

Why TV series from the US are so good

TV series produced in Germany and elsewhere in Europe are finding their way onto outlets like Netflix. But the US, with its cult series such as "Breaking Bad" and "Mad Men," remains hard to beat. Why is that?

"Tell me what you watch and I'll tell you who you are..." Discussing the latest TV series has been a popular topic of conversation for years.

A brief history of epic narratives

Early models of the format were released in theaters, with serials such as "Fantômas" in the 1920s and "Batman and Robin." "Dallas" and other soap operas were prime time long-lasting hits in the 1980s.

From radio to TV sitcom: "Father Knows Best" from the 1950s was one of the first TV series

But at the end of the 1990s, HBO emerged as the forerunner coming up with TV series boasting renewed storytelling standards. "With 'The Sopranos' and 'The Wire,' HBO took on a clear pioneering role. While series had previously been seen as escapism, they were suddenly compared to novels, featuring more characters, with depth," Mainz University film expert Gregory Mohr told DW.

Read more: How TV is refining its secret recipe

Serial storytelling was nevertheless not invented in the 20th century. Rather the format is a "trans-historic and trans-cultural phenomenon," which developed ages ago with epics such as Homer's "Odyssey" or the Sanskrit "Mahabharata," points out Joachim Friedmann, professor for serial storytelling at the Cologne International Film School (IFS).

Can be considered one of the world's earliest series: the ancient Greek epic "Odyssey"

The factors contributing to success in the US

While quality series are now also being produced in Germany and across Europe, the US still remains a leader in the field. Tac Romey, professor at the

University of Television and Film Munich who also studied filmmaking in the US, can pinpoint a few reasons to explain this.

Tac Romey *is an author, producer and teaches TV series scriptwriting*

For one, he says, in the US, a team of authors work together in the writers' room, developing the 22 to 24 episodes of a season while it is being produced.

This allows authors specialized in specific topics to write their episodes. Also, "if they notice that a specific plotline turns out to be particularly exciting while the show airs, they can directly react to that," says Romey. In Germany, an entire season is usually written first, then produced, and airs only later.

Read more: Classic German film 'Das Boot' to be continued as TV series

The German TV series "Bad Banks" applied the US model: it was developed in a writers' room

Pay television, already widespread in the US by the 1980s, is also another factor contributing to the development of strong series. To keep subscribed viewers hooked to their services, premium TV companies had to offer something that wasn't available on free TV. "That's when all the morally ambivalent characters were born," says Romey.

Another person playing a central role in the production process is the showrunner, which is the 21st-century term for the leading executive producer of a TV series. Outranking the director, the showrunner holds the creative authority for an entire series. The showrunner, usually one of the creators of the series or a member of the writing team, decides on the cast and all creative aspects of the show. "That gives homogeneity to the story," explains Romey. A growing number of German productions meanwhile also have someone in the position as well.

Read more: On the brink of nuclear war in 1983: TV series 'Deutschland 83'

Joachim Friedmann, author and professor for serial storytelling

Time-tested narrative structures

While different production structures have been established over time in the US and Germany, the content of the series produced in both countries does feature common elements.

"To put it simply, films are about things and series are about people," says Joachim Friedmann from the IFS in Cologne. Series that work well often feature strong characters and an unsolvable problem that allows a conflict to unfold over several episodes, he explains.

The protagonists also need a goal, says Tac Romey. "It can be that the main character hopes to be in a relationship with a specific person or to become President of the United States." The viewer needs to understand that goal and develop empathy for the character. The antagonist, someone blocking that goal, is also a classic narrative device of serial storytelling.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

Netflix German series 'Dark'

The first German language TV series produced by Netflix for the international market, "Dark" was released on December 1, 2017. The first season consists of 10 episodes and tells the story of four families living in a small German town. The disappearance of two young children in surrounding forest leads to investigations revealing that something shady has been happening there since the 1980s.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

Dark worlds

The series was directed by Baran bo Odar and his wife, Jantje Friese, wrote the screenplay. The Swiss director filmed a similar story with the 2010 feature film, "The Silence," another thriller that interconnects two generations of a family in a small provincial German town. As the title suggests, his latest offering is a lot darker and claustrophobic.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

Ambitious production: 'Babylon Berlin'

The most expensive non-English drama series ever produced, "Babylon Berlin" started airing in Germany last October. Netflix purchased broadcast rights for the US. Three directors, including Tom Tykwer, recreated the atmosphere of Berlin in the 1920s for this period drama.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

Amazon's German series 'You Are Wanted'

The first German series to be produced by Amazon, "You Are Wanted" started airing in March 2017 and was also made available worldwide through the Amazon Prime streaming service. It was directed by Matthias Schweighöfer, who also plays the lead role in this series dealing with cyber crime. Despite dividing the critics, the show's second season is already in production.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

A sequel for 'Deutschland 83'

Broadcast on SundanceTV channel, "Deutschland 83" was the first German-language series to air on a US network with English subtitles. The show obtained a number of accolades, including an International Emmy Award. The second season of this Cold War espionage drama, titled "Deutschland 86," will air in 2018 on Amazon Prime.

'Dark' and other German TV series to watch worldwide

Berlin mafia: '4 Blocks'

"4 Blocks," directed by Marvin Kren, is set in the Berlin district of Neukölln and is centered on different organized crime family clans. The series obtained rave reviews, with some critics comparing it to the US TV hit "The Sopranos." Since October 2017, it is available in over 150 countries on Amazon Video. A second season is in the making.

The future of series

Along with providers already well established in Germany, such as Netflix, Amazon and Sky, more streaming services are coming along. Disney and Apple want to produce their own series in the upcoming year.

This makes it "the best time in the history of humanity to be a series writer," says Friedmann, who nevertheless wonders who has time to watch all those programs: "There's simply an overabundance."

Tac Romey sees mystery series gaining in popularity. And while morally ambivalent characters are popular nowadays, he has observed another trend: "There are many people who say: I would like to see something more positive, not as brutal; I want to feel good. We're constantly bombarded with depressing news we can't act upon, and many wish to see a somewhat more intact world."

