10 Best-Looking Television Shows...Ever!

Of course it’s impossibly subjective. That’s why we did it.

by PAULINE ROGERS

THE 10 BEST-LOOKING TELEVISION SHOWS OF ALL TIME. REALLY? HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY MAKE THAT KIND OF CHOICE? WE OPENED UP THE IDEA TO MEMBERS AND FRIENDS. AND DID THEY RESPOND. CULLING FROM THE ALMOST 100 SUGGESTIONS WAS QUITE A FASCINATING CHALLENGE.
There are eight million stories in the naked city, that has been our. "This view that wrapped up each episode of ABC's Naked City television series (1958-1963) was a quite a look. Guild camera operator Jeff Barklage, ASC, says he became enamored with the series after he purchased a Mitchell BNC camera and discovered that it was used by J. Burgs Cantor, ASC, for the show's pilot and first season."

"The film noir look was gloriously captured in black and white as actual New York City locations, adding extra realism and grit," Barklage describes. "I am literally blown away by the fact that they could shoot on location, using all that heavy, bulky gear!"

"Time to Naked City: film noir origins, its LP's typically embellished the scenes with the rich palate of the grayscale and striking shadows and cuts to style the tone. "As the series progressed and switched to full-hour episodes, cinematography legends like Jack Hildyard, ASC, Irving Lippman, ASC, Ernesto Caparulo, ASC, and Andrew Lanza, ASC, carried on the tradition."

"There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmissions... Who can forget the chiding opening lines from the "voiced voices" for the 1963-1965 ABC series The Outer Limits?"

"It was visually more interesting than most of the shows on TV as the mid 1960s," insists Russ Abbe, ASC. "This show [shot in black and white] used more graphic compositions, did interesting scenes with crane and dolly shots, played shots in striking silhouette and was not afraid of contrast. It allowed scenes to play in deep shadow yet always separated from the background with pools of light or appropriate backlight, and generally enhanced the the lighting that played television in that period. Conrad Hall, ASC, only shot about 15 episodes of the series, but I suspect his work left a significant impact on the style of the show."

Conrad Hall, Jr., ASC, agrees. "When it began in 1963 and syndication, I would always try to guess if my father shot it or John Nichols did;" Hall recalls. "I could always tell when it was Daddy. He used to get the chance to shoot and experiment. It was a mantra from which he never ventured too far.""

Another big entry aired in the 1960s during to visually take its audience where it had "never gone before," in that famous voiceover by Captain James T. Kirk intoned. "At the point when I was seriously looking at lighting and studying cinematography, I was watching Star Trek, the original series, and it hit me," accounts Jonathan E. Abrams, ASC. "I realized that the color palate, and the use of color and the concept of actually coloring walls were amazing and revolutionary for the time - and even today."

Still photographer Hopper Stone, SMPSP, of the same mind. "The rendering of light on the bridge of the Enterprise was new to the world, as opposed to the usual flat and bright lighting that you would see there," he recalls. "Jerry Finneman, ASC, was not afraid to let backgrounds go dark from the foreground and then just sculpt the shadows."

"It almost looked like a colored anamorphic," adds Abrams. "Finneman used Panavision softening filters to smooth out the wrinkles of older women's faces - and shot with Mitchell BNC 35 millimeter film cameras, yet still managed to get enough movement to support the story."

By the early 1970s, one revolution that no audience could ever was a multi-camera television show from NBC and Norman Lear called Good Times, the first all-black cast in prime-time television. "Quite a challenge for the NBC bleachers, because needed a minimum of 200 footcandles, because the network thought brighter was funnier," recalls Donald A. Morgan, ASC, who was tasked to balance the wide variety of skin tones. "We were trying to express with different quality of light at the time," Morgan continues. "We started out using very low-hanging key lights, thinking that would make them pop better from the walls. Then we used fill lights that did not use any diffusion. That made a very flat look because all that light projected from the floor."

Morgan says he settled for a 5.6 stop and lighting with Colorama 2K soft lights and an array of Barndoor & Mitchell lighting instruments. "We ended up going with warmer lights on the 2Ks that got a good highlight on black hair," he share.

"After some time we came up with a tracer system for the soft lights to shade to break up the walls a little," Morgan adds. "While the technology today is changing fast, the basis way we set up on shows like Good Times hasn't - it is just how you achieve it."

While the technology today is changing fast, the basic way we set up on shows like Good Times hasn't - it is just how you achieve it," he adds.

Capitulating on the lessons learned on Hawaii 5-0, the long-running 1960s hit, CBS's Magnum P.I. look shooting in the Aloha State to a new level. "The look had a lot to do with the things that we did with the character of Thomas Magnum," remembers cinematographer John C. Flann III, ASC (who also shot Hawaii 5-0).

"We were using Kodak 5247 and 5294, Parasol 2 and Anamorphic 2, and one of the most beautiful sources ever - arc lights," Flann comments. "When we were on location doing key scenes, we would put an art
through the windows, and it was a beautiful daylight source no matter what time of day it was. They might have been cumbersome and hot, but we'd get a flicker to deal with now and then, but there is no other light that could mimic real sunlight like those arcs could.

The biggest challenge, Flans says, was Havan’s “the islands were a big part of the show and always had to look great,” he says. “One shot might be as a beautiful back-to- back scene that would enhance the color of the island. The next location could be on the opposite side of the island where the clouds would still in at a moment’s notice. I got to our assistants know when to open up the stop, and the grips would be under the arc raising and lowering the scene in sync to keep up the proper balance with the clouds.”

Who out there remembers a quirky little high school show from the 1990s called Parker Lewis Can’t Lose? Paul Mab plasma, ASC, says does, recalling how he lit action with scenes were币en from the camera. “We used lighting as a tool in many different ways, including Oobe lights and cutting holes in bounce cards for the lens, and lighting the bounce card without lighting the lens itself and creating a warm look.” Mab plasma remembers.

Parker Lewis and 16 mm panax Elan cameras and Panavision 16 mm lenses/prime as well as the Panavision. Parker Lewis featured very aggressive camera moves. Using an OConnor 100 fluid head on top of a Panaflex for shots accompanying Dutch angles, these moves because the show's wide angle.

“Peeps were a big part of the storytelling,” Mab plasma continues. “When one of the characters had his first drink of beer, an oversized beer can was constructed and mounted to the camera with the camera inside the larger than life can, and beer flowed underneath the lens and into the character’s mouth to achieve the beer can PPO?”

Parker Lewis may have taken TV comedy to bizarre lengths — but it was the spooky 1990s cult series The X-Files that took television into the dark and esoteric.

“I remember reading an article on the series where the director, David Tickell, said something like, ‘I’m the one who is responsible for the look of light on this show,’ recalls X-Files fan Graham Patridge. ‘To me, they made light more mysterious and anemic. I remember bright flashlights and flares as well as big hooting beams of light through smoke.’

The max responsible for all that visual creepiness, John Bartley, ASC, says he always tried to make the cinematography interesting for the audience. “The shows gave me the opportunity to experiment,” Bartley shares. “We used different lighting gels and cool white fluorescent tubes and Chroma Sx. We shot with two Arri Alexa 53 BLs, Zeiss lenses and low light levels on Kodak 501 and 520 with T-stops at 2.8 to 4, which made it difficult for the assistant. I’m grateful that people are still talking about some of the signature lighting we used — like those Xeen flashlights.

“The show still follows me,” Bartley laughs. “I’m in Moscow on a serial now, and once someone finds out I did that show, there are more and more questions.”

In early 2000, cable began to show audiences, and one of the most-watched series was USA Network’s unique whodunit, Monk. “Everyone thought it was a broad comedy, but the series contained elements of action, drama, horror,” accounts one of the show’s DPs, Joe Ponzella.

“There wasn’t a specific production design or color. And, there wasn’t a specific look from the lighting and lensing point of view — it’s all evolved from what Tony Shalhoub would do.”

“T might be as simple as Monk walking through a door but, as we know, Joe Ponzella, that could take a long while,” adds alternating DP Anthony Palermo, ASC. Monk was shot on Super 16 mm film, with cameras angles, camera staging and lighting setups changing as the cameras rolled, due to its antics. “The lighting was extremely varied,” Ponzella adds. “We did everything from soft-source looks to film noir and colorful and bright.”

“I remember having Monk in the middle of Times Square, or forced to ride the subway,” recalls Ponzella. “How about when Monk finds himself trapped in a submarine?” asks Ponzella. “Or, when he and Scoop Dogg solve a crime on stage singing a rap song?” Whatever the challenge, both DPs were up to it, and that’s why Monk became the most-watched cable series at the time.

Two of this year’s most popular series have featured radically different visual styles. Boardwalk Empire, which earned 40 Primetime Emmy nominations and concluded its five-season run last October, was shot in Super 35-mm 3-perf on Kodak Visionon 50D 5201, Vision3 250D 5207, and Vision3 500T 5219 stocks, the Emmy-winning House of Cards, one of the first and best streaming series, is shot on the Sony digital RED Epic Dragon with Zeiss Master Prim 85mm 1.4.

The first time I saw Boardwalk Empire, I thought they had a nice way to capture the early morning light of the East Coast,” describes AC Tiffany Ang. “They used the light in the air vs actual morning sun or fog machines but without that horror movie feel of diesel, foggy lights. The color palette of coal white colors for outside and very warm tones for night interior give it that vintage feel of lightboli that bumed warmer and created pools
of light combined with scenes where the people were just using candles."

"Director Martin Scorcese and Stuart Deming, ASC, exquisitely crafted the pilot on Kodak 35-millimeter film," describes DP Jonathan FExpression, ASC. "Taking their lead, we drew further inspiration from New York artists of the period to create the look. These included John Sloan, George Bellow and others from the Ashcan School. Their work was often deep as shadows, their figures etched in fleeting light. The details were coarse with the texture of the brush."

"I knew the best way to convey that expanse was to continue shooting film," adds FExpression, who admits they did not digital. "The film responded to the lighting and period design in a way that was true to the color palette, look and tone."

To a fan of the distinctive period drama, that decision to stick with film was crucial.

"It’s the feeling that you get watching the show," says Ang. "How natural is the lighting? They let the fill light go dark and interesting filters go dim. Being inside at night felt like you’re in today, and then you could feel that watching the show, in contrast, you can see how much of the nightlight filled the same sets during the day.

Late in 2013, audiences became hooked on a new kind of TV platform—streaming videos—thanks in large part to Netflix’s Emmy-winning series, *House of Cards*. Creating the political drama’s signature look, which moves back and forth between the main characters’ Deep South base and his machinations within the Beltway, has fallen to several DPs, including Greg Masters and Martin Albracht.

"This series is, in a way, a more formal film language compared to a lot of television," Albracht observes.

"The approach was so different than the way one would prepare a feature film," Masters adds. "Dark dealings of the underworld were usually represented by shadows, half-light and overall fading things in darkness. The color palette is reduced to minimal color accents for key scenes. Close-ups are also reserved for key dramatic moments."

Amherst says the camera in *House of Cards* moves many "to keep up with the action or to follow a certain point of view," but mainly for emotional reasons.

"The camera moves with the scenery and the environment of the shots—both up close and long shots," he adds. "Lighting is for the scene rather than the shot—allowing camera freedom to look in multiple directions at the same time."

"We shoot almost exclusively on dollys on dollys on dollys," with our master shot moving between several different sizes in a scene as the actors move around," Albracht continues. "Part of the visual language is that the camera rarely does. Instead, the dolly moves up and down to the desired frame."

Albracht says the size of the viewing venue—TV or movie screens—has no bearing on how *House of Cards* is produced. "If anything, we’re going a little wider than the usual television shows—faster closer-ups," he reveals. "On the flip side, we finished

this season in 4K, which means that there’s an incredible amount of detail for anyone who is watching this on a large 4K ‘viewing room’."

"Impossible, you still say, to call it a 10 Best."

Looking TV Shows Ever list (mostly from Local 699 members’ points of view)! Perhaps no one can deny we’ve taken ICG readers from classic old BNCs to ALEXAs, 35 mm to digital and even 4K. Agree? Disagree? Have a few ideas of your own? There’s always next September, and, perhaps, The 10 Best Looking Television Shows Ever—Revisited.

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