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HBO and the Aristocracy of TV Culture : affiliations and legitimatising television culture, post-2007

*Kim Akass and Janet McCabe*

In its institutional pledge, as Jeff Bewkes, former-CEO of HBO put it, to ‘produce bold, really distinctive television’ (quoted in LaBarre 90), the premiere US, pay-TV cable company HBO has done more than most to define what ‘original programming’ might mean and look like in the contemporary TV age of international television flow, global media trends and filiations. In this article we will explore how HBO came to legitimatise a contemporary television culture through producing distinct divisions *ad infinitum*, framed as being rooted outside mainstream commercial television production. In creating incessant divisions in genre, authorship and aesthetics, HBO incorporates artistic norms and principles of evaluation and puts them into circulation as a succession of oppositions—oppositions that we will explore throughout this paper. What we learn from HBO, in how it systematically sets about legitimatizing a discourse of television distinction and prestige, is how the company functions as a site of cultural legitimisation. In so doing HBO structures a particular restricted field of cultural TV production, set against the mainstream networks—driven as they are by advertising revenue and ratings—which has, in turn, not only normalised what we’ve come to think of as important television work (critical acclaim, nominations and awards), but also kept these beliefs and practices of TV in circulation, with its international versions (HBO Latin America, HBO Nordic) and other ventures (film festivals) and services (HBO Go, HBO HD, HBO NOW). Such thinking helps explains how HBO has aligned its brand with already legitimated cultural forms to authenticate an institutional model of restricted cultural TV production; and this model makes sense of what they do and how they understand themselves and their field, as well as influences behaviours and thinking about how we consume and understand distinct and prestigious television in the post-network era. In sum, we want to “follow up” on what the legacy of HBO means for legitimatizing contemporary television culture.

Central to the thesis is the idea of HBO as a recognisable brand—of exclusivity and prestige, of representing a particular approach to TV style and aesthetics, narrative and storytelling, as well as a way of thinking about television as culture. Taking forward this idea of HBO as brand, and understanding the implications of its transnational appeal beyond the United States, gives us the opportunity to speak to the themes of this special issue – of what motivates re-makes and filiations, but at the level of ideas and how HBO bestow a sense of prestige, value and exclusivity on that endeavour. Our article sheds light on what HBO can teach us about the complex interaction between television, culture and commerce — to tease out the implications for producing contemporary original serial drama — and how, in turn, the value placed on aesthetic style and storytelling practices developed at HBO have been adapted in and through other TV institutional contexts across the globe. Put simply, it is not about merely listing features of serial storytelling that could be defined as original and innovative, as much as it is about searching out the very site of discourse—of power and knowledge—in which this kind of television is defined and made possible in the first place: it is about understanding a way of considering television as possessing a specific language, as it were; or to quote Michel Foucault, ‘the language that silently pre-exists within a discourse (2005, 87).

This article elaborates on the ways in which HBO adds value and functions as an influential site of cultural legitimisation in defining contemporary television seriality as art and ‘high’ culture. This understanding of HBO is set against an accelerated socio-political and economic climate of neo-liberal marketisation and cultures of globalisation where, since the late 1980s, TV markets have been increasingly de-regulated and technologies revolutionised flows of production, distribution and reception. Television screens have been wider, larger, flatter and HD. Digitalisation, video on demand, TiVo, the DVD and box set, time-shifting, catch-up TV, binge-viewing, Internet TV, multiplatform viewing – laptops, tablets and smart phones etc; the TV viewer has been remade within these technologies and the new technologies allow for new ways of consuming and appreciating television. If, as the political sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, writes, ‘A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who

possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (1984, 2), then we would extend such thinking to argue how the technologies of HBO embeds its viewers into ways of thinking about television—of positionality and taste, of becoming discerning consumers of television culture (more of which later).

At this point it is worth pausing to take an ever so brief look at the history of HBO to see how, since its launch as one of the first non-terrestrial cable networks (and becoming in 1975 the first to broadcast via satellite communications), it has been responsible for a number of television 'firsts'. Because across its history HBO has repeatedly pushed the boundaries of the medium—in terms of delivery, form and content—motivated by its economically precarious and, at times, institutionally marginal position in the US audiovisual media ecology. HBO started as a small enterprise situated on the very fringes of the US TV industry. Barely registered in the press HBO launched on 8 November 1972, with the 1971 film, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, starring Paul Newman and Henry Fonda, followed by a NHL hockey game between the New York Rangers and the Vancouver Canuck. 365 Service Electric subscribers in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania were the first to receive HBO. As of December 2013 HBO had an established 43 million domestic subscribers and by 2015 that figure had risen to 49million, to include users of its newly launched streaming service, HBO NOW (Statista). HBO has gone from a small, almost regional service in the northeastern and Mid-Atlantic area of the United States to become a truly global brand and internationally networked owner-syndicator. It is in and through this sense of connectivity, connectedness and networking, of distribution and flows of TV seriality, that ideas and the production of taste and cultural value come into view; and it is this accumulation of reputation and value—or what Bourdieu calls 'capital' — that we'd like to explore next.

In 1986, HBO became the first TV broadcaster to encrypt its signal to combat piracy. In so doing it set itself apart from the mainstream networks and other basic cable channels, as a way of delivering a television content that could not be accessed elsewhere. From the start, HBO placed a high premium on selling what it had to offer as something worth paying for each and every month; especially as at \$15-20 per month (dependent on provider) it proved the most

expensive. HBO thus actively created a sense of itself as an exclusive cultural domain, branding its original programming for those with discriminating taste; or, as Amanda Lotz put it, 'HBO thrives by defying program standards that appeal to the mass audience, and succeeds by exploiting the limited access as a means of acceptance as high (or at least higher) elite art' (2003, 66).

To further understand this idea of delimited access and 'élite art' we need to think about how HBO turned potential commercial liabilities—restricted availability, additional cost—into cultural and symbolic capital, as defined by Bourdieu. Until the mid-1990s, HBO busied itself establishing a coherent and highly visible brand identity, offering exclusive access to what could not be seen elsewhere on either free TV or basic cable (e.g. uncut first-run Hollywood movies and exclusive sporting events like boxing). Post 1996 saw a shift, in part because HBO had established a brand identity in the television landscape, and in part because that landscape was changing with the proliferation of production and flow propelled by accelerated economic and technological forces (Strauhbaar 2007). Thus when Jeff Bewkes took over as president and CEO in 1995, he instituted a different concept of creative control. The idea was to create a more intense, long lasting relationship between HBO subscribers and the HBO brand in and through its production of original series.

What distinguished HBO from its cable rivals at this time was how it shifted from a buyer of content to producing one-hour original scripted drama series, starting with *Oz* (1997-2003). Rather than relying solely on Hollywood or producing one-off TV events (boxing matches, comedy specials) to fill its schedules, this owner-syndicator as producer took responsibility for the production of series perceived to be of a different quality from the opposition. The way in which HBO positioned its original series in the US market was not only about disseminating an idea of an exclusive viewing experience (a gated community through subscriptions), but also to bring into play particular viewing protocols and ways of thinking about its series, whereby the viewer was able to discriminate an HBO original from ordinary television. Central to its success in transforming the company from an occasional use channel into a truly cultural phenomenon was its audacious 1996 logo : 'It's Not TV. It's HBO'. Bourdieu's work on the sociology of taste and culture (1994) proves particularly helpful in

explaining the ways in which HBO established its reputation as a market leader and tastemaker with its 'originals', legitimating difference and consecrating a sphere of restricted cultural production. So successful in fact that the brand speaks back to HBO, but significant still is how it's spoken back by those with sufficient cultural and symbolic clout to make it count; said another way, HBO matters because it matters to those who matter. As Avi Santo succinctly put it, 'promised by HBO via subscription is one that supposedly grants paying viewers membership in a distinct community that clearly ranks above the riffraff who watch the standard broadcast and cable stations' (2008, 33).

Drawing on Bourdieu's key concepts—field, capital and habitus—gives us a set of coordinates to initiate further debate into understanding how HBO functions as a site of cultural legitimisation in the contemporary television era. So effective has HBO been in its enterprise that its model for production has been appropriated, adapted and remade within other cultural ventures and television landscapes, only to sustain the idea of HBO as a site of culture legitimisation when it comes to talking about defining prestigious and originality in contemporary serial drama. In order to give a better focus to this argument, we will concentrate on the post-2007 era. In part, because the history of HBO until this point has been relatively well documented (see for example, Edgerton and Jones 2008; Leverette, Ott and Buckley, 2008; DeFino 2014); but in part because the resignation of Chris Albrecht, following his arrest for assault (Steinberg 2007), came at an uncertain time for HBO. *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) had ended and the new series like *Rome* (2005-6) hadn't quite captured the imagination in the same way. It did for all intent and purpose appear as if HBO as a cultural force was at an end. Far from being in decline, and as we shall argue, HBO had built sufficient cultural and symbolic capital to remain as a gatekeeper and tastemaker of contemporary TV culture. **It has normalised ways of thinking about and practising what it means to be original in contemporary television seriality, and introduced its platforms as an alternative site for consuming that kind of television.**

This leads to our first observation about the US TV industry, which represents a 'field' of cultural production with individual companies and networks sharing similar features, but also a shared set of values, rules and

principles. Within this broader field, HBO represents a restricted small-scale cultural production. Unlike the larger networks like NBC, CBS and ABC, where a mass audience is targeted and profitability typically outweighs aesthetic considerations (or so HBO incessantly reminds us), HBO promotes an idea of what it does as free from the influence of the commercial TV market. Of course HBO operates deep 'inside' power, belonging to the world's largest media conglomerate Time Warner, but even so the company has strategically positioned itself as a purveyor of TV creativity from within. From its miniseries like *Angels in America* (2003), *John Adams* (2008) and *Mildred Peirce* (2011) to its dramas like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-8), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-14), *True Detective* (2014- ), *Game of Thrones* (2011- ) and *Westworld* (2016-)- HBO endlessly self-promotes as fostering a television renaissance, with former CEO, Chris Albrecht, going so far as to likening the HBO 'to the Medicis of Italy, the Renaissance patrons of the arts' (Johnson 2003: A6). It does so as it advocates a notion of 'high' TV art by situating its original programming in relation to the other possibilities of television production of which it is part.

**HBO is television realised under very different conditions. Its original series comprise of fewer episodes (13, as opposed to the 22 made for network), lasting a full-one hour (as opposed to 42mins, because of the need to accommodate commercials) and limited runs (as opposed to being extended and repeated across the network cycle);** the originals air without being audience tested first and are initially only available via subscription, box set or streaming services such as HBO Now. Implanted in its original programming philosophy, and made intelligible in each series and repeated with every new one, is how HBO nurtures a particular idea of delivering television to its audience in opposition to the mainstream commercial TV. Rebelling against the structural subordination to FCC regulation, and the capriciousness of programming trends and popular taste, HBO has liberated itself from dependency on advertisers and an idea of entertaining the mass. What the company does instead, in cultivating an appreciation for aesthetics and authorial intent, is in keeping with what Bourdieu refers to as an 'autonomous artistic field' (1990). It is able to conceive and bring into effect its own values and its own codes of legitimacy while at the same time repudiating outside sanctions

and demands. It is imperative not to see these two subfields as somehow fixed categories—mainstream broadcast network television, restricted small-scale cultural TV production at HBO, but instead part of a sliding scale of culture practice, distinguished by two hierarchical principles defining the struggle to take up a position within the cultural field of production: the autonomous principle for restricted production and the heteronomous principle for large-scale production.

Modes of delivery have also changed in the post-2007 environment, with the move to new streaming services. *Game of Thrones* (2011- ) is arguably one of the most successful recent series coming out of the HBO stable, in part capitalising on the initial advantages of the innovative methods of delivery, with HBO Go, its VOD service, as well as the exclusive deal with Sky Atlantic to air its series in the UK. *Game of Thrones* first aired on 17 April 2011 in the US and one day later on Sky Atlantic in the UK. Here we can see not only how HBO makes good use of originals to attract an audience for their new delivery services, but also how other channels have adopted the HBO exclusivity, using HBO originals as their cultural capital. What goes around comes around in the world of HBO originals and the premium cable channel has come full circle with its investment in series to boost its audience share. Just eight months after the launch of HBO Now at the end of 2015 the streaming application was enjoying some 800,000 subscribers and by February 2017, 'HBO Now had exceeded two million domestic subscribers' (Alexander 2017). For Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes the economic value of the original series remains high as part of the reason 'the network is seeing a consistent increase in subscriptions is because of original and exclusive series like *Westworld* and *Game of Thrones*' (Alexander 2017). With HBO Now in direct competition with other streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu, original series become ever more vital to attract subscribers, particularly when they are all pitched at about the same cost (between \$14.99 [HBO], \$7.99 [Netflix] a month or \$75 [Amazon] a year) (Moylan 2015). It is at this point in technological developments that cultural capital begins to make economic sense and shows how HBO seeks to remain in the forefront of the television game.



As previously argued by us (McCabe and Akass 2008, 83-93; Akass and McCabe 2004), drawing on valorised literary and generic forms to distinguish its original dramas from regular television enables HBO to position itself in its field and align originals with an already consecrated sphere of culture. Reputation is essential before a discourse of what constitutes innovation in television drama can be uttered and more importantly sanctioned and guaranteed. HBO might have told us that *The Sopranos* is *not* television, but it did so predicated on what Bourdieu calls 'capital' to determine its status to make such a claim of artistic ambition in the first place. Accepting Bourdieu's notion that every social agent is intent on assuming the best position possible for themselves in their field, it becomes apparent how HBO complies with the rules of the game and strives to accumulate what counts as legitimate capital in terms of prestige and recognition to advance its position. Moving television into this domain of cultivated tastes HBO shifts its originals up the cultural hierarchy, as it leaves in place those very distinctions of worth and respectability that denigrate television as a medium in the first place.

Originality at HBO is closely aligned with a writer rupturing established codes to produce an original tele-literary script. Emphasis is placed on an individual motivated by artistic intent and given a relatively generous degree of autonomy to tell stories in an innovative way, rather than as part of a traditional US TV idea of the writer's room with large teams preparing scripts subject to network oversight, FCC regulation and the demands of sponsors. Reliance on a single authorial vision finds HBO placing a high premium on the kind of authorship already consecrated elsewhere in the field, namely: the author as 'aesthetic experience' (Bourdieu 1993, 219). Appreciation of the authored HBO original requires understanding of the subtle codes and rules required of commercial US television, a comparison that allows for HBO to reject the commercial TV norm and assert its televisual uniqueness.

This is not to suggest for one moment that the *auteur* guarantees the best television, but that the *auteur* as discourse carries important creative signification that helps establish the reputation for a show in particular, and bestow prestige on HBO more broadly — particularly at the company where series are sold *as* originals. In analysing the structure of the social space in which

‘the “creative project” was formed’ (1993, 193), Bourdieu thus offers us a framework for understanding how HBO revises the social definition of the bohemian artist, opposed to bourgeois norms and conventions, and ‘secure in their cultural capital and in their authority as arbiters of taste’ (1995). Structured in this artistic field, with a sense that the writer is located outside mainstream network practices and demands of appeals to the largest possible market, the TV *auteur* at HBO is positioned as exceptionally gifted, with having particular sensitivities and operating in a magical-like sphere that remains untouched by mundane, commercial concerns of US network television. Note, for instance, how HBO waited for over a year for the storied mind of David Chase to find inspiration to write a third series of *The Sopranos*; or the mythology that swirls around David Milch and his creative (if flawed) genius. Known for his cerebral and unorthodox approach to scripting, for the profanity of his dialogue and precision of his plots, Milch is positioned at HBO as elevating the very possibilities of the medium in which he works—a reputation only enhanced by failed projects like *John of Cincinnati* (2007) and *Luck* (2011-12). The image of Milch as TV *auteur* thus occupies a particular position within the cultural space of HBO and, in turn, such writers makes visible the HBO ‘vocation’ (Bourdieu 1993, 195) of sponsoring original dramas that defy network convention; or as Nancy Franklin put it, ‘The person who creates a *Deadwood* is also probably going to make a *John from Cincinnati* one day’, only to add: ‘Networks don’t let that happen: HBO does’. (Franklin 2007). The principles behind HBO’s relationship with the author to define its enterprise for original drama are continually strengthened and reiterated by the selective choices—or the ‘distinctive stylistic features’ (Bourdieu 1993: 222)—of Milch, Chase, Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*, *True Blood*), David Simon (*The Wire*, *Treme*, *Show Me a Hero* and newly commissioned *The Deuce*) and David E Kelley (*Big Little Lies*) who come to work at HBO.

What made writers like Chase, Milch, Simon, as well as alumni like Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) appear so radically original, and their work of incomparable value, is their relationship with the critics and scholarly community—and how this favourable critical reception is sustained. For, as Bourdieu writes, ‘works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known

and recognised, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognising them as such' (Bourdieu 1993, 37). The role of the critic to decipher the meaning and value of the author at HBO not only speaks back to the HBO brand, communicating what makes original, but in return the author at HBO confirms the critic 'in his vocation, that of privileged interpreter' (Bourdieu 1993: 135). Note what the culture editor, Martin Chilton, at the *Daily Telegraph* had to say about *Boardwalk Empire* finale.

*Boardwalk Empire* may not have gained the popular acclaim of *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos* but it is one of the most exceptional, multi-layered television dramas of the past 25 years.

... Eldorado [the final episode] was co-written by series creator Terence Winter (who is already working on a new show for HBO, set in the world of rock 'n' roll music in 1973) and Howard Korder, and directed by HBO veteran Tim Van Patten. How they oozed class. But what made the series such a success overall was that it was so intricate. It was always about more than just Prohibition and crime, and explored interesting areas such as politics, the war, women's rights and race relations in Twenties and Thirties America (2016).

Evident in the above is the function of a 'cultural editor' to make personal judgements, to define the public meaning of the work, sanctioning it and placing it within a cultural hierarchy ('[*Boardwalk Empire*] of the most exceptional, multi-layered television dramas of the past 25 years). Developing criteria for evaluation ('But what made the series such a success overall was that it was so intricate') helps shows like *Boardwalk Empire* achieve cultural recognition amongst the peer group, 'whose members are both privileged clients and competitors' (Bourdieu 1993, 115). *Boardwalk Empire* ran for 5 seasons over a relatively short span of 4 years, but in that time the critical acclaim it received, principally for its lavish visual style and historical accuracy, saw the series receive 57 Primetime Emmy Award nominations, of which it won 20. This further positions the audience within this relationship between the author, HBO and the critic, enabling them to interpret and appreciate the work and develop

more refined preferences than those associated with more mainstream commercial television. ‘The work of art considered as a symbolic good (and not as an economic asset, which it may also be),’ wrote Bourdieu, ‘only exists as such for a person who has the means to appropriate it, or in other words, to decipher it’ (1993: 220).

Where we want to conclude is with an understanding of the habitus in which HBO operates—not only as an important site of cultural legitimization, but its role as gatekeeper and tastemaker in the field of contemporary TV cultural production. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which understands the mostly unconscious ways in which people are socialised to think and behave, is particularly suited to making sense of what HBO post-2007 does and how it understands itself and its field.

HBO has, for one thing, influenced the behaviour and attitude of creatives—of filmmakers, scriptwriters and actors. In its gatekeeper role HBO gives exposure (a scheduled slot to showcase talents), recognition (judged as worthy enough to be chosen) and ideally also prestige (selected for primetime slots and esteemed awards and honours). The image of HBO, with the way in which it orientates its productions as distinct and original in the field, attracts those in a similar position. Martin Scorsese, associated with the American New Wave and the *auteur* as independent from Hollywood dominance, may have brought his reputation to HBO for reinventing the classic generic rules of the gangster when he came to direct the pilot of *Boardwalk Empire*; but conversely HBO is a place where creatives like Scorsese, but also Todd Haynes (*Mildred Pierce*), Jonathan Nolan (brother of film director Christopher), Lisa Joy and JJ Abrams (*Westworld*), acquire symbolic capital: prestige, honour and recognition. Time and again, filmmakers with indie credentials choose to come and work at HBO: with two film credits, *Sin Nombre* (2009) and *Jane Eyre* (2011). Carey Fukunaga directed *True Detective*; and Jean-Marc Vallée, director of the 7 episodes of new limited series, *Big Little Lies*, previous credits include *The Young Victoria* (2007) *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and *Demolition*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal, which opened the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival. HBO

thus provides framework for understanding this diverse group of filmmakers, as critic Eric Deggans said of *True Detective's* first season, it had 'the feel of an indie film spread over eight episodes starring two of the best character actors [Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson] in the business.' (January 2014). Within this space of cultural legitimisation HBO can bring another kind of recognition, as when Martin Scorsese won the Directors Guild of America Award for Outstanding Directing in 2011 for the *Boardwalk Empire* Pilot. Similarly with actors like Steve Buscemi (*Boardwalk Empire*), Paul Giamatti (*John Adams*), Kate Winslet (*Mildred Pierce*), Nicole Kidman and Reece Witherspoon (*Big Little Lies*) all of who have enjoyed critical acclaim and award-winning success at HBO. Put another way, these creatives share a certain cinephilic disposition with HBO and its field of cultural production (critics, industry professionals).

As a gatekeeper and tastemaker HBO has become one of the largest supporters of niche cultural film festivals, often community-based festivals tailored for specific communities (LGBT, racial and ethnic-based festivals). These festivals are some of the most prominent advocates for the development and production of multicultural cinema, such as American Black Film Festival (held in Miami during July), Philadelphia Asian Film Festival (October), NY International Latino Film Festival (considered one the top festivals for Latino filmmakers). HBO sponsors the Short Film Script Competition and the winner receives a production budget and licensing deal valued at \$15,000, along with multiple screenings during the festival. Another festival is the Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, where HBO is the awards sponsor for Best Narrative, Best Documentary and Best Short Film. Just as Marijke de Valck argues for how Bourdieuan concepts can explain 'why festivals matter' (2016: 112), then such an approach can help shed light on HBO's role in the festival circuits of community, often grassroots film festivals, ones in particular that emphasise the identity politics of America—race and ethnicity, LGBT and Gay Rights. For filmmakers, an HBO Award offers industry credibility, with an opportunity to showcase their work on the premiere-pay network, revenue from award prizes and licensing deals to begin their next project, and direct access to acquisitions and development executives. Such a circuit not only addresses issues with socio-political

relevance, but also are exactly the kinds of distinct, peripheral and controversial cultural products that find a home at HBO.

Argued here is that HBO is more than its original programming, but in understanding the field of cultural production in which it operates gives important insight into the dynamics between originality in seriality, taste-making and the circulation of ideas about television. This conceptualisation of HBO deals with the way it fosters ways of making and nurturing an appreciation about television, contributing to the largely unconscious function of rules, categories and values in television production. This article has made sense of what HBO does and how they understand themselves and their position within their field, as the company competes for, and takes up, positions, not only in and through the institutional structures of global television, but also the incorporated structures (the *habitus*), which allows them to participate in the first place. This position is 'made' and not 'given' and the precariousness of such a process is witnessed as in 2005 when TV professional and critics withdrew their support from HBO. Suffering fatigue and in the face of growing scepticism, the subsequent withdrawal of critical validation gave rise to a notion that HBO was in decline. Still, what we see post-2007 is how robust HBO is within its field, as it continues to function as an influential site of cultural legitimisation. Its cultural consecration continues to lend a commonsensical notion of what constitutes originality in contemporary television seriality—its aesthetic values, an autonomous and strong authorial voice, complex storyworlds, long narrative arcs and high production values, a set of arrangement held up by the beliefs and practices of the TV business, critics and audiences.

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*Luck* (2011-12)

*Mildred Peirce* (2011)

*Six Feet Under* (2001-5)

*Sopranos, The* (1999-2007)

*Tanner on Tanner* (HBO, 1988)

*True Detective* (2014- )

*Wire, The* (2002-2008)

*Westworld* (2016 - )