LOOKING BACK at select pilots launched since 2000, it’s clear that the first decade of the New Millennium paved the way for the current Platinum Age of Television. Of course, strong material and canny casting provides the raw material for success, but without strong execution behind the scenes by directors (who are rarely mentioned in reviews), these shows would not have cast such a giant shadow on the TV landscape.

Some of these series put their networks on the critical map, such as *Mad Men* for AMC and *Gilmore Girls* for The WB, and, with keen directorial guidance, advanced more than a few acting careers, including those of Jon Hamm, Elisabeth Moss, Jason Bateman, Steve Carell, Bryan Cranston, Kyle Chandler, Connie Britton, Adam Driver and Sandra Oh, among many others.

By Steve Chagollan
Another instant classic in the quirky, eccentric family genre, *Malcolm in the Middle* revolves around the title character, played by Frankie Muniz, who occasionally addresses the camera directly. Other directorial flourishes orchestrated by director Todd Holland included whiplashing camera movement and frequent wide-angle and extreme close-ups. In this sitcom, the parents often act like adolescents and the kids are a source of reason, but with an undercurrent of love and support. Variety called the show a “fresh Valentine to dysfunctional clans everywhere.”

**MALCOM IN THE MIDDLE**
*Todd Holland (Jan. 9, 2000)*

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**ATLANTA**
*Hiro Murai*  
*“The Big Bang”* (Sept. 6, 2016)

> This series, about a Princeton dropout who seeks salvation by managing a rapper who’s on the verge of stardom, revels in a sense of place and the realistic frustrations of an intelligent protagonist (star and creator Donald Glover) who nevertheless makes reckless decisions. Pilot helmsman Hiro Murai shot on authentic, unromantic Atlanta locations, and has directed the bulk of the series. He credits the “meandering, existential comedies” of the Coen brothers and Sofia Coppola as influences. “They have a really cool way of making comedy out of a tone poem almost.”

“Pilots are tricky because there are so many things you have to accomplish. For FX, it’s about letting the audience in.”  — HIRO MURAI

**DEADWOOD**  
*Walter Hill*  
*March 21, 2004*

> It’s only fitting that Walter Hill, the director of such big-screen Westerns as The Long Riders and Wild Bill, which both share DNA with Deadwood, would direct the pilot of this series set during the Dakota gold rush of the 1870s. “This was a period piece ahead of its time,” writes The New York Times’ Alessandra Stanley when she revisited the series in 2015. “This depiction of the West was sophisticated and deeply layered, sometimes comical but always brutal.” Hill would win a DGA Award and an Emmy for his efforts.
Anthony & Joe Russo (Nov. 2, 2003)

This landmark comedy centers around the dysfunctional Bluth family, oddballs who indulge in extravagant lifestyles until their patriarch, a real estate developer, is arrested for defrauding investors. The show’s outrageous humor and eclectic style—using handheld cameras, voice-over narration and quick-cut inserts—would influence myriad sitcoms in its wake. The Russo brothers, who won an Emmy for the pilot, established the show’s controlled mayhem. The Hollywood Reporter called it “easily the smartest, funniest and most original new comedy of the season.”

WE TRIED TO CREATE A COMEDY THAT DOESN’T LOOK LIKE ANY OTHER COMEDY.” —MELINA MATSOUKAS

THE PEOPLE v. O.J. SIMPSON: AMERICAN CRIME STORY
Ryan Murphy
“From the Ashes of Tragedy” (Feb. 2, 2016)

The first season of the FX true crime anthology series deals with race, celebrity and the court of public opinion. Director Ryan Murphy set the table with the discovery of the bodies, the infamous Ford Bronco chase, and the introduction of several major real-life characters, including deputy D.A. Marcia Clark (Sarah Paulson), co-prosecutor Christopher Darden (Sterling K. Brown), defense attorney Johnnie Cochran (Courtney B. Vance) and defendant O.J. Simpson (Cuba Gooding Jr.). The Atlantic called the series “shockingly well-acted and sensitively rendered” and “one of the most compelling TV dramas in recent memory.” Murphy earned a DGA nomination, and the series raked in 22 Emmy noms and nine wins.

INSECURE
MELINA MATSOUKAS (Oct. 9, 2016)

This prickly comedy series, loosely based on Issa Rae’s popular web series The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl, explores the contemporary black experience from a female perspective, touching on the complexities of friendships and relationships, as well as social and racial issues. “We tried to create a comedy that doesn’t look like any other comedy,” said director Melina Matsoukas, who filmed much of the pilot on location in South L.A. and Inglewood. “The way we shoot Insecure is motivated by the mental state of each of our characters.”

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT
Anthony & Joe Russo (Nov. 2, 2003)

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FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS
Peter Berg (Oct. 3, 2006)
► Emmy-nominated pilot director Peter Berg—who also directed a film version of the source material, the nonfiction Friday Night Lights: A Team, a Town and a Dream, by H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger—has said that one of his motivations for developing the series about high school football culture in Texas was to flesh out many of the book’s interpersonal relationships that were excised from the film due to time constraints. Berg also insisted on shooting in Texas and giving the actors freedom to roam without artificial marks. “The core philosophy of the shooting style,” said Berg, “is that the cameras should organize their movements and behaviors based upon what the actors are doing”—like a documentary crew going after the action.

THE WIRE
Clark Johnson
“The Target” (June 2, 2002)
Although this series—narratively tackling everything from Baltimore’s drug trade to the interworkings of its city government, educational system and mass media—received mixed reviews upon its initial outing, it has come to be regarded by many critics as one of the most rewarding TV shows of all time. Clark Johnson, who directed three of the first five episodes, including the pilot, helped establish The Wire’s gritty authenticity. “The show has a look of its own, and a place that is both (black) and gray,” Johnson told NPR. “And because of the theme of the show, which is about surveillance and observation and watch from a distance, we took the idea to use a long lens and watch from afar. That’s also the telling view—that detached view.”

“The goal [on The Office] was to create the illusion that we were trying to keep up with the action, not always successfully.” —KEN KWAPIS

THE OFFICE
Ken Kwapis
(March 24, 2005)
► Ken Kwapis, a leading practitioner of the single-camera sitcom, brought his savvy sensibility to this comedy about the employees of a fictional paper sales company, utilizing the “mockumentary” style that stayed true to the series’ original BBC incarnation. In this regard, recalled Kwapis: “It was important for me to announce to the crew that certain kinds of ‘mistakes’ were quite welcome. The goal was to create the illusion that we were trying to keep up with the action, not always successfully.” In its review of the pilot, The Hollywood Reporter noted: “It is ironic that this series, though an adaption, is one of the most unique and creative new comedies on NBC in years.”