over serial narratives, as the viewer numbers of early episodes does not stand for whole serial and as the binge-watching option makes the viewer perceive a season of a serial as a whole. Netflix’s study reveals that “viewers are seeking out longer form, complex storytelling” and they consider binge-watching as a factor that improves the quality of television (West 2013). Indeed, binge-watching gives television the “novelesque” feeling that quality television is after.

As a network that carries no commercial and depends on its subscribers who look for quality television, Netflix takes narrowcasting as a targeting strategy. In her essay arguing that online VOD and binge-watching might mean the “TVIV” era, Mareike Jenner underlines the HBO influence on Netflix’s quality approach: “By offering creative and budgetary freedom to television auteurs [...] Netflix seems to follow HBO’s example of creating a brand identity where ‘quality’ content helps construct the brand” (2016).

Another element that Netflix took out of HBO formula was anti-heroic protagonist, and this time binge-watching allowed the creators to push the conventional hero boundaries even further. The pragmatist congressman Francis Underwood (Frank) works on overthrowing whoever crosses his path to reach his self-interested goals, which is mainly to become the president of the United States.

³¹ According to Richard Oliver, “summary satisfaction” means “the satisfaction that a consumer derives from an entire television drama series” while “transactional satisfaction” stands for “the satisfaction a consumer derives from an individual episode” (1997).

He habitually lies to every other senator and congress people, sets immoral traps for his political rivals, and he even murders a young journalist³² and his personnel³³ when they begin to be a risk. But the most important violent act Frank committed seems to be the murder of a dog, serial's creator Beau Willimon states: "The double standards are laughable. People had no problem seeing on *House of Cards* some of the ways people behaved emotionally or physically violent to one another. But we killed a dog in the first 30 seconds and people freaked out" (2013). Nevertheless, *House of Cards* has been the most popular serial of Netflix after seasons (Worland 2015), although the serial's narrative does not clearly attempt to justify Frank's brutal character: The only sympathy that he could gain is through his sincere friendship with the low-class cook Freddy, which resembles Tony Soprano's friendship with the cook Artie Bucco. Other than that, similar to Dexter, the way he directly addresses the audience self-reflexively to share his ambitious and wicked plans makes the audience his closest companion.

Unlike Tony Soprano, Frank does not reveal any attachment to customs and conservative values of American society. He does not have a usual family with children to worry about, which previous television anti-heroes had. Rather, his relationship with his wife Claire is a non-traditional one with mutual affairs and even threesomes involving their henchman Meechum. Beside, Frank takes a piss on his father's grave in the opening of third season, after declaring that he would not be there if he had the choice. "But I have to do this sort of things now, makes me seem more human," he admits. Unlike previous anti-heroes, Frank has no sympathy for

³² Season 2, Episode 1.

³³ Season 1, Episode 11.

children and he ridicules his own pretentious way of talking to a child as part of his election campaign, early in the following season premiere.

It might be suggested that Frank's intention to serve the country is enough for the audience to sympathize with him, but he never expresses his dedication to the U.S. when he addresses us through the camera. His monologues that address us directly isolate him from other characters and give us a feeling of confidentiality, similar to Dexter. These moments seem to be his only honest speeches and they only express his greed and self-interested ambition to seize the power. And that is the most important quality he shares with the other anti-hero examples: Proven determination to get whatever he wants. "The Underwoods are like power porn. They flesh out our fantasies. They are a trip into the forbidden in us all," writes Lloyd Sederer to explain the fascination he and Clair evoke (2014).

With the momentum *House of Cards* gave, Netflix was considered as having the "best" original content than any other network according to Morgan Stanley's survey (in Spangler 2016). Beside, after Don Draper, Frank Underwood gave a reputation boost to the anti-hero: Brand distinguishing anti-heroes in the U.S. television are no longer only mobsters, flawed cops or serial killers, but white-collared advertisers, congressmen, and with Amazon's *Hand of God*, well respected judges.

Amazon was implementing narrowcasting just as previous newly developing networks that greenlighted anti-hero narratives, and the service went for quality television in accordance with this. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos states that he prefers their team to be obsessed over quality rather than ratings, and reveals that Amazon

takes the data-driven approach of Netflix one step further by examining audience feedbacks on the pilot episodes of serials before greenlighting the rest (2015).

At the moment, it is early to name a drama serial as brand distinguishing for Amazon; nevertheless, most of its on-going drama serials consist of complex protagonists and mostly anti-heroes. *Bosch* (2014-), is based on a detective whose mother was a prostitute and who murders serial killers that target prostitutes. *Sneaky Pete* (2015-), is based on a protagonist who manipulates an innocent family for his self-interest after getting out of prison. But one serial in particular, *Hand of God*, is distinguished by its controversial anti-hero narrative in which the audience is pushed to question their morality in a divine context.

The morally corrupt judge Pernell Harris, who uses the gaps in the legal system to favor the city council's construction projects for his self-interest, starts to believe that God sends him visions in order to maintain justice over his son PJ's suicide attempt. PJ is in persistent vegetative state after attempting suicide as a result of witnessing his wife getting raped, and Pernell believes that uncovering responsible will bring PJ back. Pernell's hallucinations drive him to manipulate the religious criminal Keith to kill people that Pernell is suspicious of, and some of Keith's victims turn out to be innocent. Thus, Pernell is indirectly a murderer who is only motivated for his self-interest; even though he knows that PJ would prefer DNR over a vegetable state³⁴, Pernell chases his hallucinations to compensate for neglecting PJ in the past.

Similar to previous television anti-heroes, Pernell is a strong figure who seizes the power through his reputation, but his psychotic state makes him an

³⁴ Season 1, Episode 6.

unreliable protagonist and therefore even edgier than Frank Underwood. Besides, there is no voice-over to reveal his feelings and to create companionship with the audience. Yet, perhaps due to the justifying reason of his unstable state and acts, we are oriented to hope that his visions are not hallucinations, but revelations. And *Hand of God* approves his anti-hero and his immoral acts by the hand of God: Even though Pernell's shrink reveals that his hallucinations arise from his guilty feeling toward his son, the visions that we witness in Pernell's point of view lead him to reveal the real responsible in the end of the first season.

A viewer writes that he “enjoyed it although there isn’t one appealing character in the show” (Wayneklein 2015), and *Hand of God* is already renewed for its second season. With binge-watching option of VOD, television anti-heroes now have the ground to get a reputation rise and to become even bolder. Reports suggest that another VOD network, Hulu is now looking for original content to define its brand (Shaw 2015). It is expected that the formula of narrowcasting and quality television is going to be the strategy of Hulu.

4. CONCLUSION

Developing audience measurement systems and the arising value of key demographics for advertisers lead networks to focus on providing quality television to upper-middle and high class audience through narrowcasting. Pay-cable networks' attempt to give their original dramas a "cinematic" feeling which demands narratives with complex characters, paved the way for anti-heroes to move to television. From pay-cable networks' to basic cable and satellite networks', and finally to VOD networks', anti-heroic protagonists get edgier in each step to distinguish newly developing network's brands from others. Even without any likeable aspect, the contemporary television anti-hero proves that an alternative to the conventional hero can survive in television and this alternative even becomes the new convention of television. The pattern of these protagonists could be identified as follows: A powerful figure who can provide the audience the satisfaction of maintaining justice criminally or of getting whatever they want, who is loyal to his personal set of rules and who isolates his real persona from others except the audience.

As Shafer and Raney also point out in their study (2012), due to the repetition of this character pattern and the popularity of these unconventional narratives, networks' concern over audience's attitude towards anti-heroes dies out and the narratives become bolder and more common among networks. Moreover, shifts in targeting strategies push broadcast networks to adapt narrowcasting and therefore quality television narratives that consist of complex characters. Lotz argues that broadcast networks are now more likely to create content for specific, niche audiences since these audiences are likely to pay for contents they are fans of (2007: 141). CBS executive David Poltrack admits that eventually the only way to satisfy advertisers will be to deliver advertisement to households according to their

demographics through DVR or VOD services (in Ross 2011). This shift pushes networks to search for ways to deliver contents to the customer in a more personalized way to include advertisement, or to give up on advertisement and directly sell content through VOD platforms. For instance, ABC sold *Lost* (2004-2010) episodes on iTunes by excluding advertisements, and Lotz indicates that perhaps ABC made more income through iTunes sales than its usual ad-supported broadcasts (2007: 147). Gray suggests that there is a shift in the number of viewers opting for ad-free subscription services, and this shift “might eventually provoke more producers and channels to give up on advertisers completely” (2008: 86).

Since the pay-services take narrowcasting as a strategy to focus on viewers that are eager to pay for televisual content, complex protagonists will eventually attract more interest of broadcast networks. CBS already introduced the anti-hero to broadcast television by airing *Dexter* in its prime-time slot in 2007 and the serial’s first season attracted 7 millions more viewing than its first telecast on Showtime (Byers 2010). However, Parents Television Council’s denunciations made it hard for CBS to stand by their decision (Howard 2010). NBC tested the anti-hero on broadcast television with the adaptation of Thomas Harris’ *Hannibal* (2013-2015), which was also denounced by PTC (Gildemeister 2015). Having the advantage of less content restriction, networks that use different distribution practices other than broadcasting increasingly continue to welcome anti-hero narratives in their original programming. Showtime filled *Dexter*’s gap with *Ray Donovan* (2013-), while HBO sticks to the productions of *The Sopranos* crew and greenlights Terence Winter’s *Vinyl* (2016-). AMC follows *Breaking Bad* with the spinoff *Better Call Saul* (2015-) that is based on criminal lawyer Saul Goodman, and FX takes O.J. Simpson as a protagonist in *American Crime Story* (2016-). Similarly, Netflix carries drug lord Pablo Escobar to

television in *Narcos* (2015-). The anti-hero even moves to thematic networks with basic cable network History Channel's *Vikings* (2013-).

With HBO and VOD networks expanding to the worldwide market,³⁵ anti-hero narratives are no longer limited to the U.S. audience and they are becoming popular internationally (March 2013). Chuck Tryon indicates that theatrical viewers are decreasing dramatically in all over the world, except in China. Cinema audiences are moving to online streaming options, and television audiences are cancelling their broadcaster memberships for cheaper VOD services like Netflix and Amazon (Tryon 2015). Considering this, narrowcasting network's quality television approach is expanding to the international market and they might also influence other networks in the rest of the world.

Thus, the international course of the anti-hero might be a future research possibility, as well as the possible sociological and cultural reasons behind this shift in hero conventions not only in the U.S. but in the world. In the light of Marxist media theory and the Frankfurt School, the influence of anti-hero narratives on masses such as endorsement of conformism and indifference, and perhaps even endorsement of empathy towards "anti-heroic" politicians, might be another future research prospect.³⁶ For gender studies, contemporary television's female anti-heroes such as Nancy Botwin of Showtime's *Weeds*, Patty Hewes of FX's *Damages* (2007-2012), and Piper Chapman of Netflix's *Orange is the New Black* (2013-) are worth

³⁵ HBO is available in the U.K., America, Russia, Eastern Europe, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, Nordic countries and partially in Asia. Netflix is available in over 190 countries except Syria, China, North Korea and Crimea.

³⁶ Frank Tomasulo compares Tony Soprano to Louis-Napoleon (2011: 207) whilst Thomas Batten examines similarities between contemporary television anti-heroes and the U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump (2015).

examining.³⁷ Quantitative and qualitative audience researches on televisual anti-hero narratives are also necessary to understand this shift in protagonist preferences of the audience.

Television networks' narrowcasting strategy leads to quality television as a result of the audience measurement practices, and quality television's morally complex narratives lead to anti-heroic protagonists in television. The narrowcasting strategy is widely accepted by networks and the accumulative popularity of anti-hero narratives indicate that these narratives are the new convention of television serials. Whilst broadcast networks might be looking to adapt narrowcasting and the audiences are becoming more familiar to anti-hero narratives through repetition of this new convention, it is possible to anticipate that anti-heroes in television will get even edgier to help new networks to distinguish themselves from others.

³⁷ Peter Jonason et al. suggest that female anti-heroes are less common in media as audiences treat the anti-hero as malespecific. "Female characters may more commonly conform to the stereotypic female gender roles of nurturance, caring, and compassion. It seems possible that if female characters violate these roles, the associated movies will not make it to mainstream audiences" (2012). Contemporary television examples seem to be pushing the boundaries of this convention also.

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