

# 10 Best-Looking Television Shows...Ever!

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

by PAULINE ROGERS



House of Cards / Photo by David Giesbrecht

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.





All photos this page from ABC TV's *Naked City* / Top Right Photo of Mitchell BNC 1 used on the series Courtesy of Jeff Barklage, SOC

"There are eight million stories in the naked city, this has been one." This voiceover that wrapped up each episode of ABC's *Naked City* television series (1958-1963) was quite a hook. Guild camera operator Jeff Barklage, SOC, says he became enamored with the series after he purchased a Mitchell BNC camera and discovered that it was used by J. Burgi Contner, ASC, for the show's pilot and first season.

"The film noir look was gloriously captured in black and white in 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!"

True to *Naked City's* film noir origins, its DP's typically embellished the series with the rich palette of the grayscale and utilized shadows and cuts to style the tone. "As the series progressed and switched to full-hour episodes, cinematography legends like Jack Priestley, ASC; Irving Lippman, ASC; Ernesto Caparrós, ASC; and Andrew Laszlo, ASC, carried on the tradition.

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

"It was visually more interesting than most of the

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

Conrad Hall, Jr., ASC, agrees. "When it began in reruns and syndication, I would always try to guess if my father shot it or John Nicholas did," Hall recalls. "I could always tell when it was Dad's. He said he was grateful to get the chance to shoot and experiment. It was a mindset from which he never ventured too far."

Another 10-best entry arrived in the 1960s, daring to visually take its audience where it had "never gone before," as 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," recounts Jonathan S. Abrams, SOC. "I realized that the color palette, and the use of color and the concept of actually coloring walls were



Star Trek Photos by Mel Traxel / Paramount Studios • Top Right and Left from ABC TV's *The Outer Limits*

amazing and revolutionary for the time – and even today."

Stills photographer Hopper Stone, SMPSP, is of the same mind. "The sculpting of light on the bridge of the Enterprise was new to the time, as opposed to the usual flat and bright lighting that you would see then," he recalls. "[Jerry Finnerman, ASC] was not afraid to let backgrounds go dark from the foreground and then just sculpt the shadows."

"It almost looked like a colored animate," adds Abrams. "Finnerman used Pancro Mitchell 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 miss 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 Norelco tube cameras, which 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 experiment 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 front."

Morgan says he settled for a 5.6 stop and lighting with Colortran 2K soft lights and an array of Bardwell & McAlister lighting instruments. "We ended up going with hard light on the back X 2Ks that got a good highlight on black skin," he shares.

"After some time we came up with a teaser system for the soft lights to shade the back walls a little," Morgan adds. "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."

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.

Capitalizing on the lessons learned on *Hawaii 5-0*, the long-running 1980s hit, CBS's *Magnum, P.I.* took 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. Flinn III, ASC (who also shot *Hawaii 5-0*).

"We were using Kodak 5247 and 5294, Panaflex 2 and Arri handheld cameras, and one of the most beautiful sources ever – arc lights," Flinn continues. "When we were on location doing day interior/exterior, I would put an arc





NBC TV's *Good Times* / Courtesy of Donald A. Morgan, ASC

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, and 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, Flinn says, was Hawaii. "The islands were a big part of the show and always had to look great," he says. "One shot might be in a beautiful back-cross-light that would enhance the colors of the island. The next location could be on the opposite side of the island where the clouds would roll in at a moment's notice. It got so our assistants knew when to open up the stop, and the grips would be under the arc raising and lowering the scrims 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 Maibaum, ASC, sure does, recalling how he lit actors whose faces were mere inches from the camera. "We tried lighting these shots in many different ways, including Obie lights and cutting holes in bounce cards for the lens, and lighting the bounce card without lighting the lens itself and creating unwanted flares," Maibaum remembers.

Shot in 16 mm with Panaflex Elaine cameras and Panavision 16-mm zooms/primes as well as the PogoCam, *Parker Lewis* featured very aggressive camera moves. Using

an O'Connor 100 fluid head on top of a Panahead for shots incorporating Dutch angles, these moves became the show's visual motif.

"Props were a big part of telling the story," Maibaum continues. "When one of the characters had his first drink of beer, an over-sized 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 POV!"

*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 mysterious.

"I remember reading an article on the series where the gaffer, David Tickell, said something like, 'I'm the one who is responsible for the lack of light on this show,'" recalls *X-Files* fan Graham Futerfas. "To me, they made lights more source-y and realistic. I remember bright flashlights and flares as well as big backlit beams of light through smoke."

The man responsible for all that visual creepiness, John Bartley, ASC, says he always tried to make the cinematography interesting for the audience. "The stories gave me the opportunity to experiment," Bartley shares. "We used different lighting gels and cool white fluorescent tubes and Chroma 50s. We shot with two Arriflex 53 BLs, Zeiss lenses and low light levels on Kodak 5293 and 5296 with T-stops at 2.8 to 4, which made it difficult for the



*Parker Lewis Can't Lose* / Photo by Ron Batzdorff



*X-Files* Season 7 night exterior consistent with look established by DP John Bartley, ASC, in early seasons / Photo by Nicola Goode/FOX TV

assistants. I'm gratified that people are still talking about some of the signature lighting we used – like those Xenon flashlights.

"The show still follows me," Bartley laughs. "I'm in Moscow on a series now, and once someone finds out I did the show, there are more and more questions."

In early 2000, cable began to draw audiences, and one of the most-watched series was USA Network's unique whodunnit, *Monk*. "Everyone thought it was a broad comedy, but the series contained elements of action, stunts, drama," recounts one of the show's DP's, Joe Pennella. "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 often evolved from what Tony Shalhoub would do."

"It might be as simple as *Monk's* walking through a door – but, as we knew, for *Monk*, that could take a long while," adds alternating DP Anthony Palmieri, ASC.

*Monk* was shot on Super 16-mm film, with camera angles, camera staging and lighting setups changing as the cameras rolled, due to his antics. "The lighting was extremely varied," Pennella 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 Palmieri. "How about when *Monk* finds himself trapped in a submarine?" adds Pennella. "Or, when he and Snoop Dogg solve a crime on stage singing a rap song?" Whatever the challenge, both DP's made it work, and that's why *Monk* became the most-watched cable series at the time.

Two of this era'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 Vision2 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 5K digital RED Epic Dragon with Zeiss Master Primes.

"The first time I saw *Boardwalk Empire*, I thought they had a nice way to capture the early morning mist of the East Coast," describes AC Tiffany Aug. "They suspended the light in the air via actual morning dew or fog machines but without that horror movie feel of dense, foggy lights. The color palette of neutral white colors for outside and very warm tungsten for night interior give it that vintage feel of lightbulbs that burned warmer and created pools



*Magnum P.I.* crew setting up a shot in Hawaii / Photo Courtesy of John C. Flinn III, ASC



*Monk* Season 7 / Courtesy of Joe Pennella



Final season of *Boardwalk Empire* / DP Jonathan Freeman, ASC / Photo by Macall B. Polay





of light combined with scenes where the people were just using candles.”

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

“We knew the best way to convey that essence was to continue shooting film,” adds Freeman, who admits they did test digital. “The film responded to the lighting and period design in a way that was truer to the color palette, look and tone.” And to fans of the distinctive period drama, that decision to stick with film was crucial.

“It’s the feeling that you get watching the show,” Aug adds. “How natural is the lighting. They let the fill light go dark and interior fixtures go dim. Being inside at night was darker than it is today, and you can feel that watching the show; in contrast, you can see how much the sunlight filled the same sets during the day.”

Late in 2013, audiences became hooked on a new kind of TV platform – streaming video – thanks in large part to Netflix’s Emmy-winning drama, *House of Cards*. Creating the political drama’s signature look, which moves back and forth between the main character’s Deep South base and his machinations within the Beltway, has fallen to several DP’s, including Igor Martinovic and Martin Ahlgren. “This series is, in a way, a more formal film language compared to a lot of television,” Ahlgren observes.

“The approach was no different than the way one would prepare a feature film,” Martinovic adds. “Dark dealings of the underworld were usually represented by shadows, silhouettes, half-lights and overall hiding things in darkness. The color palette is reduced to minimal color accents for key scenes. Close-ups are also reserved for key dramatic moments.”

Ahlgren says the camera in *House of Cards* moves mainly “to keep up with the action or to follow a certain point of view,” but rarely for emotional reasons.

“The lenses stay wider and include the rooms and environments in the shots – even in close-ups,” he confides. “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 dollies on dance floors, with our master shot moving between several different sizes in a scene as the actors move around,” Ahlgren continues. “Part of the visual language is that the camera rarely tilts. Instead, the dolly booms up and down to the desired frame.”

Ahlgren says the size of the viewing venue – iPhone or 50-inch screen – has no bearing on how *House of Cards* is produced. “If anything, we’re going a little wider than most television shows – with fewer close-ups,” he reveals. “On the flip side, we finished



Boardwalk Empire / photo by Macall B. Polay / HBO Pictures

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 screen.”

Impossible, you still say, to cull a 10 Best-Looking TV Shows Ever list (mostly from Local 600 members’ points-of-view)? Perhaps. But no one can deny we’ve taken ICG readers from static old BNCs to ALEXAs, 35 mm to digital and even 4K. Agree? Vehemently disagree? Have a few ideas of your own? There’s always next September, and, perhaps, The 10 Best-Looking Television Shows Ever – Revised 🎯

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top: Final season of Boardwalk Empire / Photo by Macall B. Polay  
Other Photos: Season 3 House of Cards / Photos by David Giesbrecht