

TV Feature: The 10 Best TV Shows of 2013

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 30, 2013 - 3:37pm

- [Boardwalk Empire](#) [2]
- [Breaking Bad](#) [3]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [4]
- [Broadchurch](#) [5]
- [Enlightened](#) [6]
- [Game of Thrones](#) [7]
- [Hannibal](#) [8]
- [Hello Ladies](#) [9]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [10]
- [House of Cards](#) [11]
- [Justified](#) [12]
- [List](#) [13]
- [Masters of Sex](#) [14]
- [Orange is the New Black](#) [15]
- [Parks and Recreation](#) [16]
- [Ray Donovan](#) [17]
- [Rectify](#) [18]
- [Television](#) [19]
- [The Americans](#) [20]
- [The Killing](#) [21]
- [The Middle](#) [22]
- [The Returned](#) [23]
- [The Walking Dead](#) [24]
- [Veep](#) [25]

I've avoided saying it outright for a few years as it seems like an overwritten headline but one thing is too clear to ignore when looking back at this past year in television — we are currently in the most creatively vital time in the history of the form. Coming up with the ten best films or ten best video games for 2013 was infinitely easier than when I had to craft my “Best of TV” list for the year due to the ridiculous abundance of quality choices. With new players like Sundance Channel and Netflix shaking things up alongside the continued creative vitality of HBO, AMC, and FX, I've never seen a year like the one below and I've been doing this over a decade. How good was 2013? “Homeland,” “Bates Motel,” “Orphan Black,” “The Newsroom,” and “Sons of Anarchy” — five shows that I would highly recommend and be top ten candidates in most other years — aren't in my TOP TWENTY. That's how good.

Looking over the top twenty shows, a few things are clear:

1. While the form is exploding in cable and streaming forms, the creative erosion of network TV is nearly complete. Only three broadcast network shows made my top twenty (although, to be clear, “The Good Wife” is my blind spot in this feature - the show that I haven't kept up with enough to judge...every critic has a few, I just admit mine.) Looking further out than the top twenty, only eight network shows are mentioned at all below. If you don't have cable, you're not fully appreciating television.
2. Genre lines are blurring. I have written for years about how I longed for more shows that didn't fit into neat categories of drama, comedy, and reality, and that's clearly happening. So many of the best shows from 2013 had elements of multiple genres, crafting great fiction without adhering to the rules that so often hampered showrunners creatively since the dawn of TV. I found myself drawn to the shows this year that really played across expectations and I hope that trend continues.
3. There are more players than ever. Much has been made of the emergence of Netflix as a major name in the world of TV and the big three original programs from the service are all on the list below but Sundance Channel made just as much of an impact, arguably more, with “The Returned” & “Rectify,” two of my top ten shows of the year.
4. We're starting a new wave. As “Southland,” “Enlightened,” “Breaking Bad,” “Mad Men,” “Dexter,” “Sons of Anarchy,” and possibly “Boardwalk Empire” head out one door, “Rectify,” “The Returned,” “Ray Donovan,” “The Bridge,” “The Americans,” “House of Cards,” “Masters of Sex,” “Hello Ladies,” “Hannibal,” and many more enter stage left.
5. We're finally getting some diversity in our American television. While a remake is in production, the original “Broadchurch” wasn't held back from U.S. audiences. The Sundance Channel chose to air the French series “The Returned” subtitled instead of just pushing through an English-language remake. And “Orange is the New Black” featured as diverse a cast of regular characters as we've seen on a critical hit in some time.

Note: I chose not to include them because I went series over movie/mini-series but “Top of the Lake” and “Behind the Candelabra” were two of the best original TV events of the last decade. Watch them both.

Runner-ups (alphabetical): Archer, Arrested Development, Bates Motel, The Blacklist, The Bridge, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Homeland, Legit, The Newsroom, Nurse Jackie, Orphan Black, Sleepy Hollow, Sons of Anarchy, Southland, Veep, The Walking Dead and the two best reality shows on TV - Survivor & Top Chef.

- 20. Mad Men (AMC)
- 19. The Middle (ABC)
- 18. Girls (HBO)
- 17. House of Cards (Netflix)
- 16. Masters of Sex (Showtime)
- 15. The Americans (FX)
- 14. Hello Ladies (HBO)
- 13. The Killing (AMC)
- 12. Ray Donovan (Showtime)
- 11. Justified (FX)

10. Boardwalk Empire (HBO)

"You know my wish is never to involve you. To keep you separate, above the muck that I have walked through here in Babylon where we each of us have been exiled... The things I do just simply to stand up and look my equals in the eye."

—Episode 4.9, "Marriage and Hunting," 11.3.13



Boardwalk Empire

Photo credit: HBO

The fourth installment of HBO's once-beloved drama felt a little more episodic than the focused-and-best third season but there's still so much to like here in terms of overall production quality that it's clear that too many people have started to take this program for granted. Take Jeffrey Wright's riveting supporting performance, Michael K. Williams' always consistent work, Steve Buscemi's never-faltering quality, or the breathtaking art direction and put it on another show that doesn't have the same expectations as an HBO program from Martin Scorsese and a few of the talents behind "The Sopranos" and watch the headlines explode with praise. "Boardwalk Empire" isn't a flashy show like some other modern hits — "Breaking Bad," "The Walking Dead". It's not easy to recap the next day. It's something that's often not easy to appreciate until the season is over, like closing the last page on a great book. I look forward to the next edition.

9. Parks and Recreation (NBC)

"There's only one thing I hate more than lying: skim milk, which is water that's lying about being milk."

—Episode 5.17, "Partridge," 4.4.13



Parks and Recreation

Photo credit: NBC

The funniest show on network TV, without much competition (although ABC's "The Middle" edges closer every year and deserves way more praise for its blend of "Roseanne"-esque blue-collar sentimentality than it achieves) continued to thrive in 2013, even as rumors of its impending cancellation continued to gain steam. I've always said that comedy is only as funny as its weakest supporting player. Think about your favorite sitcoms. They're almost all ensemble pieces and this group of performers is one of the best of the modern age. There's not a single weak link. Will it survive when Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones leave? Anything is possible in Pawnee.

8. Game of Thrones (HBO)

"I eat from plates stamped with roses, I sleep in sheets embroidered with roses, I have a golden rose painted on my chamber pot — as if that makes it smell any better. Roses are boring, dear."

—Episode 3.4, "And Now His Watch is Ended," 4.21.13



Game of Thrones

Photo credit: HBO

Closer to Shakespeare than Tolkien, HBO's beloved program continues to dazzle and stun in equal measures as the third season felt more politically attuned to our times than shows actually set within the Capital Beltway. "Game of Thrones" has always been about power but the third season showed the lonely tragedy of struggles for control; how we betray one another and ourselves to attain some semblance of management over our own fate, only to then watch that dissipate in horror. "Game of Thrones" is remarkable, breakthrough television, completely blurring genre from fantasy to drama to political commentary and into something altogether new. It's HBO's best drama.

7. Rectify (Sundance)

"It does something to you not to be touched in any positive way for so long. You begin to vascillate between being repelled by touch and seeking it out in any form, even the most negative."

—Episode 1.4, "Plato's Cave," 5.6.13



Rectify

Photo credit: The Sundance Channel

Look at that quote again. What a great little piece of dialogue about how a character like Daniel Holden (Aden Young) has to greet the world years after his wrongful incarceration. As with so much television for this viewer, the shows that really resonate, the ones that get under my skin, do so through their writing. We're in an era of high-concept TV — Zombies! Witches! The latest "Lost" clone! And so seeing a show like "Rectify," that has a hook of a concept but doesn't peg everything to it, felt like a new kind of fiction for the form when it premiered in May. Slow-paced, character-driven, and fascinating, "Rectify" is a show about a man dealing with something unimaginable, written by people who know how to make such an unfathomable journey relatable. I can't wait to see what they do in round two.

6. Orange is the New Black (Netflix)

"You keep looking for people you have that chemical thing with, but that's not the whole package. You have to find someone you can spend two weeks with in a cramped timeshare in Montauk, in the rain, and not want to kill, who made jigsaw puzzles fun and competitive."

—Episode 1.10, "Bora Bora Bora," 7.11.13



Orange is the New Black

Photo credit: Netflix

"House of Cards" and "Arrested Development" got the headlines but it was a show about a women's prison that really gave Netflix its identity in 2013. First, there's the writing — so crisp, so smart, so multi-layered in the way it spins wilfly from laugh-out-loud comedy to character-driven drama. But this show doesn't work without a rock-solid, top-to-bottom ensemble. Taylor Schilling has received some deserved praise but the supporters here have not garnered appropriate acclaim. List the most memorable characters on TV in 2013 and try not to include Taystee (Danielle Brooks), Daya (Dascha Polanco), Red (Kate Mulgrew), and Sophia (Laverne Cox). We complain a lot, correctly, about the lack of well-written female roles in dramatic television and the lack of well-written minority roles. "Orange is the New Black" showed both are possible and that Netflix could lead the way.

5. The Returned (Sundance)

"You mustn't be afraid. It's all happening as it was written. They're here to warn us that the end is near. And when it comes, it will be wonderful."

—Episode 1.7, "Adele," 12.12.13



The Returned

Photo credit: The Sundance Channel

With echoes of early “LOST,” this French import almost defies explanation. The simple pitch is that a French Alpine village is shattered when a few of its deceased, former inhabitants suddenly return, as if they never left. A teenager who died in a bus crash, a soon-to-be groom who took his own life, a serial killer, and a mysterious boy simply...come back. Why? And what does it mean when life is no longer the end? The writing and filmmaking on “The Returned” was as riveting as TV got in 2013, all the way up to the stunning cliffhanger. This is a show that contained some of the most dramatically heartbreaking and straight-up terrifying moments of the year. Chapter two can’t come soon enough.

4. Hannibal (NBC)

“I don’t know if I will ever be myself again. I don’t know if I’ve got any self leftover. I spent so long thinking I was him it’s gotten really hard to remember who I was when I wasn’t him.”

—Episode 1.11, “Roti,” 6.6.13



Hannibal

Photo credit: NBC

The tightrope act of 2013. There’s no reason to have expected that another iteration of Thomas Harris’ legendary cannibal would be this dramatically successful. Sure, we knew that showrunner Bryan Fuller was one of the form’s best but this was still a very delicate proposition. Taking a character we know and love and playing prequel would only draw comparisons to beloved books and Oscar-winning films. (And yet, it worked twice in 2013 with “Bates Motel” finding moments of brilliance as well.) Fuller deserves the majority of the praise for this dense, rewarding exploration into the darkness of true evil but credit to Hugh Dancy and Mads Mikkelsen for creating the two most memorable network TV characters of 2013. Hardly anyone watched “Hannibal.” It was barely renewed. And yet it’s coming back. We need more TV this challenging on the networks or they will simply become a revolving door of sitcoms, reality shows, and mysteries. Do your part and catch up on season one and accept the invitation to dine with Hannibal in season two.

3. Enlightened (HBO)

“Am I crazy?”

“No. You’re just full of hope. You’ve got more hope than most people do.”

—Episode 2.8, “Agent of Change,” 3.3.13



Enlightened

Photo credit: HBO

Every once in awhile, there's a show that seems to really capture something about our current era and in 2013 that show was "Enlightened." Was there a more symbolic figure for how so many people struggle in work and life than Laura Dern's Amy Jellicoe, a woman hoping for some time in the spotlight but striving to be a good person at the same time? HBO sent the entire, 8-episode second season at one time and I watched it one day. I changed plans. I could not stop. It plays like a feature film with delicate, nuanced characters, brilliant dialogue, and some of most consistently fascinating social commentary in years. As much as I'll miss Amy and "Enlightened," this season was SO perfect that it's almost OK that it's the last. Much like other brilliant-but-canceled shows, it will only grow in esteem from here.

2. Broadchurch (BBC)

"These people's lives have been destroyed. And now our incompetence has made it worse."

—Episode 1.1, 8.7.13



Broadchurch

Photo credit: BBC

Again, a show that transcended its genre set-up. At its core, "Broadchurch" is a murder mystery. Who killed Danny Latimer? But it becomes a chronicle of the ripple effect of crime on an entire community. It unleashes skeletons from closets and pushes relationships in new directions. With some of the best performances on TV this year (Olivia Colman's work in the final episode deserves a special award), "Broadchurch" was like a great novel, one in which you feel you know all of the characters by the final, painful revelation. It's debatable that no program has ever more devastatingly captured that dramatically elusive element of crime — the grief it creates in those impacted by it.

1. Breaking Bad (AMC)

"I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really — I was alive."

—Episode 5.16, "Felina," 9.29.13



Breaking Bad

Photo credit: AMC

I have some issues with the tidiness of the actual finale but there was no smarter, more creative, or more riveting program in 2013 than Vince

Gilligan’s massive hit, a show that has already been included on lists of the best of all time. The word I think of when I think of “Breaking Bad” is confidence. Over five seasons, we never once got the impression that Gilligan and his team lacked an OUNCE of it. They always knew where they were going and how they were going to get there and we were just along for the ride. So many programs, even the greatest, had their lulls, where you could sense the writers trying to find their way or the uncertainty about where characters should go next. That never happened with “Breaking Bad.” And it’s not through a desire to please or pandering to a denominator but through sheer creative force that Walter White took a seat next to Tony Soprano in the pop culture vocabulary. Like the Italian anti-hero before him, he became more than a character through the force of the performer who played him and the genius who wrote him. He may be missed in 2014 but his impact is only beginning to be felt.



[26]

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