

Vision Quest



By Steve Chagollan

IT'S HARD TO SAY WHEN primetime programmers' ambitions became so large that the television screen could hardly contain them. But the end result for directors in this era of Peak TV is that they are routinely being equipped with bigger and deeper sandboxes than the medium has ever afforded. Nowadays, all the hallmarks associated with prestige moviemaking are very much a part of episodic television: the single-camera sensibility, stylized—even off-kilter—narratives, far-flung locations, artful lighting and framing, unlimited scale, top-notch production values and A-list casts. It might be a stretch to suggest that the current television landscape is not unlike Hollywood in the '70s, when the director's vision reigned supreme. But in terms of the opportunity to spread their creative wings and throw out the established rule-book, directors are having a field day during what is no less than a renaissance of dynamic original content on the small screen. Here are just a few examples of what we like to call "cinematic television":

GODLESS

► The Western, as seemingly rare as the California Condor, is brought to vivid, if ultra-violent life, in this seven-part miniseries shot on location in New Mexico. But the writer-creator-director Scott Frank gives it a twist: the fictional town of La Belle, decimated by a mining accident, is populated mostly by women, albeit with a brutal outlaw played by Jeff Daniels as the main antagonist. "I think it very much is a feminist Western," Frank, pictured above, told NPR, "but at the same time, I was equally obsessed with telling the story of fathers and sons."



TWIN PEAKS

► David Lynch had already attracted a rabid fan base in the art house world by the time this series first appeared in 1990, and the unsettling, aesthetically daring nature of that original vision—with its themes of the darkness that lurks beneath outwardly serene small-town America—is only amplified in this latest iteration, with all of its narrative twists and turns. Lynch, shown here with actor Kyle MacLachlan, called it “an 18-hour movie,” famously declaring that “television and cinema to me are exactly the same thing.”



FARGO

► The acclaimed 1996 Coen brothers movie has been re-imagined as an anthology series with a unique set of characters distinguishing each outing. What unites them is a mixture of Grand Guignol humor, hapless victims and their brutal tormentors who commit unspeakable atrocities in a chilly Midwestern setting. Pictured right is the director Keith Gordon (with actress Mary Elizabeth Winstead), who directed the last two episodes of Season 3, including the one titled “Aporia.”



THE ALIENIST

► Not unlike a Hollywood epic, New York circa 1896 was recreated in Budapest for this series based on the Caleb Carr novel about a multitude of grisly murders, and the criminal psychologist (Daniel Brühl) and *New York Times* illustrator (Luke Evans) who are on the case. In addition to taking advantage of Budapest’s Gilded Age architecture, a massive set comprising 10 city blocks was built, adding rich period texture. Above, director Jakob Verbruggen works on location with Evans.



STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

► There have been so many versions of the *Star Trek* franchise on both the big screen and small that, like the *Star Wars* series, the mythology can get murky for all but the most committed fan base, while the stakes get higher and higher with each enterprise, no pun intended. But as Matt Zoller Seitz at *Vulture* points out, “*Discovery* stands tall alongside the best-regarded incarnations of the *Trek* franchise even as it raids elements from all of them.” Left, director Jonathan Frakes calls the shots on the episode “Despite Yourself.”



THE HANDMAID'S TALE

► The cinematographer-turned-director Reed Morano, who won DGA and Emmy awards for directing this adaptation based on Margaret Atwood's dystopian drama, is responsible for establishing the series' ominous tonal template. Writing for *DGA Quarterly*, Carrie Rickey described Morano's "static camera and formal compositions" as melding "Old Masterly framing with Kubrickian symmetry." Morano, who directed the first three episodes of season one, is shown below with actress Elisabeth Moss.



WESTWORLD

► A dramatic leap in scale, ambition and production polish from the 1973 feature written and directed by Michael Crichton, this offering ranks as the most-watched first season of any HBO original series. The eponymous wild west theme park around which the sci-fi saga is centered—populated by android hosts—gives rise to all kinds of forbidden fantasies, both sexual and violent, and the lush imagery is both pastoral and chilling. Below, cocreator Jonathan Nolan, who directed both the pilot and the finale for season one, calls the shots on location.



MOZART IN THE JUNGLE

► This quirky view inside the world of classical music—with its combination of exotic and urban settings, international cast and premium production values—upset the competition in 2016 when it won the Golden Globe for best television series, comedy or musical. *The New York Times* called it "more serious in tone and more naturalistic in style than a great majority of television dramas." At the center of it all is a conductor modeled on the L.A. Philharmonic's Gustavo Dudamel, played by Gael García Bernal, seated left, with Tricia Brock, who directed four episodes in the series' first three seasons.



THE WALKING DEAD

► The long-running post-apocalyptic series has been an AMC staple since 2010 and has piled up more than a dozen Emmy nominations over the years. But perhaps its most startling accomplishment is to take a B-movie genre and elevate it to must-see TV. *Salon.com* gave it its top score, declaring "a film-quality drama series about zombies? Somebody pinch me!" Above, director Greg Nicotero works on location with actor Andrew Lincoln.

PHOTOS: (TOP) GEORGE KRAYCHYK/HULU (2); (BOTTOM) JOHN P. JOHNSON/HBO (2); (OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE, TOP LEFT) ALI GOLDSTEIN/AMAZON STUDIOS; SARAH SHATZ/AMAZON STUDIOS; GENE PAGE/AMC (2)

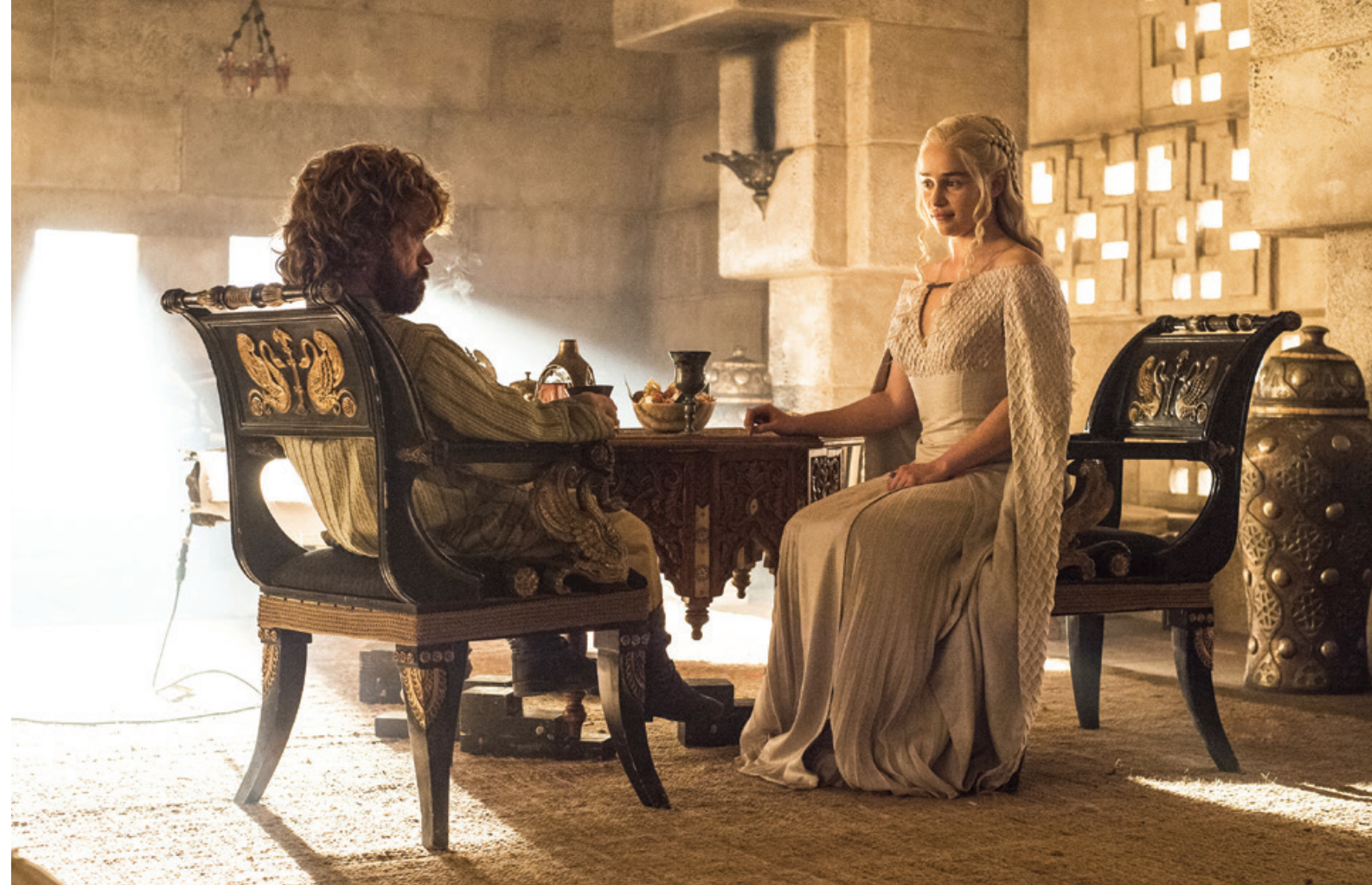
THE KNICK

► The visual brainchild of filmmaker Steven Soderbergh, *The Knick*—which revolves around an early 20th-Century hospital in New York—reveals in the kind of gritty, at times shockingly graphic, period detail unimaginable in television just a couple decades ago. Its central character, a surgeon with a weakness for cocaine and opium, is as flawed as they come. In her reevaluation of the show, *The New Yorker's* Emily Nussbaum admits that she “began to get into [the surgical scenes’] ugly aggression, as well as Soderbergh’s vision of the body itself as a war zone.”



LEGION

► This might be the most unorthodox Marvel adaptation of all, with a superhero, played by *Downton Abbey's* Dan Stevens, whose grip on reality is tenuous at best. *The Hollywood Reporter* called season one “a visual tour-de-force of stunning imagery and freak-tastic ideas” and among the most “visually challenging fare of 2017.” Pictured, Michael Uppendahl guides Stevens through a scene in “Chapter 3” of the first season.



“There was a very David Lean kind of approach to it. It was traditional and naturalistic in some respects, even though it was fantasy.” —MIGUEL SAPOCHNIK



GAME OF THRONES

► In terms of large-scale filmmaking, *Game of Thrones* is as epic as they come. The series, based on George R.R. Martin’s fantasy novels, is set in the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, and the producers have used such far-flung locations as Iceland, Northern Ireland, Spain and Morocco for its storybook landscapes. Miguel Sapochnik, left, who has won a DGA and Emmy Award for directing the series, told *The New York Times* that when he came aboard, “There was a very David Lean kind of approach to it. It was traditional and naturalistic in some respects, even though it was fantasy.”