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Essay 2

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Television interpretation & *Batman: The Animated Series (1992-1995)*

In articles like *Why Television* and *Making Meaning* professor Jason Mittell and author Jeremy Butler explore the cultural, sociological, technological and industrial aspects of television and how the medium has greatly impacted American culture. I decided to go against the norm and present a cartoon program's aesthetics to help illustrate Mittell and Butler's key points.

*Batman: The Animated Series* or for short *BTAS* was an American animated show which was produced by Warner Bros. Animation and based on the DC Comics superhero Batman. It originally aired on the Fox Network from September 5, 1992 to September 15, 1995; as it took its inspirations from the theatrical *Superman* cartoons produced by Fleischer Studios during the 1940's. The series was widely acclaimed for its dark sophisticated themes, influential stylized animation and mature complex writing; and it took much of its serious tone from the recently acclaimed *Batman* (1989) movie directed by Tim Burton. The series won four Emmy Awards, including one for Outstanding Animated Program and ultimately the show crossed-over to several animated movies, comics and videogames.

*BTAS* aired in 1992 which Mittell stated was The Multi-Channel Era which lasted roughly from the 1980's all through the 1990's. Mittell explains how this era brought on a more

fragmented audience as people's viewing habits drastically changed due to various different cable channels, networks and the rise in the popularity of the VHS (Mittell 60). In *Television's Ebb and Flow* Butler emphasizes the relationship that occurs between television programs and the various advertisements that constantly get placed strategically throughout an entire episode.

Butler presented a 'Grid System' which is a network system used not necessarily to tune into a specific show, but to keep the viewers on the same channel for as long as possible (Butler 5).

Most of the commercial and advertisement interruptions that appeared during the breaks of *BTAS* were mostly toy commercials, toys that would appeal to boys between the ages of 7-12. There were also promos of upcoming *BTAS* episodes; most of them would usually appear during the end credits.

*BTAS* was released at a time where such extra accessories like Netflix, DVR, Hulu and TiVo weren't yet available, so networks probably had an easier challenge throughout the early 90's in creating a Grid System that could keep viewers to remain on their channel much longer than they do today. I remember the various choices I had in television programs around the 4 a clock afternoon mark which was immediately after I got home from school. Other cartoon shows that aired before or after the time-slot of *BTAS* were shows like *Animaniacs* and *Goof Troop*, two popular anchor shows which seemed to appeal to a similar age group but lacked the darker more adult approach than what *BTAS* offered. Even similar genre shows like the popular super hero cartoon *X-Men: The animated series* which was part of Fox Kids Saturday morning lineup remained lighter and more kid-friendly, and did not include any of the dramatic intensity that the stories of *BTAS* had.

In the chapter *Exchanging Ideas* Mittell explores the differences between 'Viewers' (individuals) and 'Audiences' (groups). What makes *BTAS* such a unique achievement was that it

was able to offer elements for both specific groups. It offered conventional elements like action, drama, comedy, fantasy and adventure which commercially geared to a demographic of predominantly young boys. And yet the show has elements for 'Viewers' as well which include dramatic storytelling, rich character development, adult ideologies and faithfulness to its source material which would all breeze right past younger viewers and attract older viewers outside its target audience. The iconic intro of the show is immediate evidence for any new viewer that the show goes beyond your typical Saturday morning cartoon show. Unlike most opening themes in television *BTAS* lacked an on-screen title. The producers wanted to design a cartoon intro that was never previously seen on TV before, creating a title that presents the iconic image of Batman without the use of any words.

Another appealing element that *BTAS* had to offer was the way it presented its narrative modes for each new episode. The plot structure that the show constantly used was what Mittel called 'Episodic'. *BTAS* for the most part was a completely episodic series as many of the episodes would feature the same consistent world of Gotham City and repeatedly use a familiar cast of characters like Batman, Alfred, Catwoman, Robin, Joker, Two-Face, Renee Montoya, Harvey Bullock, Poison Ivy, and Commissioner Gordon. What made the show so appealing and accessible to newer viewers is that you could walk into it as a first time viewer and not at all be lost or disoriented on who the characters were or what the story was about. Each episode was individually self-contained with its own traditional three act structure which was highly similar to a mini-movie. Once in a while the show would feature slightly episodic serials, narrative arcs or two-part episodes that would stretch over multiple episodes. Stories like Harvey Dent transforming into the villainous Two-Face (*Two-Face Part 1 & 2*), Barbara Gordon experimenting with crime fighting leading her to become Batgirl (*Shadow of the Bat Part 1 & 2*),

and Robin quitting his partnership with Batman and becoming his own persona by the name of Nightwing (*Old Wounds*).

What makes *BTAS* absolutely timeless in the large scope of television is the highly influential and electrifying animation style which was applied to create the vast world of Gotham city and all of its inhabitants. When designing the series, creators Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski incorporated a gritty somber expressionistic era that would resemble a 1939 World's Fair-like architecture, automobiles, wardrobe and weapons, set in the present time. Unlike any other cartoon before it, *BTAS's* dark shadowy backgrounds were drawn on black paper with lighter material emphasizing a moody and gothic atmosphere. It's distinctive and authentic noir imagery was later renamed as 'Dark Deco' by the producers and this revolutionary stylized approach created a 30's and 40's world of expressways, police blimps, automobiles, bridges, and towering skyscrapers that reached the skies; all the while its technology and ideology remained modern.

*BTAS* was considered a more sophisticated and adult-oriented show than other cartoon programs especially with the strong musical score and mature voice acting. The orchestrated soundtrack was composed by the legendary Danny Elfman who also did the scores for both of Burton's *Batman* films. The score can be heard during the opening and credit sequence of each episode and its epic score helps establish a more adult tone for the entire show. The voice acting provided another key element which gave *BTAS* a distinctive mature feel. Instead of traditionally hiring cartoon voice actors to do the roles, the creators wanted dramatic movie actors like Kevin Conroy, Bob Hastings, David Warner, Ron Perlman, Roddy McDowall, John Vernon and Mark Hamill to do the voice work. Because of this unconventional decision to use real dramatic actors,

it helped give the show a much more human and dramatic quality, especially since the cast used subtlety and didn't rely on colorful and child-like cartoon exaggerations.

Within the complex world of *BTAS* there is much Polysemy that seems to be brewing underneath many of its episodes. Within Butler's three axioms found in the chapter *Television: Ideology and Representation*, he explores the Polysemy's of television as *BTAS* seems to pertain mostly to the 'text.' Each episode and individual story can be approached and analyzed as an individual text and many of its Polysemy's encompasses various different themes, meanings and ideologies which can be emphasized through particular discourses (Butler 10). *BTAS* is not as simplistic and black and white as most people would think a Saturday morning cartoon would be. Batman is essentially good, yes, and the Joker is bad, but if you peel back the layers deeply enough it will slowly reveal a disturbing shade of grey which explores themes like obsession, bitterness, abandonment, isolation, identity, manipulation, tragedy, voyeurism, murder, and guilt.

The Batman/Bruce Wayne presented in *BTAS* is less the idealistic super hero and more a conflicted tragic Shakespearian figure with excessive mommy and daddy issues. Even many of the villains throughout the series are looked at less as monsters and more psychologically and emotionally damaged outcasts, lost souls who seem to suffer from some severe form of mental illness. Two-Face for instance wasn't born a villain but a tragic victim of childhood abuse. This damaged childhood ultimately led him to develop 'big bad Harv' a split personality which eventually took full mental control in the name of Two-Face (*Two-Face Part 1 & 2*). Mad Hatter was originally a nerdy lab-worker who became infatuated with a co-worker who resembled female perfection from one of his all-time favorite storybooks. When he realized he couldn't win her affections, jealousy, anger and violence took the best of his intellectual genius (*Mad as a Hatter*). And finally there is Mr. Freeze, a bitter and twisted scientist who swears revenge on the

man who killed his wife and turned him into a horrific monster. Mr. Freeze's powerfully moving origin story emotionally touched audiences, as they completely understood the pain and bitterness that Mr. Freeze was going through; which earned the show its very first Emmy win (*Heart of Ice*).

Only a Saturday morning cartoon like *BTAS* could effectively make audiences feel complete empathy for the villain in the story and at the same time understand that the crime they are committing is unmoral, unethical and unjust. Maybe that is why Batman seems to have such a deep connection with his villains, and they in return seem to be constantly obsessed with him. Batman is the mirror image of his enemy. Batman's unstable psychosis is constantly on the edge and the only thing that's keeping him from crossing over and ending up locked up in a cell at Arkham Asylum next to them are his close friends, moralistic values and strong ethical boundaries that he strictly sets for himself.

*BTAS* has been one of my favorite childhood television shows and for me the only perfect visual adaptation on the character of Batman. Voice actor Kevin Conroy will always be the true embodiment of Batman and every time I find myself opening up a Batman comic book and seeing an illustration of the character my subconscious always imagines Conroy doing the voice. And so to analyze this show by using analytical aspects that were explored by Mittell and Butler, it became an educational and enjoyable experience. I'm extremely grateful that as a young boy I just happened to come across *Batman: The Animated Series* one day on TV. Its simple episodic narrative Mittell explained was assessable enough for me to immediately get hooked as a first-time viewer. And so not only is *BTAS* a much more enjoyable show since I can now fully appreciate many of its adult mature elements, but it has also become an tender nostalgic memory that takes me back to a much simpler, more innocent time.

Work Cited

Butler, Jeremy. *Television Style*. United Kingdom: Routledge Press, 2009. Print.

Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.