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Writers, Showrunners and Television Auteurs: Ideas of One Vision

Introduction

Television production is a complex process with input from many people along the way. The collaborative nature of the workflows is generally acknowledged as the nature of creating new series, and in television studies there has been remarkably less interest in singling out the individual contributions behind specific productions than among scholars focusing on the film medium, traditionally found to be the place for more individual, artistic expression. Within the extensive ‘how-to’-literature for film and television writing, the collaborative process is often addressed from the very outset of books on writing for the small screen. Whereas classic ‘how-to books’ for film often address the singular writer and rarely comment extensively on the mode of production as such, several books on writing for television start by emphasizing the collective nature of the process. In Writing the TV Drama Series, Pamela Douglas states that ‘if you go on to write for television, you’ll never work alone. Series are like families, and even though each episode is written by one writer, the process is collaborative at every step’ (2007, 11). Moreover, many screenwriting manuals for television address the industrial context, stressing how television writing is not only about being good at storytelling but also about the industrial rules of the game.

In their book on successful television writing Lee Goldberg and William Rabkin underline the importance of understanding the interplay of the concept for a series, its characters and narrative structures, which is what you see on screen. However, another important part of the process is ‘the business behind the camera, the unglamorous stuff that shapes, and reshapes, what you write more than anything else. It’s where
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reality collides with creativity’ (2003, 7). As a television writer, one collaborates with a number of people from the very outset of a process. Film scholar Kristin Thompson has noted how the amount of plot needed for series in the American context necessitates a group effort, meaning that the idea of the singular writer creating a series on his or her own – thus winning ‘the awed admiration’ of their peers – is an exception (2003, 39–40).

Despite the widespread agreement about television writing being a highly collective process, the concept of one vision in the DR production dogmas singles out the head writer as the one person with the vision for what is to be produced from start to finish. As already discussed, this does not imply that the head writer has to write everything on his or her own, but that his or her vision should permeate all aspects of production. This chapter explores this concept of one vision by investigating its gradual implementation in the production framework since the late 1990s as well as the current conceptions of its meaning among practitioners working at DR Fiction.

Within the Screen Idea System, experts in the field can introduce different managerial ideas, thus creating a certain framework for what is likely to find acceptance by the gatekeepers at that point in time. The question is, however, how these ideas are implemented in practice, and how they work in the interplay with the individual talent and the ideas of what should be produced for the domain of Danish television drama. As discussed in the previous chapter, the concept of one vision is regarded as originating in the intention of copying work methods from the US industry, and the chapter opens with an introduction to the current interest in the role of the showrunner in the US television industry.

Recent research on the role of showrunners (e.g. Cornea 2009; Mann 2009; Perren 2011, 2013) and on writers’ rooms (Caldwell 2008; Henderson 2011; Phalen and Osselame 2012) show a renewed interest in the divisions of labour in the US television context and in how to understand the contributions of individuals in a context where one professional role is now identified as the most important for the process as a whole. In the public realm, writings on specific showrunners are also getting still more common, and some even discuss particular creators of series as ‘TV auteurs’ (Molloy 2010).

Based on interviews with writers, producers and executives at DR, the chapter traces how to understand one vision in the DR mode of production since the 1990s. The analysis points to how there were initial problems with establishing a head writer/episode writers