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Agents of Change: *Enlightened*, HBO and the Crisis of Brand Identity in the Post-Network Era

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Agents of Change: *Enlightened*, HBO and the Crisis of Brand Identity in the Post-Network Era

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For mom and dad—thanks for the emotional support.

Abstract

Agents of Change: *Enlightened*, HBO and the Crisis of Brand Identity in the Post-Network Era

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As a result of changing cultural, economic and technological factors, television always exists in a perpetual state of transformation. The fragmentation of the mass audience and the disintegration of the network oligarchy catalyzed the emergence of a multi-channel universe and niche cable markets in the post-network era. HBO, perhaps the most successful premium cable channel to emerge during the changing TV landscape, implemented a subscription-service economic model, enabling it to produce uncensored, commercial free content unavailable on broadcast television. HBO has since been labeled as the leading purveyors of quality, *auteurist*-centered TV. For this report, I analyze how HBO has been constructed in the realm of academic discourse. Using *Enlightened* and showrunner Mike White as a case study, I examine how the series conforms to and deviates from HBO's established brand and reflects the network's struggle to redefine itself in the post-network era. Ultimately, I aim to reveal the mythologized, idealized and manufactured culture of production at HBO and examine how journalistic discourse surrounding the series presents the HBO brand identity in a state of crisis and transition.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Introduction

The primary goal of this report is to examine how HBO—like television itself—exists in a perpetual state of crisis and transition using *Enlightened* and showrunner Mike White as a case study. I begin by analyzing how academic discourse has historically conceptualized HBO in relation to its perceived brand identity. HBO perpetuates the belief that its series are closer to art than that of its network competitors. Such discourse derives from the relatively recent cultural legitimation of television as an art form, which is based on a number of factors. First, the constant circulation of positive and pervasive academic, critical and journalistic discourse surrounding a particular television program; and second, the branding of the showrunner-as-*auteur*, which is grounded in the slightly archaic notion that works of art cannot exist without artists and therefore highly collaborative mediums, like film and TV, become authored by one individual whose artistic vision is permanently stamped on the text. In the case of HBO, interviews with the series' showrunners in the popular press has become one of the most vital elements to the network's synergistic branding and marketing strategies in the post-network era.

The second chapter focuses on interviews with Mike White, examining how his status as an *auteur* has evolved over time. Interviews with other creative figures involved in mutual projects, such as Judd Apatow with *Freaks and Geeks* and Richard Linklater with *School of Rock*, are included in order to illuminate how the popular press largely ignored White's creative contributions during the early stages of his career. My research indicates that once White becomes part of the HBO marketing machine, his status as a

television-*auteur* becomes nearly unanimous in the popular press. While this functions to further the mythological construction of the HBO brand, as I suggest in my third chapter, it appears that, in more contemporary discussions, perhaps journalists and critics are beginning to re-evaluate the manufactured culture of production at HBO.

For the third chapter, I examined the production and marketing discourses surrounding the promotion, reception and cancelation of *Enlightened* and attempted to situate HBO's contemporary production practices within the context of the post-network era. Ultimately, I believe the series both conforms to and deviates from HBO's established brand and reflects the network's struggle to re-legitimate itself in the post-network era. The decision to cancel a low-rated but critically praised series like *Enlightened* undermines what HBO has historically conveyed to the public—that is, a haven for creative freedom unrestrained by the limitations of its broadcast counterparts. My research indicates that the discourse—like HBO itself—appears to be shifting, perhaps towards a more realistic understanding of the network's current production practices. As a result, the lasting reputation of HBO's established brand is being called into question and the mythological veil that once enveloped the network appears to be fading.

Chapter One: Literature Review: Academic Discourse and the Constructed HBO Brand

In this chapter, I will examine how HBO has historically been constructed in the realm of academic discourse. Since its genesis in 1972, HBO has attempted to redefine television as we know it; however, it was during the 1990s that the network began to receive recognition for its innovative original programming and the effectiveness of its marketing. Known as the HBO effect, the network perpetuated an abiding discourse of quality and exclusivity, offering subscribers something they believed could not be found on network television. Since then, HBO, the popular press and academic discourse have co-existed in a symbiotic relationship. Ultimately, these discourses function primarily in two ways: to perpetuate what the HBO brand conveys—a haven for creative freedom untainted by the restraints and limitations of ratings-obsessed advertising sponsors and the producers and curators of quality, *auteurist*-centered television—or to counter popular notions that position HBO as the purveyors of cinematic-televisual art rather than commercial entertainment.

Anderson, Christopher. *Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television*. "The Essential HBO Reader" University Press of Kentucky, 2008

Using Pierre Bourdieu's writings as a theoretical framework, Christopher Anderson argues that HBO series, through a process of aesthetic disposition and cultural consecration, are being discursively elevated to the status of 'works of art.' HBO's

branding strategies have continually sought to "build an ongoing relationship with particular groups of consumers, so that the brand conveys meanings that circulate through the culture independently of the company's products and serve as a key resource in the consumer's repertoire for creating a social identity" (30). As part of this strategy, HBO avidly promotes the showrunners as authors of the series, for "the 'charismatic ideology' of authorship—the belief in the artistic vision of a sole creator—'is the ultimate basis of belief in value of a work of art'" (37). The branding of the showrunner-as-*auteur* is essentially a marketing strategy implemented to elevate a series culturally and aesthetically.

Furthermore, the pervasive critical and press discourse exists in a symbiotic relationship with HBO in that each works to further legitimate the other. "By drawing attention to the aesthetic claims of TV critics," begins Anderson, "HBO has contributed to a measure of legitimacy and cultural authority to those who would speak about television series as works of art…this helps to make critics more effective agents in the production of cultural value" (38). Collectively, these elements contribute to the potential cultural consecration of HBO.

Edgerton, Gary R. *A Brief History of HBO*. "The Essential HBO Reader." University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

In the introduction to *The Essential HBO Reader*, Edgerton conducts a historical analysis, tracing the development of HBO from syndicated movie service to premium cable network. Utilizing trade press and secondary materials, Edgerton forms a rich

analysis of the company's (as well as television's) industrial transformation during the post-network era. By the 1980s, the three-network oligopoly was largely disintegrated; and with the rise of niche cable markets and the fragmentation of the mass-audience, "branding became the standard way in which networks and production companies differentiated their programming from the competition" (7). Perhaps more than any other cable channel, HBO cultivated a unique brand identity that became synonymous with quality and exclusivity. The intriguing slogan, 'It's Not TV, It's HBO' placed the company in an ideal position to capitalize on the changing TV landscape. Furthermore, HBO adopted an atypical strategy for television production; by "investing more money in program development" and "limiting output," HBO attracted the industry's top creative talent and became known for "producing only the highest-quality series" (8). Ultimately, HBO's reputation for providing an ideal creative environment free from the restraints of advertiser-supported networks enabled the company to distinguish itself in the post-network era.

Feuer, Jane. *HBO and the Concept of Quality TV*. "Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond" I.B. Tauris & Co LTD, 1998.

Through historical analysis, Jane Feuer argues that, as the producers of 'quality TV,' HBO has a clear ancestry within higher forms of art (theatre and cinema). In the television industry, 'quality TV' is synonymous with 'quality demographics,' as in the case of HBO's premium cable service that attracts a sophisticated "audience with enough disposable income to pay extra for TV" (147). The term 'quality' is polysemic—it can refer to televisual aesthetics or as a genre label, or it can operate discursively as a means

of distinguishing certain series from 'other TV.' Historically, there exists a set of criteria for quality television: 1) serialized (as opposed to episodic) structure 2) large ensemble casts and interweaving/juxtaposing narratives and 3) the cinematic aesthetic. Furthermore, HBO's original programming "interpret[s] itself as art cinema. It does this through self-promotion on HBO, through supplementary materials included on the DVD release and by encouraging critics…to offers readings of [the series]" (154). Interviews with the series' creators in the popular press function to further reinforce HBO's perceived 'not TV' status.

Jaramillo, Deborah. *The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand*. "Television: The Critical View." 7th ed. Oxford University Press. 2007.

Relying heavily on critical political economy theory, Jaramillo explores how the prestigious HBO brand "perpetuates the idea of competition between broadcast network and cable television" as a means of distancing itself from other TV (580). Using *The Sopranos* as a case study, Jaramillo also applies genre theory, auteur theory and industry studies to her analysis to reveal how HBO is positioned in direct contrast with broadcast TV, despite having shared parent companies. As a premium cable channel, HBO's economic viability is contingent on three factors: 1) gaining and retaining subscribers 2) domestic syndication and 3) ancillary sales (DVDs). In order to achieve these economic goals, HBO strives to cultivate a unique brand that perpetuates its reputation as the leading purveyors of quality programming nonexistent on broadcast television. Branding, according to Jaramillo, is "the development and maintenance of sets of product attributes

and values which are coherent, appropriate, distinctive, protectable, and appealing to consumers" (584). Aspects of the HBO brand include showrunner authorship, generic prestige, cinematic aesthetics, innovation, experimentation and uncensored, commercial free programming, which function collectively to create an aura and allure of quality TV.

In the larger industrial framework, HBO is but one facet of the Time Warner media conglomerate, which "has interests in three different tiers: over-the-air television, basic cable, and pay cable…the conglomerate claims to control more than its share of media in circulation, yet it also claims that it is in constant danger of being wiped out" (588-589). In this sense, Time Warner manufactures a false sense of competition within the media-sphere, encouraging consumers to distinguish between the deceptively shared channels as if they were not owned by the same parent company. As an extension of Time Warner, then, HBO capitalizes on this illusion by asserting its programming to be "refreshing, uncensored, groundbreaking" while its "basic cable competitors [are] boring, constrained, [and] routine" (583).

Johnson, Catherine. ***Deregulation, Differentiation and Niche Targeting: The Emergence of Branding in the Cable/Satellite Era*****. "Branding Television." Routledge: New York, 2012.**

Tracing the specific industrial, technological and political changes that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, Johnson examines how the US television industry adopted branding strategies during the emergence of the cable/satellite era. Cable channels like HBO and MTV could not compete with the broadcast networks and, as a result, "focused on offering differentiated programme services to specialized niche audiences" (16).

During the late-1980s, HBO increased the budget for its original programming as a means of differentiating itself from the networks. By the early 2000s, HBO's original series began to epitomize the brand itself. The press coverage during this time also functioned to reinforce the company's constructed brand identity. HBO's economic model, however, makes it dependent "not only on revenue from subscription, but also on revenue from ancillary sales (particularly DVD) and syndication" (38). In accordance with Avi Santo's argument, Johnson believes that there exists "a central contradiction for HBO between affirming the exclusivity of the aura of quality around its brand and the need to generate greater numbers of subscribers and to create revenue from syndication and merchandising" (34). As such, HBO runs the risk of undermining and potentially tarnishing its perceived brand image.

Kelso, Tony. ***And Now No Word From Our Sponsor: How HBO Puts the Risk Back into Television*****.** "**It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era." Routledge: New York, 2008.**

In this essay, Kelso utilizes a political economic perspective to examine how HBO's economic model places the company at a structural advantage to its advertiser-supported counterparts. As a subscriber-supported network, HBO is not restrained by ratings-obsessed advertising sponsors and, ostensibly, permits its writers and producers to exercise more creative freedom. These ideals have become internalized in the company's self-promoting philosophy—the political-economic structure, corporate culture and overall brand identity. Yet, Kelso also questions the longevity of HBO's strategy to distinguish itself from other networks due to the increased competition and changing

conditions of the post-television era: "How does [HBO] continue to raise the bar and retain the momentum it has already established?" (55). While part of this challenge stems from technological developments (DVR, online streaming, and torrent websites) and the over-saturated, pay-cable television landscape, "perhaps the single-most threat to HBO, with the potential to undermine everything the network supposedly embodies, is the gaining capacity of commercial networks to compete with HBO at its own game" (56).

While Kelso makes salient points regarding his argument, he frequently buys into the mythic and manufactured culture of production at HBO. For instance, he writes: "HBO can ignore individual ratings because all it needs to ensure is that it delivers to each subscriber *something* worth paying for" (50). Ultimately, I believe he—like the majority of critics and journalists—fails to recognize the economic imperatives of HBO, in which numbers, ratings, buzz-worthy press coverage, critical acclaim and awards recognition play crucial roles in determining the success or failure of a given program.

McCabe, Janet. *Sex, Swearing, and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV*. "Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond" I.B. Tauris & Co LTD, 1998.

In this chapter, McCabe examines how controversy has become a distinct component of the HBO brand image, "embedded in and through its original programming, as a distinctive feature of its cultural cachet, its quality brand label and (until recently) its leading market position" (63). McCabe refutes claims that position HBO's programming to be 'groundbreaking' and 'innovative' and, instead, believes that

the allure is the result of pervasive critical discourse that continues to obfuscate the 'illicit' for 'quality.' Furthermore, McCabe provides a historical analysis tracing television's institutionalization of graphic violence, profanity and provocative subject matter. More so than other networks, HBO has capitalized on the power and pleasure derived from producing uncensored material. As McCabe acknowledges, "HBO takes control of the illicit and encloses it within an institutional discourse of quality" (69). That other networks have since developed programming that continues to push boundaries in terms of content is perhaps a direct inheritance of HBO and the aura of prestige and acclaim that it now enjoys.

McCabe, Janet and Akass, Kim. *It's Not TV, It's HBO's Original Programming: Producing Quality TV*. "It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era." Routledge: New York, 2008.

McCabe and Akass examine how HBO institutionalized an abiding discourse of quality in the post-network era. It is ultimately this discourse of quality that has enabled HBO to distinguish itself from other television. As McCabe and Akass assert, "constantly reassured, through incessant self-promotion and the brand equity and waged in aggressive marketing campaigns, is the perceived cachet of HBO…as a haven for creative integrity, initiating diversity and bucking convention that breaks the rules in terms of language, content and representation" (89). Product differentiation has become essential in the increasingly fragmented, multi-channel universe of the post-network era. The perpetual circulation of positive discourse from the popular press and its devoted subscribers

functions to promote the HBO brand, which has come to signify "authorship as brand label, the illicit as a marker of quality, high-production values, creative risk-taking and artistic integrity, the viewer as consumer, customer satisfaction, and value for money" (92). However, McCabe and Akass theorize that HBO exists in a shifting television landscape and the 'quality formula' is translating to other networks willing to implement and perhaps replicate HBO-esque production practices and branding efforts.

Mittell, Jason. *Authorship on Serial TV*. "Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling." Media Commons Press, 2012.

In this essay, Mittell explores "the tension between the collaborative realities of [television] production versus the romantic notion of singular authorship embodied in the concept of the 'showrunner'" (2). With the rise of the showrunner as the major authorial presence in a television series, networks began promoting shows via their creators; known as 'authorial branding,' the showrunners "serve as brand names for a new series, establishing an aesthetic framework for judging a program and a horizon of expectations for viewers in terms of tone, style…and genre" (11). Like Nike or Apple, the audience expects the brand name to adhere to and fulfill a certain set of pre-conceived expectations. If the brand name fails to do so, then we as consumers have lost faith in the brand's loyalty.

Showrunner authorship is but one facet of HBO's branding strategies and is used as a marker of distinction from other TV networks. In the hype and synergy saturated media landscape of the post-network era, HBO has increasingly "taken advantage of the

showrunner's increased public personae to create official paratexs that surround and augment a television series across media" (14). Audiences are encouraged to associate the series with an individual creator through paratextual media consumption. This correlation then becomes an extension of the HBO brand identity. The showrunners typically reiterate how much creative freedom the company permits, enabling the HBO brand to become synonymous with 'quality' and 'art,' further distinguishing its series from the run-of-the-mill products found on other networks. In this sense, HBO is in the 'high risk, high reward' business—the company strives to create products that diverge from 'other TV' yet it cannot afford to completely isolate its subscriber base.

Newman, Michael and Levine, Elana. ***Legitimating TV: Media Convergence and Cultural Status***. **Routledge: New York, 2012.**

Newman and Levine conduct a discursive analysis of the concept of legitimation within contemporary convergence-era television, providing a historical contextualization for this trend. Due to its place in the domestic sphere, television, as a medium, was negatively associated with perceived class and gender identities. However, television's network diversification allowed for greater narrowcasting and niche marketing, which enabled the medium to transition from 'mass low art' to 'class high art.' They describe legitimation as a process of distinction and exclusion that is ultimately determined by social hierarchies and the politics of taste. Throughout the book, Newman and Levine provide different contexts for understanding legitmation, including authorship, genre, technological advancements, scholarship and critical discourse.

These various contextualizations can be directly applied to HBO's ongoing cultural legitimation: the branding of the showrunner-as-auteur, upgrading the sit-com by removing certain aesthetics associated with low-culture (single-cam vs. multi-cam, serialized storytelling vs. episodic structure, removal of laugh-track), embracing new technologies and televisual images (HDTV, DVD, DVR, HBOGO), and the symbiotic relationship between HBO, the popular press and academic discourse. "In the echo chamber of cultural production," begin Newman and Levine, "HBO then feeds the press coverage of its programs back through the public relations machinery, so that people begin to speak about the positive press coverage" (32). This process of legitimation becomes mutually beneficial—critical praise reinforces the prestige and quality of the HBO brand, which in turn, helps further legitimate the critic and ultimately the publication's reputation. While cultural legitimation is inherently problematic because it reinforces cultural hierarchies and maintains disparaging attitudes toward other 'un-legitimated' forms of television, HBO has certainly benefited from the process.

Santo, Avi. *Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO*. "It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era." Routledge: New York, 2008.

In this essay, Avi Santo argues that HBO is an example of "para-television" which borrows from and builds upon existing television forms and branding strategies—the primary distinction being the company's radically different economic model than that of network TV. By adopting a premium-cable subscription service model, "HBO must continuously promote discourses of 'quality' and 'exclusivity' as central to the

subscription experience. These discourses aim to brand not only HBO, but its audience as well" (20). In this sense, HBO attempts to sell cultural capital to a sophisticated and presumably educated niche audience who must be convinced, every month, that the HBO brand "is different and it is worth paying for" (31). Furthermore, the corporate culture of HBO promotes authorial freedom "as a means of distancing HBO from both the supposed lack of creativity and economic bottom-line found on regular TV" (40). Santo, however, seems intent on demystifying the alluring premise of TV authorship in a corporate environment. "Creative freedom," Santo begins, "occasionally fails to conform with HBO's stated goals of producing groundbreaking para-television" (41). HBO is certainly not afraid to intervene if they fear the brand's image becoming jeopardized, as evidenced in the case of *Rome*, where the budget was actually raised "in an effort to produce the highest quality series possible" (41). It is irrefutable, then, that economic imperatives and consumer satisfaction play crucial roles in shaping the degree of creative freedom allotted to producers and writers.

Santo's analysis provides an interesting industrial context for understanding the complex marketing strategy implemented by HBO to promote discourses of 'quality' and 'exclusivity' as an extension of the brand's corporate identity. Santo, however, believes that HBO's subscription-based model and the branding of 'quality TV'/'quality demographics' is sometimes detrimental to the company's economic viability. As Santo asserts, "HBO's institutional culture…[has] led it to absorb particular notions of exclusivity and quality that guide production and programming decisions in ways that occasionally contradict the pay channel's economic goals" (42). HBO's branding

strategies have placed the company in a unique position that forces it to continually innovate rather than repeat past successes. Ultimately, as Santo illuminates, HBO is often willing to dissipate economics in favor of producing 'not TV' that contributes to discourses of distinction.

Chapter Two: *The Silence is Deafening*: The Mike White Interviews

In her essay *It's Not TV, It's Brand Management*, Denise Mann argues that interviews should be regarded as "cultural artifacts containing evidence of an intricate, interlocking system of heavily codified discursive knowledge" (105). In this chapter, I conduct a discursive analysis of various interviews with Mike White and explore how the popular press constructs White's authorship. Interviews with other creative figures, such as Judd Apatow and Paul Feig with *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) and Richard Linklater and Jack Black with *School of Rock* (2003), were included to explore how White is largely ignored, despite his considerable contributions to those projects. Throughout his illustrious career in both film and television, my research indicates that only after making his directorial debut with *Year of the Dog* (2007) does the popular press begin referring to White as an authorial figure. This authorial construction is further indicated once White becomes part of the HBO marketing machine with *Enlightened*. As Christopher Anderson suggests:

> HBO promotes the creators of the drama series and encourages reporters to flesh out their biographies so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series, no matter the scale and complexity of the production… Now he is acclaimed as an artist capable of placing his signature on every shot of a television series (Edgerton and Jones 36-37).

I believe White's status as *auteur* is a direct result of the whirlpool of synergy between HBO's marketing campaigns, branding strategies and symbiotic relationship with the popular press that positions showrunners as authors of the series.

Conducting research for this chapter proved to be rather difficult considering White's lack of presence in journalistic discourse prior to *Enlightened*. Throughout his career, it appears that critics and journalists collectively ignored his creative involvement. White's contributions to more well known projects like *Freaks and Geeks*, *School of Rock* and *Chuck and Buck* are overshadowed by more recognizable and established brand-name figures. After extensive research through online databases—including *LexusNexis*, *News for TV Majors*, *Media History Digital Archive*, *Jstor*, *ProQuest*, *Ebsco Host*, *The Variety Archives*, and *The Los Angeles Times Archives*—interviews with White prior to *Enlightened* are nearly nonexistent. And most of the interviews available are, regrettably, from second-rate journals such as *Hollywood.com* and *Filmmaker Magazine*. However, White's pre-*Enlightened* absence in the popular press supports my position that HBO's marketing and branding apparatus manufactures showrunner-authorship. The interviews will be presented in chronological order and structured as an annotated bibliography in order to illuminate how White's authorial status evolves and remains largely ignored throughout his career, leading up to his directorial debut and branded status as an "HBO *auteur*."

Kaufman, Anthony. "Interview: Chuck, Buck and Miguel: Director Arteta as DV Renegade" *IndieWire.com*. July 14, 2000.

Before delving into the interview with Miguel Arteta, director of *Chuck and Buck*, Kaufman provides some background information on the production and reception of the film. Written by and starring Mike White, *Chuck and Buck* premiered at Sundance Film

Festival and was instantly met with word-of-mouth buzz and critical acclaim. Critics and audiences, in particular, praised White's darkly comedic screenplay and unnerving, breakthrough performance. Kaufman briefly acknowledges White's previous work as a supervising producer and frequent writer for *Dawson's Creek* and *Freaks and Geeks*. Aside from this, however, White is completely absent from the conversation. Ultimately, it becomes Arteta who is positioned and self-constructed as the visionary author of the film. Describing his general cinematic philosophy, Arteta states, "every great filmmaker defines film on their own terms…they're not trying to imitate other people's work." And, when discussing how the project came into development, Arteta claims, "like any indie movie, it's more about a personal voice, so it's hard to find people to give you the money so you can do whatever the heck you want." Such statements reinforce the alluring premise of the *auteur* theory in which the director evades the restrictions imposed by system through his or her unique, artistic vision.

Gross, Terry. "NPR Fresh Air: 'Freaks and Geeks' Creator Paul Feig" *NPR.com*. Aired in 2001, reissued March 26, 2004.

In an interview with Paul Feig, creator of the cult TV series *Freaks and Geeks*, Gross continually refers to Feig as though he were the sole-visionary behind the entire series. He asks, "When you created the characters for *Freaks and Geeks*, what traits from yourself did you give to the main characters?" to which Feig responds, "I actually think there's a bit of me in each character…the way I like to work is kind of break up my

personality a bit and sprinkle it around to all the characters." The personal experience of the showrunner is but one means of ascribing authorship to a sole-creator. Throughout the interview, Feig describes how his childhood experiences influenced the series' fictional narrative. "Let's look at the two main characters—the sister and the brother," begins Gross, "why don't you describe each of them and tell us which of those traits came directly from your life or from people that you knew." Feig goes on to explain how Sam (the brother) is reflective of himself in the past and Lindsey (the sister) represents himself currently. He also provides a detailed account of disputes with studio executives, who wanted to make the series less subversive and include more victories for the characters. Of course, as an *auteur*, he remained completely ambivalent to this, claiming it would have diluted the honesty, realism and authenticity of the series. Despite White serving as a producer and frequent writer, no mention is made to his contributions (or that of anyone else aside from Judd Apatow), thereby reinforcing the claim that the charismatic ideology of authorship ignores the realities of collective agency.

Gross, Terry. "NPR Fresh Air: 'Freaks and Geeks' Writer-Producer Judd Apatow" *NPR.com*. Aired in 2001, reissued March 26, 2004.

In another interview with Terry Gross, executive producer and frequent writer-director of *Freaks and Geeks*, Judd Apatow, discusses his creative influence on the series. The interview also profiles Apatow's previous work in film and television and how he broke into the entertainment industry. When discussing *Freaks and Geeks*, he explains how he and Feig were certain that the series would be canceled in the imminent future.

Apatow claims, "As a result of the fact that we knew we would probably go down, we didn't take any notes from the network or make any adjustments and we really followed our hearts about where the show should go and it became more of our own personal art project." It is important to note that the 'we' here refers to Feig and himself. Aside from mentioning how great it was to work with young actors, Apatow makes no mention of White's (or anyone else's) creative input. Furthermore, his statements coincide with notions of authorship as personal expression while constructing a narrative that depicts the triumph of the creative individual against the commercial system.

Maynard, Kevin. "Pasadena Not All Roses" *Variety*. September 14, 2001.

This is the earliest article I discovered that features an interview with Mike White. Given that *Pasadena* is the first show for which White served as the series' showrunner, it seems fitting that this would mark the first instance in which he is mentioned in an authorial context. The article opens with, "'Soap' meets 'Twin Peaks' in 'Pasadena,' a new Fox TV show that serves up family values as only Mike White, writer of the homoerotic big screen black comedy 'Chuck and Buck,' can." In this sense, Maynard identifies elements of White's creative trademark—his unique aesthetic that blends melodrama, surrealism and bizarre comedy, which, in turn, establishes his reputation as an artist with a unique vision. A good portion of the article is devoted to the series' cast and the critical reception; however, in one instance, producer Robert Goodwin notes that "Mike White is so talented and he has such a unique voice. The show's humorous and scary and full of action." It seems apparent, then, that television authorship is principally

reserved for showrunners and, occasionally, executive producers perceived to have considerable creative influence.

Baumgarten, Majorie. "Black and White and Rick All Over: The ABCs of 'The School of Rock'" ***The Austin Chronicle*****. Friday, October 3, 2003.**

In this article, Baumgarten begins by allocating equal creative recognition to each of the three major players involved with the film—"Actor Jack Black, screenwriter and actor Mike White, and director Richard (aka Rick) Linklater are the primary creative forces that shaped *The School of Rock* into the delightful comedy it is." As the article progresses, however, Linklater becomes constructed as the primary authorial figure. "His films, even those he didn't write," begins Baumgarten, "are intimate character pieces in which the concerns and preoccupations of the filmmaker resonate." While White is given credit for coming up with the story and writing the script, once the interview section begins, he becomes completely overshadowed by Jack Black and Richard Linklater. Consider, for instance, the following statement from Linklater, which serves to position himself as *auteur*—"Yes, anyone could have [directed *School of Rock*], but I kind of felt called in some strange way. It sounds goofy, but I felt this film could use me. I felt chosen to do it." And later in the interview, Linklater states: "No one from the studio was ever around. I never got a studio note… Here I could always say this is my ninth film, I know what I'm doing, leave me alone. I'm more of a veteran." Ultimately, such discourse not only reinforces Linklater's authorial integrity and subversion of studio authority, but

also comes at the expense of White and other individuals involved in the film's production.

Head, Steve. "An Interview with Mike White" *IGN.com*. November 17, 2003.

The article begins by highlighting Mike White's career from his early work on cult TV shows like *Dawson's Creek* and *Freaks and Geeks* to his recent string of successful independent films (*Chuck and Buck*, *The Good Girl, Orange County and School of Rock*). Head observes that White's characters possess homologous traits that clearly reflect a unified body of work: "White's characters are more than people on the page and actors on the screen, Mike White has lived with them, as he says, 'in their world,' and they're more so close to his heart." Throughout the interview, however, White barely refers to his creative involvement in *School of Rock* and certainly doesn't appear to refer to himself as a visionary *auteur*. Yet, considering Head frequently refers to White's considerable success over the years, it becomes apparent that White is perhaps on the verge of becoming a more recognizable, brand name figure.

Dawson, Nick. "Mike White, Year of the Dog" *Filmmaker Magazine*. April 13, 2007.

Dawnson begins the interview by stating, "*Chuck and Buck*…announced the film's writer and star, Mike White, as an unusually daring and original talent." Marking White's first time as director:

> *Year of the Dog* finds him occupying an interesting middle ground between his recent family-friendly efforts and his earlier, darker films. Inspired by an incident from White's own life in which a stray cat died in his arms, *Year of the Dog* charts the impact of the death of Peggy's (Molly Shannon) beloved dog, Pencil, and how her life unravels as she attempts to compensate for his absence.

Here, the discourse plays into the idea of authorship as personal experience in which moments from White's personal life serve as inspiration for, and are woven into, the fictional narrative of the film. Dawson further claims that the film "features White's trademark edgy, barbed humor which works extremely well in this ostensibly benign context." Here, we begin to see the emergence of a unique style and set of aesthetic criteria that define White's *oeuvre*. And later, Dawson observes, "there seems to be a journey you've taken from a film like *Chuck and Buck* to *Year of the Dog*" to which White responds, "My personal aesthetic is certainly present in both." Lastly, when discussing the stress of working on his canceled sitcom *Cracking Up*, White disclosed: "I really wanted to do something where I was like, 'I don't care if I do this for $20 or $2m or $20m, I'm just going to do something that's just my thing and do it, and succeed or fail on my own terms." It appears as though White is conforming to *auteurist* brand image as he slowly begins to occupy more press coverage.

Buchanan, Kyle. "The Great White Way" *The Advocate*. Issue 985, May 8, 2007.

In a profile piece on Mike White, Buchanan discusses how White has delved into nearly every facet of filmmaking—writing, producing, and acting—and now, with *Year of the Dog* in 2007, he has finally taken on directing. When asked about his decision to

direct a feature, White claims, "I realized that I had become such a backseat driver on my films that I was going to make myself crazy, so I felt like I should just do this." Buchanan contrasts White's current, optimistic demeanor "to the time White spent as the creator of *Cracking Up*, a short-lived Fox series whose transformative failure provided the inspiration for *Year of the Dog*." Again, the personal experience of the showrunner becomes a basis for establishing authorship. He also notes that White's general philosophy on life, his 'coming-out' experience and his "nonconformist way of approaching relationships and sexuality" very much reflect his projects, "which often pit an outsider against a confining institution that tries to suppress them." White's personal experiences, then, are seen as emblematic of his art and are filtered through press discourse.

"'Year of the Dog' Q&A: Director and Brainchild Mike White" *Hollywood.com*, 2007.

As indicated by the article's headline, by 2007, White is being referred to as a "brainchild" within the popular press. "Was there something particular that inspired you to make this movie?" asks the interviewer, to which White replies, "It was definitely a personal story for me." When discussing whether he allows actors to improvise or prefers the maintenance of the integrity of the script, White insists, "For me, you want to have sense of authorial intent or trying to get at something. I definitely want the actors to feel like they can make it their own, but at the same time, I'm not big on improvisation." This is perhaps the first indication of White acknowledging his "authorial intent." Later in the

interview, White discusses his experience as a first-time director: “I just felt like I’d rather make my own mistakes rather than watch someone else make their own mistakes with my material.” Here, White seemingly ignores collective agency altogether—highly possessive phrases like “my own mistakes” and “my material” reflect a sense of authorial integrity through creative ownership. Thus, White appears to be evolving into the indie-*auteur* capable of placing a unique signature on his body of work.

Chapter Three: "Like Nothing Else on TV": *Enlightened* and The HBO Brand Identity

In this chapter, I explore how the HBO brand identity is constructed in the popular press using *Enlightened* as a case study. The discourse surrounding the series aligns perfectly with what the HBO brand has historically sought to convey to the public—that is, the mythic culture of production that presents HBO as a haven for creative freedom and the producers of art rather than commercial entertainment. In this instance, HBO's previous claim to being "not TV" is further legitimated by the critical discourse surrounding *Enlightened*, in which journalists frequently referred to it as "like nothing else on TV." However, I believe that HBO's decision to cancel *Enlightened* presents the brand at direct odds with what it purportedly conveys to the public. As a result, the discourse—like HBO itself—appears to be shifting away from the "not TV" status that once defined the brand. Thus, I believe *Enlightened* is indicative of the HBO brand identity in a state of crisis and transition and further indicates the company's struggle to re-legitimate itself in the post-network era.

Before conducting a closer examination of the HBO brand in relation to Mike White and *Enlightened*, there are a number of external factors to consider: the increased competition from other networks (Netflix is perceived to have surpassed HBO in U.S. subscribers), who have adopted similar production practices (fewer episodes per season, higher production values, enhanced creative environment, authorial freedom, etc.); the rapidly changing patterns in audience viewership and the futility of Nielsen Ratings in

determining accurate ratings statistics; and the impact of new technologies, such as DVR, Netflix and HBOGO, in the changing TV landscape.

A Brief Contextualization of *Enlightened*

On October 10, 2011, HBO introduced two new comedy series into the Sunday night lineup: *Enlightened* and *Girls*. The latter evolved into a pop-culture sensation. Generating an abundance of critical acclaim and buzz from the popular press, the series won two Golden Globe awards (Best Comedy Series and Best Actress, Lena Dunham) for its first season and became "the most talked about series of 2012" (*Indiewire*). Although the series' relatively low ratings may suggest otherwise, the press coverage for *Girls*—and shortly thereafter *Veep*—seemed to eclipse *Enlightened* in notoriety. White appeared rather ambivalent to the series' unprecedented success. During an interview with *The Huffington Post*, Maureen Ryan states, *Girls* "seems to suck up every available molecule of media coverage" to which White responds, "It's like, there's always something that's sucking the air up from your moment." In another interview with *Vulture*, Denise Martin insists, "it feels like there has been an outpouring of love from critics lately." "But how do you quantify that?" asks White, "It's sort of true about *Girls*, because it has so much buzz and not great numbers. We have less buzz and less numbers. It actually hurts us." And on March 19, 2013, HBO announced that the critically praised but ratings-deprived series *Enlightened* was canceled after two seasons. "It was a very difficult decision," HBO said in a press statement. "We've decided not to continue

Enlightened for a third season. We're proud of the show, and we look forward to working with Mike White and Laura Dern in the future" (*The Hollywood Reporter*).

Since the premiere, *Enlightened* was plagued with severely low ratings, averaging approximately 200,000 viewers per week (*Variety*). As Tim Goodman notes, "an audience of 200,000 to 300,000 is not sustainable unless there's a critical cacophony a la *Girls*…I would make the argument that if the pay cable channel didn't have a handful of comedies in the pipeline, it probably would have stuck with [*Enlightened*] for a third season" (*The Hollywood Reporter*). Initially, the press coverage for *Enlightened* was minimal at best; however, in an effort to convince HBO to renew the series, a small but devoted fan-base of critics, celebrities and viewers (along with White) began promoting the series via social media and journalistic discourse. Although the campaign appeared to generate more positive and pervasive press coverage leading up to the series finale, ultimately, their impassioned efforts were proven futile. As a failed series, then, *Enlightened* provides an interesting context for understanding the complex industrial practices at HBO as constructed by critical and academic discourse and the company's strategic marketing and branding campaigns.

In the *Aesthetics of Failure*, Jason Mittell argues, "the economics of television place the failure threshold much higher, as most series only turn profitable after multiple seasons, making failure a nearly universal condition by the only measures that matter to the television industry" (1). Mittell seems to suggest that, in the television industry, failure is indeed the standard and not the exception. At HBO, however, this notion is reversed, as cancelation is perceived to be a last resort. It is important, then, to consider

the term 'failure' as polysemic. And in this case, aesthetics, critical acclaim and awards recognition were not taken into consideration when describing *Enlightened* as a 'failed' series; rather, *Enlightened* was an economic and industrial failure for HBO because it was canceled prematurely. Success, then, is purely quantifiable and measured in terms of longevity, viewership, ratings, ancillary sales, and in the case of HBO, subscription renewals.

Interestingly, *Enlightened* was canceled at the height of its critical acclaim and buzz from the press. The popular belief that Nielsen Ratings do not affect HBO's decision to renew or cancel a series has become a mainstay of academic and journalistic discourse. Although buzz and subscription renewals are necessary to HBO's economic model, the company still relies on ratings numbers to determine viewership, despite notions that might suggest otherwise. And, certainly, HBO has canceled series in the past—typically ones that were met with both terrible ratings and negative critical reception. For the company to cancel a series just as it was beginning to build critical momentum is indeed an uncommon practice. And considering the highly competitive nature of the post-network era, perhaps this exemplifies a changing HBO. As such, I believe that the decision to cancel *Enlightened* has, in turn, prompted journalists to reconsider their current positions regarding HBO.

The primary goal of this chapter is to examine how *Enlightened* conforms to and deviates from HBO's established brand and reflects the network's struggle to redefine itself in the post-network era. As the self-proclaimed leading purveyor of 'quality TV,' HBO perpetuates the myth that ratings do not influence its decision to cancel or renew a

given series. However, in this case, it appears that HBO chose to undermine its constructed brand identity in favor of economics. By analyzing a 'failed' series, I aim to reveal how HBO's industrial practices operate when commercial success and buzz-generating discourse do not meet HBO standards. I examine the production and marketing discourses surrounding the promotion, reception and cancelation of *Enlightened* and attempt to situate HBO's contemporary industrial practices within the context of the post-network era. A predominantly discursive approach was implemented in order to highlight the dichotomous relationship between HBO's imagined culture of production and its economic goals. Thus, using *Enlightened* and its showrunner Mike White as a case study, I aim to reveal the mythologized, idealized and manufactured culture of production at HBO and examine how journalistic discourse surrounding the series presents the HBO brand identity in a state of crisis and transition.

The Mythic, 'Not TV' Culture of Production at HBO

Deborah Jaramillo defines branding as "the development and maintenance of sets of product attributes and values which are coherent, appropriate, distinctive, protectable, and appealing to consumers" (584). Considering HBO's existence is entirely dependent on subscribers, who make a conscious choice to renew the service each month, the company must continually reinforce notions of 'quality' and 'exclusivity' that are central to the brand image. These values are then perpetually circulated throughout the popular press in an attempt to reiterate the ubiquitous claim that HBO offers something unique to

the undifferentiated mass of programs found on network television. This assertion is further indicated by HBO's previous claim to be 'not TV.' The primary objective, then, is to "build an ongoing relationship with particular groups of consumers, so that the brand conveys meanings that circulate through the culture independently of the company's products and serve as a key resource in the consumer's repertoire for creating a social identity" (Leverette et. all 30). Thus, HBO's economic model, culture of production, creative freedom, and uncensored, advertiser-free original programming coupled with positive (and pervasive) journalistic discourse collectively operate to construct the HBO brand image.

Critics and journalists frequently referred to *Enlightened* as "very different from a lot of shows on TV" (*Interview Magazine*) and "like nothing else on TV" (*New Republic*). *The Hollywood Reporter* even went so far so to declare: "Mike White's noble effort was TV as art, and the bold experimentation at the network should be applauded" and "it was pretty clear that there was nothing like *Enlightened* on television" (*The Hollywood Reporter*). The press coverage of *Enlightened* further establishes the integrity of the HBO brand by presenting it in direct opposition to other series in the current television lineup. As Newman and Levine acknowledge, "Legitimation always works by selection and exclusion; TV becomes respectable through the elevation of one concept of the medium at the expense of another" (13). During interviews, White furthers this distinction between HBO and 'other TV' and highlights how *Enlightened* is just different from other TV series:

> I had this paranoia of going back to TV, where you end up feeling like you have to keep churning out the same thing, or variations of the same thing. [*Enlightened*] excites me because it's so different, swimming in a different direction than it feels like everything I watch…it challenges viewer's expectations of what a show is (*Vulture*).

Discursively, White is further legitimating the HBO brand by creating a dichotomy between *Enlightened* and other series. This, in turn, positions the company as exceptional and inherently better than its network competitors. Historically, the HBO brand has become synonymous with terms like 'groundbreaking' and 'original,' which inevitably forces 'other TV' into the realm of the 'mundane' and the 'conventional.' Again, this reaffirms the notion that "discourses of legitimation are premised upon cultural hierarchies and hierarchies of all kinds require the denigration of some to justify the elevation of others" (Newman and Levine 36).

The "unlike anything else on TV" discourse became one of the most pervasive and reoccurring phrases in the press discourse surrounding *Enlightened*, especially when the series was beginning to pick up critical momentum during its second season. Seven of the articles referenced in my analysis directly implemented the 'not TV' rhetoric. Interestingly, the 'unlike anything on TV' discourse seems to be crystallizing into a genre in and of itself. This should come as no surprise, considering the HBO's now famous slogan from the early 2000s, "It's not TV. It's HBO"—the implication being that TV is everything else. Such discourses of distinction are vital to the preservation of the company's brand image.

Slate	"*Enlightened* is so unlike anything else airing on television right now that it's almost impossible to categorize it as a comedy or drama or anything."
Salon	"*Enlightened* is doing things that no series has ever done, in a tone that no show has ever attempted. And on top of that, it feels like a definitive statement on a troubled era…[*Enlightened* has] a benevolent and even inspirational view. It's very easy to sneer and snicker at. It's valuable. And right now it's almost nonexistent on TV."
New Republic	"*Enlightened*…is like nothing else on TV."
Interview Magazine	**"***Enlightened* is very different from a lot of shows on TV."
Grantland	"For 18 episodes, White, Dern, and the rest of the cast of *Enlightened* brought us a show unlike anything else on television."
Hollywood Reporter	"It was pretty clear that there was nothing like *Enlightened* on television."
Huffington Post	"Aesthetically and narratively, *Enlightened* is doing something distinctive, important and new."

Table 1: **Press Coverage for *Enlightened* in 2011 vs. 2013**

The increased competition from other networks forces HBO into a perpetual state of experimentation, innovation and product differentiation targeted towards various demographics. TV critic Amy Chozick notes: "Since HBO relies on subscriptions rather than advertising dollars, it has typically valued critical acclaim and awards over nightly ratings…recently, however, the supply of high-end cable series has exploded, creating more competition for HBO" (*New York Times*). As such, the company cannot afford to simply rehash successful formulas; at the same time, however, it must provide elements of familiarity to avoid isolating the majority of viewers. In the case of *Enlightened*, critics have frequently expressed difficulty in labeling or classifying the series into a specific genre, as evidenced by the 'like nothing else on TV' discourse. Consider the following excerpt from *The The Hollywood Reporter*: "[we should] give HBO credit for trying something that…was an entirely different animal. [We] need to champion that kind of experimentation… when television approaches art…there are going to be pieces of it that are incredibly respected but just don't translate." TV critic Alan Sepinwall observes "I like that HBO makes room for experiments like this on top of safer commercial bets like *Boardwalk Empire*…And I really do hope they mean to stay in the Mike White business, because I'd love to see what the man does next given the freedom afforded by working for this company" (*Hitflix*). The above quotes exemplify the symbiotic relationship between HBO and the popular press—by referring to *Enlightened* as "art" and praising the company for its "bold experimentation," the press serves to enhance the HBO brand. However, they also acknowledge the inherent risks that derive from trying to maintain viewership with such an unconventional series.

Although speculation as to why the series suffered from low ratings is difficult, it is important to examine how critics and journalists conceptualized the series in relation to the perceived HBO brand. TV critic Maureen Ryan writes, "White is grateful that HBO brought the show back at all, given how low its first-season ratings were. And he's glad the network is willing to throw its weight behind unpredictable shows and characters that actually do feel different and new." However, she later notes, "the newness [of what the show was doing in season 1 led to the question of] 'Are people going to want to keep coming back to this?'" (*Huffington Post*). Even White praises the company for its bold experimentation: "The truth is, HBO really should be applauded, because the kinds of risks that a show like *Enlightened* or *Girls* are taking are actual risks. They're risks in tone. They're risks in content" (*Huffington Post*). The HBO brand is perceived to be "unlike anything on TV" and must continue to promote discourses of distinction in order to achieve cultural legitimation. With the rapid decline in ancillary sales from DVDs and Blu-Rays, and the sustained threat from other networks, HBO is facing unprecedented challenges in the post-network era. The HBO brand image, like TV itself, exists in an incessant state of crisis and transition. If change is often predicated on crisis, then adaptation becomes a crucial element to survival in the contemporary TV landscape.

Showrunner authorship is but one facet that contributes to the HBO brand identity, as cultivated by the popular press, critical discourse and the company's marketing strategies. The creative freedom permitted by HBO, which remains relatively (albeit allegedly) uninvolved in the production process, and the company's supposed non-reliance on Nielsen Ratings are among the myths that work to facilitate the manufactured

production culture at HBO. As one HBO insider explained, "We don't care how many people watch our shows…we just want people to decide at the end of the month that it's worth renewing their subscription" (Kelso 50). Such notions circulate throughout the popular press and further establish HBO's reputation as the purveyors of TV-art. In an interview with *Believer Magazine*, White proclaimed, "at a place like HBO, often what they want to do is something that's very distinctive and of high quality." This type of discourse is not exclusive to popular press discourse, for it has become very apparent in academic writing as well, as evidenced in the following: "HBO can ignore individual ratings because all it needs to ensure is that it delivers to each subscriber *something* worth paying for. This means, therefore, that the network must explicitly attend to audience satisfaction based not on quantitative data, but qualitative measures, and evaluate its *total* programming schedule" (Kelso 50).

According to *Variety*, the second season premiere of *Enlightened* "drew 300,000 viewers on its initial airing and 220,000 for its March 3 finale, dropping 67% from the 673,000 viewers its *Girls* lead-in captured" (*Variety*). Over the course of its two-season run, critics and journalists became increasingly concerned with the series' ratings. Journalist Denise Martin acknowledges, "the show's audience is small even by the WE DON'T CARE ABOUT RATINGS standards of HBO" (*Vulture*). In *The Essential HBO Reader*, Gary Edgerton writes: "Unlike [the] advertiser-supported system, HBO's subscriber format focused all of the channel's attention on pleasing and retaining its viewing audience" (1). In both instances, journalistic and scholarly discourses ultimately reinforce the mythic nature of production at HBO, which caters to the HBO brand image.

At the same time, however, such discourse poses a significant threat to this perceived image and serves to potentially undermine its self-constructed identity. "The economics of the HBO system," write Newman and Levine, "shape the cultural standing of the channel and its programming" (32). Thus, the subscription channel has to distance itself from its advertiser-based competitors, hence the importance of maintaining the 'not TV' image.

Since HBO's economic model is, in fact, subscriber- rather than advertiser-supported, Nielsen Ratings are not quite as deterministic; nevertheless, ratings—and more importantly buzz—are still crucial to the lifespan of a series, despite popular notions that suggest otherwise. Even White seems to suggest that HBO's economic model allows for more diverse programming:

> Because of the subscription model, what they want is to have distinctive programming, programming you can only find on HBO, so that you have to subscribe in order to see it or get it or be a part of the HBO thing. So I think success for them, sometimes it's measured in Emmys or Golden Globes or whatever, but it's also measured in good reviews and it's also measured in just a passionate viewership, even if that viewership isn't millions and millions of people, if it's just stuff where people who do connect with are talking about it and devoted (*Hitflix*, Feinberg).

It is interesting then that *Enlightened*, which was met with critical praise and awards recognition but suffered from terrible ratings, was ultimately canceled at the height of its acclaim and buzz from the popular press. As Tim Goodman suggests, "the numbers were never really there to make [*Enlightened*] a hit. And yet, that's not really HBO's business model anyway. It likes buzz, which leads to awards, which leads to a sense of something special you're not getting unless you're getting HBO. So you subscribe. That's the

business model" (*The Hollywood Reporter*). Unlike series that are met with instant critical acclaim, buzz and high ratings, I believe a marginalized and subsequently failed series like *Enlightened* can provide more accurate insight into the production culture at HBO and help demythologize the network in the process. Thus, I will combat the popular myths regarding HBO's culture of production using academic and press discourse and interviews with Mike White.

A Changing Mike White, A Changing HBO?

The interviews conducted in 2011 during *Enlightened*'s first season reveal White to be incredibly optimistic about the series' future prospects, despite the low ratings. Consider this exchange between Daniel Fienberg and White on November 7, 2011 (approximately one month after the series premiered):

> **Fienberg:** I know you've done the network TV thing where everybody's always freaking out and holding their breath about the Nielsen's each morning. How has it been different being at HBO and viewing how *Enlightened* is doing on a weekly basis?
>
> **White:** [at HBO] they are very artist-friendly…this is the best place to work, period…The first week, our numbers were bad…And they're just like, 'Relax. The show is great. We don't care…we love the show. We're behind the show. We know that people will come to the show over time, because it's distinctive and we're happy with the reviews.' Just to have the network or the studio or whatever be more bullish and confident about the weird thing you created even than you are is…I don't ever want to work anywhere else…I think they do care about numbers in the sense that they do want to build the viewership, but they're not about to abandon something that they believe in, just because of that initial whatever.

Likewise, in an interview with *AV Club* on November 14, 2011 White expressed similar optimism:

> **AV Club:** …HBO is really the only kind of network where you could do a show like this.
>
> **White:** It's the subscription model; they're not selling advertisements. They just want to have a home for things that you can't find anywhere else. They've seen all of the episodes, and I think that they see that it's a unique show and that part makes them more bullish in the face of a hard sell.

In both instances, White himself appears to employ the "unlike anything else on TV" discourse popularized by the press. In noting that HBO is "artist friendly" and not concerned with "selling advertisements," White situates the company in stark opposition to the commercial-driven agenda of other networks. But perhaps White should have taken HBO's statements with a grain of salt—to believe HBO would "not abandon something that they believe in" simply because of poor ratings points towards the power and appeal of the HBO brand. Ironically, White's statements also expose the fundamental myth of HBO—that ratings and viewership do not have a profound affect on the lifespan of a series. It seems, then, that even the creative talent at HBO has bought into the corporate mythology.

Just weeks before HBO announced the cancelation of the series, White did an interview with *Vulture* focusing on *Enlightened*'s prospects for a third season. During the interview, White seems to simultaneously promote and demystify the production culture at HBO. When describing how he feels about his work on this series, White notes, "We realize we're making something where [HBO] is giving us the real resources to do it

right" (*Vulture*). Shortly thereafter, he explains why the second season was more plot-driven in relation to the first season, which was more meditative: "I felt from a narrative point of view I needed to do my part to bring more people to the tent" (*Vulture*). In a previous interview, White disclosed that he was "encouraged" by HBO to give the second season a "juicier plot" in an effort to boost ratings (*New Republic*). "Numbers, in the broadcast sense, are not key to HBO's survival," begins Jaramillo, "[and] although ratings do not make or break HBO, the channel cannot 'be content on producing the TV equivalent of art-house films' without a sizable audience to support it" (583). Retaining and gaining subscribers is vital to HBO's economic model, as is syndication, which primarily depends on series with high ratings. In this sense, HBO commodifies buzz as a means of measuring success with the hope of acquiring syndication deals in the future. The inherent difference between ratings and buzz appears to be one of semantics; however, it becomes an important distinction when considering how HBO markets itself to the public. As Santo notes:

> While HBO continues to assert that it does not measure the success of its original programming in terms of ratings, a clear mark of distinction between regular TV and itself, it is also apparent that the reliance upon buzz as a gauge of success repeatedly puts HBO at the mercy of reviewers comparing its programming with other television series as well as HBO's own past successes (40).

Product differentiation is an integral component of the HBO brand image—it serves as a marker of distinction and further establishes HBO's cultural status, which, according to Newman and Levine, is always a process of negation and exclusion.

HBO prides and promotes itself on its reputation for providing a more creative

environment than network TV. This includes providing more authorial freedom to writers, producers and showrunners without interference from network executives and corporate sponsors. In the case of *Enlightened*, White is the only name that appears in the writing credits for each episode. According to White, however, HBO continued to provide him with "creative suggestions" over the course of the series: "They have notes. They always have thoughts. The thoughts aren't, 'What will make this more appealing?' It's not like a regular network. It is more, sort of, 'How will this story be the most satisfying" (*Buzzfeed*). Again, this type of rhetoric serves a dual function—by acknowledging that HBO is "not like a regular network," White is reinforcing HBO's idealized culture of production and brand image; however, by disclosing that HBO does have significant input into the creative process, White is also demystifying HBO's cultural and aesthetic *cachet*. Towards the end of the interview with *Vulture*, White becomes increasingly blunt about his discontent with HBO's involvement in the creative process:

> I don't know if I should be saying this as I'm waiting for the show to get picked up, but this is my feeling: [the executives] have time to watch it and think about it and so, in a sense, they give thoughtful notes because they have the time to really think about it. At the same time, it's like…I don't really want notes. It's like why? Is this going to bring more viewers to this thing? Or you just want to change it because it would feel more satisfying to you? [There are] moments where I'm like, *Aaaaah, shut up! Leave me alone!* Because for me, I'm the only person on the other end. I'm doing the writing and the editing and all that stuff…I want it perfect (*Vulture*).

In this instance, the discourse can be interpreted in a multitude of ways—primarily, it serves to illuminate the mythologized production culture at HBO by acknowledging that

ratings and viewership are, in fact, crucial to the company's economic and industrial model. At the same time, it fractures preconceived notions that HBO does not interfere with the production process, be it for monetary or aesthetic reasons. And, lastly, it reinforces White's self-constructed authorship, which still benefits HBO's reputation in the television landscape. The ideologies at play here are undoubtedly 'heavily codified' and operate on various, conflicting levels of signification.

The intersection of press discourse and interviews with Mike White function to simultaneously promote and subvert the HBO brand; at the same time, the contemporary discourse characterizes the company in a perpetual state of transformation. HBO's image is predicated on an abiding discourse of quality, innovation and experimentation regarding its original programming, which results in the potential cultural consecration and canonization of its series and has, indeed, become an essential component to the company's brand. As long as viewers continue to renew the subscription service, HBO's decision to cancel or renew a given series remains relatively inconsequential—if, for instance, a series is met with critical acclaim, but outlives it economic viability, the HBO brand will still benefit from positive discourse regardless. Thus, the primary (unquantifiable) concern for HBO becomes the lasting reputation of its brand image.

The Lasting Reputation of the HBO Brand

It has been noted that HBO prides itself on being the antithesis to network TV, "yet perhaps the single-most threat to HBO, with the potential to undermine everything the network supposedly embodies, is the gaining capacity of commercial networks to

compete with HBO at its own game" (Leverette et. all 56). The decision to cancel *Enlightened* nudges the company's brand closer to the ratings-supported image of network TV and basic cable. "Has HBO lost something here," *Time Magazine* poses, "in its reputation as a network that—within the bounds of a for-profit business—makes great shows that no one else will, and keeps them alive because they deserve it?" Such discourse functions to tarnish the lasting reputation of the HBO brand by removing the veil of HBO's perceived *cachet*. As a result, the idealized and manufactured culture of production slowly deteriorates within the realm of the popular press—and the perception shifts to one that acknowledges, "HBO takes chances on art, but with limits" (*Time Magazine*). The same article then posits:

> The question is if this becomes a pattern: an HBO that shows, going-forward, that it is only in the hit business now would be a different HBO…part of its business success stems from its willingness to support un-commercial projects. You believe you need HBO in part because you want to see TV that wouldn't exist otherwise.

The former claim to being "not TV" places the company on a pedestal of sorts, holding HBO to a nearly unachievable high standard. As purveyors of art, then, HBO must cultivate the idea that its series are more culturally and aesthetically significant than those on the networks. As Santo observes, "HBO has bought into its brand identity in ways that require the pay channel to continuously innovate rather than try to repeat past successes" (Leverette et. all 38). This process is an example of "cultural valorization," which is defined as "the use of aesthetic judgment to assign cultural value to cultural producers and [their] products" (Allen and Lincoln 873).

In an article titled "Dear HBO: Renew *Enlightened*," Matt Zoller Seitz applies the notion of cultural valorization to *Enlightened*, praising the series for its social commentary and relevance:

> [*Enlightened* is] something more than a quirky half-hour show…it's a reminder of how work defines us, and in some cases deforms us, along with everyone we know—and the soul-crushing opposition that rises up whenever we try to change anything about it. We need a show like this right now, and not just because it's a great comedy and a great character study. Beneath its comic brilliance and formal daring, it believes in a better future, a better country, a better human race (*Salon.com*).

Here, Zoller Seitz acknowledges that *Enlightened* is "something more" than just a TV series, even positing that, as a society, we need a series like this to serve as not only a reflection but as a potential wake-up call. In this sense, the discourse places the series into the realm of art, reinforcing previous notions of television's—specifically HBO's—nearly transcendent quality to become something more than merely mass commercial entertainment. As a self-fulfilling prophecy, the discourse enables HBO to become what it constantly strives towards—the curator of the arts. Even White acknowledges the importance of such discourse: "The reason we came back [after the first season] had a lot to do with the really beautiful things some of the critics had said, and that's meaningful to HBO. So sometimes copy really is a matter of life and death for a show" (*Huffington Post*). HBO's reliance on commodified buzz cannot be understated here. And while the company continues to assert that it does not measure success via ratings, the fact remains that *Enlightened* was indeed canceled at the pinnacle of its critical praise and press coverage.

Just four days prior to HBO announcing the cancelation of *Enlightened*, *Huffington Post* wrote an article titled, "*Enlightened* Renewal: 8 Reasons HBO Must Bring Back This Show." In it, TV critic Maureen Ryan writes:

> Cancelation would be bad for HBO's brand…HBO is known for a few things…shows that explore new territory and help set the creative agenda for the rest of the TV industry. Part of the reason some HBO shows get people talking is because they experiment, they break boundaries and they shake up preconceptions…Aesthetically and narratively, *Enlightened* is doing something distinctive, important and new, and people come to HBO for that kind of risk-taking. Without shows like this, HBO runs the risk of seeming, frankly, a bit stodgy and predictable…Dear HBO (which pretends not to care about ratings anyway), please don't pull another *Rome*—i.e., cancel a show in its second season just as it's beginning to garner positive buzz and awards-show heat.

If HBO chooses to cancel the series, "the fan outcry will be very loud," she declares, "for a network that lives on buzz, angry anti-HBO chatter that lasts a long time and blankets social networks is something to fear."

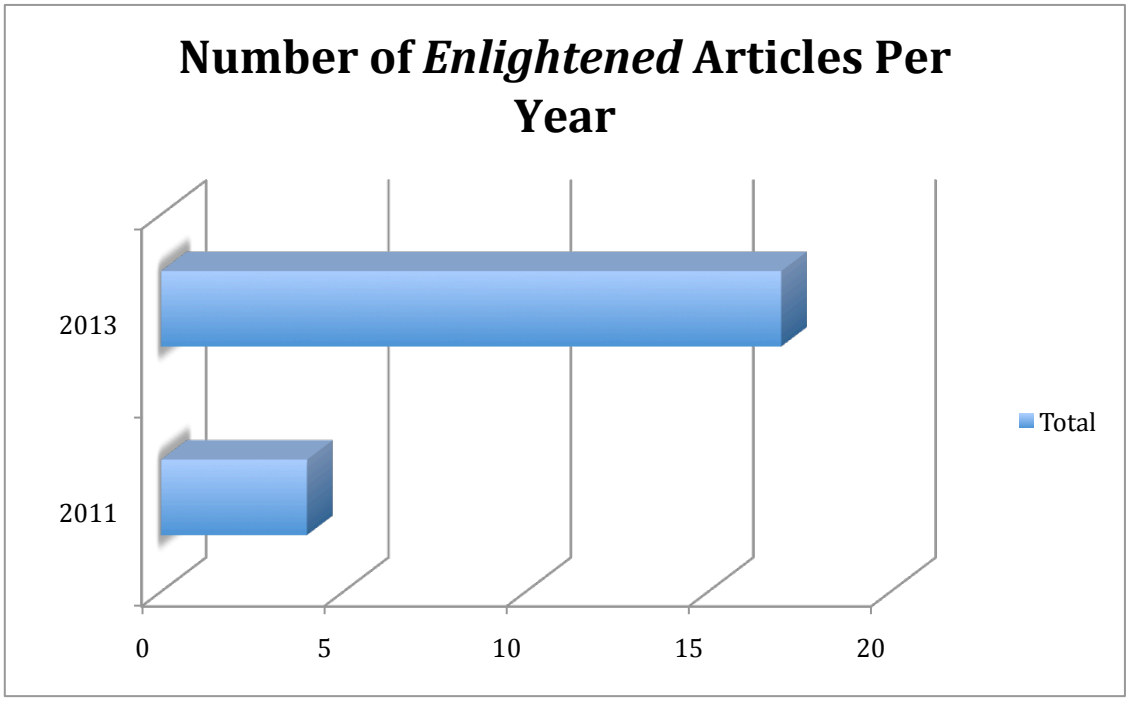

Table 2: The "Unlike Anything Else on TV" Discourse

The fan outcry was loud indeed. Upon hearing the news of cancelation, Patton Oswalt, along with other ardent fans and celebrities, staged a full-blown "Save *Enlightened*" campaign via Twitter in an effort to convince another network to pick up the series—"Everyone Tweet @Netflix RIGHT NOW. Ask them to pick up ENLIGHTENED. Followers…ASSEMBLE! At my signal, unleash hell! #Enlightened" (*scpr.org*). Ultimately, the cancelation of *Enlightened* is potentially detrimental to the HBO brand image because it subverts the belief that, "HBO appears to be in a good position to experiment with its programming, since the network will effectively earn the same amount of revenue regardless of the success or failure of any given program" (Leverette et. all 24). If the brand image begins to erode in the eyes of the public, HBO jeopardizes everything it represents—the mythic culture of production, the haven for creative freedom, the charismatic ideology of showrunner authorship, the self-proclaimed leading purveyors of quality, ground-breaking TV for quality demographics, and ultimately, the lasting resonance of its brand identity.

Conclusion

The fragmentation of the mass audience and the disintegration of the network oligarchy catalyzed the emergence of a multi-channel universe and niche cable markets in the post-network era. HBO, perhaps the most successful premium cable channel to emerge during the changing TV landscape, implemented a subscription-service economic model, enabling it to produce uncensored, commercial free content unavailable on broadcast television. Recent technological advancements—such as DVR and Netflix—have resulted in dramatically changing viewership patterns, as audiences are now able to watch TV on their laptops and mobile devices through downloading or streaming. As a result, the importance of ratings as a measurement of success is considered more obsolete than ever before. And while HBO's economic viability is not entirely dependent on quantifying ratings, it still seems apparent that, even at HBO, the longevity of a series is fairly contingent on sustained viewership. Indeed, the cliché 'adapt or die' resonates throughout the TV industry as it faces unprecedented challenges in the post-network era.

The discourse surrounding *Enlightened's* cancelation is revelatory in a number of ways—most importantly, I believe it exemplifies HBO in a state of transformation, attempting to re-define itself in the post-network era. Innovation becomes vital to the company's livelihood, for it must continue to promote discourses of quality and exclusivity that function to separate itself from other networks. But the decision to cancel a low budget, critically adored series like *Enlightened* jeopardizes the company's perceived brand image, as evidenced by the critical backlash against HBO in the popular

press. Consequently, the relationship between the idealized production culture and the company's economic imperatives poses a dichotomous and potentially detrimental threat to HBO in the imminent future. Ultimately, I believe a failed series like *Enlightened* exposes the true nature of the HBO's production culture when commercial success, ratings and most importantly buzz do not conform to the network's standards.

As the television landscape becomes increasingly competitive, HBO cannot afford to undermine what it has historically conveyed to the public. At the same time, however, HBO's lasting reputation also benefits from the series regardless of cancelation or renewal. Consider, for example, series that were initially met with acclaim from popular critics, but whose accolades were later revoked because of longevity (as in the case of *Dexter*); or even ones that are currently in the process of exceeding their critical, and thus canonical, viability (as in the case of *Homeland*). Because *Enlightened* was canceled during a period of peak acclaim from critics and fans, the series does not run such aforementioned risks. As a 'martyred series,' *Enlightened* now has a better opportunity to become culturally consecrated, since canonization typically occurs retrospectively (Allen and Michael 873); this, in turn, perpetuates the self-constructed brand image that HBO is still and will always be the leading purveyors of quality television in the post-network era. "'You can change, and you can be an agent of change,' Amy says at one point [during the series]. Of his own small crusade, White said quietly: 'I'm trying to do that for the world of TV'" (*New Republic*). Perhaps the same can be said of HBO.

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