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Murder, Rape, and More Murder on 'Quality' TV

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By Amanda Keeler, *Antenna*



As a fan of the program *Lost*, I was happy to learn that Carlton Cuse was going to be writing and producing a new program that would serve as a prequel to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 film *Psycho*. Last weekend I finally had a chance to watch *Bates Motel* on A&E. After fifteen minutes I had to leave the room. I gave up on the show in the middle of episode two. Why? Rape. Graphic, on screen, totally unnecessary to story development, female-character-punishing rape. As an avid television viewer and media studies professor, I try to read about and/or watch a wide variety of programming, usually in the service of facilitating future conversations with students. This scene was finally the tipping point for me.

We are in a moment in which many viewers are turning to basic cable channels like USA, AMC, and A&E for “quality” television programming, including shows such as AMC’s trifecta of *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, and *The Walking Dead*.

While problematic on a number of levels to some viewers, these programs nonetheless attract huge audiences. Recently *The Walking Dead* in particular broke ratings records with over 12 million viewers for the Season 3 finale episode “Welcome to the Tombs” on March 31st of this year. This season of the program featured the usual violence against the living and undead alike. It also featured an extended sequence of episodes that centered on the threat of sexual violence against Maggie (Lauren Cohan) and perhaps Andrea (Laurie Holden). While these characters somehow fared better than Michonne (Danai Gurira) did in the *Walking Dead* comic books, it was still a gruesome reminder that this type of onscreen violence is commonplace on contemporary cable programs. Likewise, *Bates Motel* (A&E), *Mad Men* (AMC), and *Sons of Anarchy* (FX) (among other programs that I haven’t watched) have all featured similarly disturbing sequences in their storylines.

This type of onscreen violence against women has made several of these otherwise compelling programs unwatchable. In her December 2012 [article](#) “Why American Television Needs a Break from Violence, Conspiracies, and Maybe Even Serialized Storytelling,” Alyssa Rosenberg writes about being “exhausted” by several current television programs that are heavy on “shocking violence.” While she doesn’t specifically address sexual violence, I think she makes an apt point; while neither Rosenberg nor I want to see an end to television programs that have violence at their core, can we all at least discuss its place and purpose? On one hand, programs like *The Walking Dead* have the potential to serve as brilliant allegorical tales that force viewers to question the relationship between the zombie apocalypse and our fears over the crumbling

stability of our own present social/political/economic world. On the other hand, what narrative purpose does it serve to show in detail the Governor's (David Morrissey) sexual degradation of Maggie? Can these scenes be alluded to and be as powerful?

On Wednesday, a related [article](#) by Margaret Lyons made the rounds on Twitter and Facebook. In "Maxing out on Murder: Good Luck Finding a Decent TV Drama Without Rape or Killing," she writes that she "can't watch any more murder shows. Or rape shows. I'm maxed out." This article gets at some great questions to ask about our present (or continuing) fascination with observing violence from afar. Why are these acts so popular on television? What does it mean that television programs continue to use sexual violence to define the psyches of male and female characters? Why is this entertaining?

This discussion is not meant to say that these programs should not be on the air. Nor do I want to suggest that these programs aren't entertaining—I will continue to watch several of these programs. But I am not drawn to these programs because they feature rape/murder. I am drawn to them because they tell interesting and compelling stories, which sometimes include the darker side of humanity. As well, I hope that the current discussion over the preponderance of graphic depictions of rape/murder is not relegated to female media scholars and critics. This concerns men as well. It is just as disconcerting that the central motivation of several male characters is their murderous bloodlust and/or their desire to enact violence against women. Surely this, too, is a disservice to the male viewers of these programs.

On the other hand, perhaps this situation is good for the networks: these graphic depictions usually fall outside of what is permissible on network television, where FCC regulations—and the Standards and Practices departments who self-regulate in accordance to those regulations—limit what can be shown. This "disadvantage" of broadcast content could be advantageous in this instance, forcing viewers to interpret and use their imaginations and perhaps propelling producers and writers to be more creative with their stories. Will viewers come back to network television if it can promise complicated stories that leave some images to the viewers' imaginations?

To close, some hopefulness: [here](#) is a great follow-up to Lyons' Vulture.com article, in which Alyssa Rosenberg celebrates some great television programs that break from the rape/murder cycle without sacrificing the level of quality and depth that viewers have come to expect.