

Missing in Action: Quality TV and Canonization

Hiding in Plain Sight: The Lack of Influence of *ER*

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How could *E.R.* have fallen through the cracks? In the 1990s it was network TV's most talked about, most expensive, most dramatic, longest-running medical series. It was nominated for 124 Emmy Awards, and won 23 with wins in every category it was nominated in. Its highest rated episode - 47 million viewers - remains a benchmark for a dramatic series and is a record not likely to be broken in our currently fragmented cable universe. Even in its lowest rated final seasons, the show was pulling in numbers (8 million viewers an episode) that HBO or any other network today would envy. Nevertheless, somehow, *E.R.* has completely fallen outside of the critical and scholarly canon.

So, what accounts for the omission? *E.R.* fits the profile of several other influential shows - like *Moonlighting*, *Northern Exposure* and *China Beach* - that are absent in our current streaming environment. Since all of these programs were *network* shows from the late 80s and early 90s, there is something presumably "middlebrow" about their status as audience pleasing works, no matter how complex or innovative they may actually be upon second glance.

Perhaps it is the presentist notion of television rhetoric that makes these shows so absent within contemporary scholarship. These shows all existed without internet buzz, making their cultural impact seem less important than today's "quality" offerings. Since *E.R.* is also 15 seasons long, with an average of 23 episodes per season, it provides a significant challenge to analyze to the scholar.

Obviously, we need to recuperate *E.R.* within our critical canon. Opposed to other series which ushered in the moment that television became "legitimate," there is something decidedly adult about the show which may not have spoken to the interests of scholars coming of age within the 1990s, but are highly relevant today. The show also served a mass rather than elevated demographic as in the example of *The West Wing*, whose viewership was significantly smaller, but whose niche audience provided it with critical, scholarly and network esteem. *E.R.*'s reputation also suffers without the presence of a *bona fide* showrunner-auteur at the helm. Despite his immense success with the series, Executive Producer John Wells figures into our history as more of a "company man" with solid credentials in the vein of Donald Bellasario, Aaron Spelling among others, but not in the ranks of writer-producers like Aaron Sorkin, Joss Whedon, or David Lynch.

Taking a closer look means admitting that the series moved beyond our shorthand perception as a mere medical show to a complex work that explored social issues in great depth. It also proves that it was the kind of show that we, as scholars, are constantly crying out for. Do we want intricate, responsible representations of people of color? Enter Dr. Benton, Dr. Gallant, and Dr. Pratt. Do we want compelling, complex representations of women? Look no further than Nurse Carol Hathaway, Dr. Corday, Dr.

Carrie Weaver or Abby Lockhart. Do we want social commentary about gun control, the faltering health care system, the Balkan War, AIDS treatment, disability, racism, gay adoption, the Iraq War, the turmoil in the Sudan, or just about any other issue that was pressing in the 1990s/early 2000s? The show had all of these issues on its front burner, leaving no question as to its liberal bias nor its impetus for representing reality as accurately as its Chicago setting allowed for.

E.R. also refutes many of the claims of the new historicization of quality TV -- particularly as it presented narrative and cinematographic innovations that are (mis)attributed to recent HBO and cable shows such as *Breaking Bad* or *True Detective*. One need only look at a single episode of *E.R.* to see the series' command of the long-take, or view a character's arc over the course of fifteen seasons how their cumulative narrative transforms them. Nor was *E.R.* any stranger to having film actors move within its ranks, as William H. Macy, Sally Field, Don Cheadle, Stanley Tucci and Angela Bassett all made their way to County General throughout the years -- not to mention the many up-and-coming actors who got their break on the series.

E.R., among other long-running network programs such as *Law & Order*, certainly deserve our scholarly attention. As a thought experiment we might also ask how *E.R.* would have fared in the twitter universe, or in the present "TV vs. Film" debate. What fandoms armed with hashtags might champion *E.R.* and how would its impact in our present moment be felt? Regardless of the answers to these questions, *E.R.* demands the look that it somehow never received in our current moment -- if only to teach and write about our field accurately.