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The 25 Best TV Shows of the Decade

By [CAROLINE FRAMKE](#) and [DANIEL D'ADDARIO](#)

The last decade of television has changed the entertainment industry forever. Granted, that's the kind of sweeping sentence that feels hyperbolic on the face of it, but make no mistake: The last 10 years' explosion of television and streaming services has incontrovertibly transformed the medium. Sometimes, that means bold new shows with the guts to push boundaries beyond guileless platitudes; other times, it means *Mad Libs* swings at relevance as the TV landscape gets ever denser. Throughout the decade, however, TV has been fascinating even (and often especially) amidst its own mess.

In choosing our top shows of the decade, we narrowed down hundreds upon hundreds of options to the 25 we feel represent this era best. Many operate outside the usual bounds of the “comedy” and “drama” binary that had so long defined television’s genres. Many are keen and startling reflections of a period of time that, as it ends, seems to have been defined by anxiety and by change. Others just rank among our personal favorites. (If you don’t see yours here, consider that we imposed a “no shows that premiered before 2009” rule on ourselves, and also that taste is subjective and there was no possible way for us to get to *everything*, despite our very best efforts.) All are, or were, utterly fascinating.

Here are *Variety*’s top 25 shows of the decade.

1. **“The Leftovers,” HBO (2014-2017)**

The ability to recklessly reinvent is one of the great joys of television, and no show from the decade now concluding did this better than “The Leftovers.” This straightforward-ish drama about a surreal occurrence plunged between planes, to the border of truth and lies, and even to Texas. Beginning after the disappearance of two percent of the global population, “The Leftovers” imagines the mass cultural psychosis that follows. As a show about depression, “The Leftovers” uses metaphor powerfully to evoke a feeling of stuckness. The show’s endless peregrinations made its universe big and broad but showed the central truth of humanity’s deep need for something in which to believe. Its finale proved that with stunning power through a story,

simply told, that's either true or just another moving metaphor; Nora (Carrie Coon) claimed to have gone to another world, seen the family she'd been grieving for years, and chosen to come back to her own broken world without them. Kevin (Justin Theroux) chooses to believe her, or, maybe, it's not a choice but a need. "The Leftovers" jumped all over the globe and universe to show us something ground-level simple: That to need connection and guidance is the frailty that makes us human. —*Daniel D'Addario*

2. **"BoJack Horseman," Netflix (2014-2020)**

When "BoJack Horseman" premiered over half a decade ago on a still nascent Netflix, it was natural to be confused. Raphael Bob-Waksberg's animated comedy stars an acerbic, alcoholic horse (voiced with equal parts gravel and pathos by Will Arnett) in a Los Angeles populated by anxious anthropomorphic people (designed by Lisa Hanawalt, the show's not-so-secret weapon). While at first the show seemed impenetrably wacky and cynical, "BoJack Horseman" soon evolved into one of the most gimlet-eyed dissections of what it means to live and work in Hollywood that TV's ever attempted. Its reputation for anticipating seismic events in the entertainment industry before they ostensibly hit mainstream awareness is well-earned, not least because the show is always careful to examine the systemic rot lurking underneath it all. The ways in which "BoJack Horseman" weeds through personal wreckage is trenchant, alarming, and even compassionate. (It's also, not for nothing, extremely funny; the best kind of "BoJack" joke

is one that waterfalls from one scene to the next, or else appears briefly in the show's always dense background.) And yet, if "BoJack Horseman" were to premiere on Netflix today, it almost definitely wouldn't get the time to grow that it did then, when it helped define the now titanic streaming service's willingness to take risks in narrative, genre, and form. — *Caroline Framke*

3. **"Enlightened," HBO (2011-2013)**

Amy Jellicoe is better now. After having spent time undergoing holistic treatment following a breakdown, she's ready to share what she's learned, to be what she calls an "agent of change." (She's as zealous about her cause as are adherents of today's wellness movement; Amy presaged our current essential-oils-MLM moment by only a flicker of time.) One of the many things "Enlightened" gets right is that the language of self-help can represent a special sort of self-harm — that Amy, with her newfound ability to deploy mantras, consistently grants herself permission not to get out of her own way. As played by Laura Dern in the first of her decade of major television roles (followed by "Big Little Lies" and "Twin Peaks: The Return"), Amy wants to do the right thing — to redistribute power justly, and to protect the earth from her rapacious corporate employer. It's getting there that's the hard part. Amy's insecurity manifests as redoubled moral conviction; her journey toward justice is one we cheer not because it's a triumph over herself. It's because it harnesses the truly good parts of herself, the ones that no one else wants to see, the parts we euphemistically call "well-meaning" but

that actually do mean for everyone to be well. Amy isn't quite well, still, when the series ends, but her progress has brought seismic change, for the world around her and for herself. One doesn't need to have the narcissism of the self-help community to suggest that those changes are equally important. —*D.D.*

4. **“The Americans,” FX (2013-2018)**

There may no more technically perfect series on this list than “The Americans.” Joe Weisberg and Joel Fields’ was, from start to breathtaking finish, as taut and polished as anything that’s been on TV. Throughout six seasons, “The Americans” tells the intricate story of how a pair of Soviet spies (the incredible team of Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys) adjusted to the rise and fall of the Soviet Union amid their own shifting loyalties to their country, each other, and themselves. On the “other side” — a designation that gets more complicated as the show progresses — is their neighbor Stan (Noah Emmerich), a CIA agent who could have been relegated to the background were it not for the show’s careful plotting and Emmerich’s nuanced performance. While the implications of everyone’s actions can reverberate on a global scale, the true triumph of “The Americans” is that it deftly wove together the political stakes with the personal. In between the high stakes espionage lay beautifully rendered stories of loyalty, loss, assimilation, and heartbreak. And when the series came to its bittersweet close, “The Americans” pulled off the exceedingly rare feat of not answering *every* question, and yet, feeling entirely complete. — *C.F.*

5. **“Fleabag,” Amazon Prime Video (2016-2019)**

The second season of “Fleabag” opens on Fleabag herself, looking into a mirror as her face freely bleeds, before tossing the camera a cheeky look over her shoulder. “This,” she says, “is a love story.” Fleabag (creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge) might not even realize at the time just how true that is, but over the series’ two seasons, Waller-Bridge’s gorgeous, wrenching story of love in all its transformative messiness proves it beyond a doubt. What’s more, that “love story” could refer to any number of relationships on the show: that between Fleabag and herself; pragmatic sister, Claire (the fantastic Sian Clifford); the depth of Fleabag’s grief for her mother and best friend; the surprising lust and understanding that blooms between her and a charismatic priest (Andrew Scott). With its canny observations on loneliness and compassionate insight on what it takes to live a fulfilling life, “Fleabag” began as a very good show, and ended a monumental one. —*C.F.*

6. **“Atlanta,” FX (2016-present)**

Donald Glover’s expansive vision of the city of Atlanta presents it as the staging-ground for American oddity; alligators roam, barbers lead their clients on strange tours of the city, and Justin Bieber appears as a young black man. All of this creative risk adds up to a setting in which anything seems possible, which makes it all the more frustrating that Earn (Glover) can’t move beyond his somewhat straitened circumstances. (He lives, for a time, in a storage unit.) Possibility and privation exist side-by-side in this show

whose protagonist has fallen from his initial promise, and whose other characters aren't shy about expressing their ambition for fame, or success, or just something more. That everything is within their grasp and yet the struggle remains so real is "Atlanta's" unique achievement. —*D.D.*

7. **"The Good Wife," CBS (2009-2016)**

"The Good Wife," like the enigmatic woman at the center of it all, was always more than met the eye. After kicking off with Alicia (Julianna Margulies) at the center of a press maelstrom thanks to her cheating politician husband (Chris Noth), the show quickly pivoted from scandal to a smart examination on the intersections of power and politics in Chicago and beyond. Alicia's ascendance at a prominent law firm, tortured romance with a co-worker (Josh Charles), and steadily hardening heart unfolded with expert care from co-creators Robert and Michelle King. But "The Good Wife" was also just an incredibly solid legal procedural that took existing tropes, fine-tuned them, and cranked them up to 11 with help from actors like Christine Baranski (who's still playing her "Good Wife" character a decade later on spinoff "The Good Fight"), Archie Panjabi, Alan Cumming, and a revolving door of talent as Chicago's cadre of impatient judges. Even if the series wasn't always quite on target with its case-of-the-week stabs at relevance, there's hardly a better time capsule of the particulars of its era. —*C.F.*

8. **"Better Call Saul," AMC (2015-present)**

“Breaking Bad” is not eligible for this list — it runs afoul of the arbitrary rule we created and, even if no such rule existed, *feels* like a show of the 2000s, continuing in a now-concluded “Golden Age” tradition of shows about wickedly talented male antiheroes. “Better Call Saul,” a spinoff of “Breaking Bad” about the lawyer who will someday go by Saul Goodman, complicates the formula, allowing its Difficult Man to look pathetic and vulnerable. It’s an evolution that allows for a rich and textured performance by Bob Odenkirk and a deep ensemble (especially Rhea Seehorn as a gifted lawyer drawn into moral gray zones). And its story — moving not, like “Breaking Bad,” toward evil in a linear plunge but rather bobbing gradually into choppy ethical waters — suits its own time. Saul, known in this show’s telling of the recentish past as Jimmy, isn’t a bad man. But he can’t help making revisions on the margins of his personal beliefs. It’s those nibbles of complicity that project him toward the future the show flash-forwards, of isolation and fear. Getting there, from bright-eyed Jimmy to broken former druglord lawyer, is what keeps viewers in Saul’s thrall. —*D.D.*

9. **“Nathan for You,” Comedy Central (2013-2017)**

The idea of the “scammer” caught fire in the late 2010s, perhaps as a way of restoring a bit of balance to the universe. (If corporations have every advantage at their disposal, taking back some small piece of capital for oneself is a victory of David over Goliath.) Into this cultural context Nathan Fielder stumbles, attempting to pivot each small business he encounters by tricking the public. He, in

character, means his schemes earnestly. And yet their scamminess can't be denied, making the show fit neatly into its economic and cultural moment. Fielder's character is wrong about how to make businesses work, but right that, in order to run a computer repair shop or travel agency in the 2010s is to exist on a level of precarity that demands drastic action. The show has a crystalline understanding of what the internet has done to businesses and, more crucially, of the degree to which thriving businesses, once, underpinned community. It's no mistake that the series-long throughline, emphasized in the majestic finale "Finding Frances," is of Nathan as a lonely social isolate. Where is he going to go to meet someone, now that the public square is collapsing? — *D.D.*

10. **"RuPaul's Drag Race," Logo/VH1**

Many might believe that the show with the biggest cultural footprint of the last ten years is "Game of Thrones." Many would be wrong. "RuPaul's Drag Race," RuPaul's reality competition series that has spanned this entire decade, has launched its own spinoffs, international outposts, fan conventions, and the careers of well over a hundred drag queens including pop culture forces Shangela, Trixie Mattel, and Sasha Velour. "Drag Race" has also done what RuPaul himself did in decades past by bringing the subculture of drag out into the light and translating it to a larger (straighter) audience by sheer force of will and undeniably hilarious turns of phrase. Depending whom you ask, this mainstreaming of drag is either the show's greatest gift (millions of people are learning to love drag and the queer

people who create it!) or its greatest sin (the show's homogenization of drag is a blight on the queer culture that created it!). Either way, the impact of "Drag Race" is undeniable, and proof of the concept that television can change the world. —*C.F.*

11. **"Bob's Burgers," Fox (2011-present)**

Not a single other show on this list can claim consistency on the level of "Bob's Burgers," which has churned out strong and wonderfully strange episodes for 10 seasons and counting. The animated comedy — which follows the Belcher family scraping by, learning from and helping each other — has been one of TV's most reliable sources of joy for almost this entire decade. And yet it's also somehow continued to push itself to be ever more ambitious, with witty homages and original musical moments in almost every episode. The Belchers are sincere, empathetic, creative and unashamed of own their weirdness. If we had them around for another ten years, we'd be very lucky. —*C.F.*

12. **"Barry," HBO (2018-present)**

Bill Hader's Emmy fortunes for this show have always felt confounding; it's not that he doesn't deserve acting honors for playing a veteran-turned-hitman struggling to recover from the trauma of war, but it's not exactly comedy acting. "Barry" has moments of arch and carefully crafted comedy, built around the acting school where Barry works to find himself after subsuming his identity into killing. But even that laughter coexists with pain — Barry's, his instructor's

(Henry Winkler), and his classmate's (Sarah Goldberg, transcendent as the fully formed person who finds herself flattened into the object of Barry's hopes and affections). Hader's work — startlingly physical performance — anchors the show, but there's a universe here bigger than any one star, one in which oddity lurks around corners. The show's genre experimentation serves a vision of Hollywood and the mob underworld as equally mercenary, and of Barry as a person cursed with the ability to move relentlessly forward through both. —*D.D.*

13. **“Jane the Virgin,” The CW (2014-2019)**

Contrary to the grim spate of surly dude antiheroes that threatened to take over TV as we knew it at the decade's start, it takes guts to tell a story guided by hope and heart. “Jane the Virgin,” Jennie Snyder Urman's American version of a Venezuelan telenovela, took a seemingly ridiculous (not to mention invasive) story of accidental insemination and created a beautiful series about family, hope, and resilience. The CW series was playful and powerful, relevant and bittersweet. It defied easy categorization; scenes could run on heartbreaking drama one minute, and screwball comedy the next. With a breakout performance from Gina Rodriguez providing the emotional center of the otherwise sprawling series, “Jane the Virgin” found nuance and magic around every corner — and sometimes, a grisly murder, too. Shows spend years trying to be half as quick on their feet as “Jane” was from its opening minutes. —*C.F.*

14. **“Broad City,” Comedy Central (2014-2019)**

It’s easy to forget now, with so many wonderful shows available in which female friendships reign supreme, how unusual “Broad City” was upon its premiere. Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer’s love letter to friendship and each other made a point of relegating romantic mishaps to the background. Instead, each episode focused on a day in the life of two best friends careening through New York City with reckless abandon and stumbling upon the kind of magic unique to that twentysomething period when anything seems possible. Following its heroines’ lead, “Broad City” was trippy and hilarious, and much smarter than many gave it credit for. With help from director Lucia Aniello, the series had its own immediately distinct style, choppy and loopy to fit the spirit of their escapades. And yet, it kept pushing itself to be more ambitious, resulting in a wonderful final season in which Abbi and Ilana — and Jacobson and Glazer, besides — came to terms with their evolving friendship and need to find their own paths. All told, “Broad City” is both a time capsule and an example of how TV can always find a freeing new gear. —*C.F.*

15. **“Orange Is the New Black,” Netflix (2013-2019)**

Netflix’s first original series (“House of Cards”) was a handsomely made version of a TV drama that had already been done many times. Soon after, however, “Orange is the New Black” premiered, opening up the possibilities of streaming television in a game-changing way. Under the guise of following a white Connecticut woman (Taylor

Schilling) navigating prison for a crime she committed years ago, Jenji Kohan's landmark series instead broadened its scope to tell the stories of dozens of women of many different races, genders, and sexualities. Actors like Kate Mulgrew and Natasha Lyonne got to show off different skills; actors like Uzo Aduba, Danielle Brooks, Laverne Cox, and Selenis Leyva got to drive their own character stories like they might not have on any other show. By the end of its seven-season run, "OITNB" had frequently fallen prey to its more scattered storytelling leanings, but its influence on television at large and the way streaming approached and changed programming throughout this decade can't be underestimated. —*C.F.*

16. **"Game of Thrones," HBO (2011-2019)**

There seems little left to say about a show that mapped so neatly onto its decade, and whose success made it both the ultimate and perhaps final example of a consensus TV hit in the era of the fragmented audience. "Thrones's" success was television's — as long as there was something on the air inspiring this much affection and debate, the medium's historical function as a way to entertain and communicate to the masses was still intact for an hour a week. Sustained by top-level craft at all levels and genuinely ambitious visuals, "Thrones" inspired endless imitators, and elevated the medium's approach to genre stories. But no fantasy epic in its wake is likely to do what "Thrones" did, to catalyze as much excitement: Thanks to excellent source material and top-line collaborators, the show's creators collided with a

moment hungry for escapism and for insight about the mechanisms of power, and created a show that stands in for its era. —*D.D.*

17. **“The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story,” FX (2016)**

Operatic in scope, Ryan Murphy’s 2016 outing was the crowning achievement on the limited series, the form he’s put to wider-ranging use than any other creator. Placing the familiar figures from the O.J. Simpson trial in the limelight just as they were beginning to fade from memory, the series painstakingly does the work from every angle, representing Simpson’s legal saga, and eventual acquittal, as influenced by celebrity, class, race, and gender, all at once. This show is not the most representative of Murphy’s work over the decade, but features key aspects of his influence, most notably in the casting of Sarah Paulson as Marcia Clark; Paulson’s star image, forged by “American Horror Story,” is as a woman for whom we feel innate sympathy. Applying that talent to Clark — derided and loathed in the Simpson moment, and later unable to escape its shadow — made a potent case for Murphy’s eye, and for his flashes of deep humanism. —*D.D.*

18. **“Girls,” HBO (2012-2017)**

Among hundreds of candidates, there may be no more controversial show of the past decade than “Girls.” Despite retaining a relatively small audience on HBO, Lena Dunham’s series became a cultural flashpoint the second it premiered, both for its seemingly myopic view of New York

City and Dunham’s apparent audacity to share it. Over its six seasons, “Girls” certainly vacillated between self-serious and self-aware, shedding keen insight one minute and demonstrating a startling lack of it the next. Like it or not, though, “Girls” defined an introspective new genre of twentysomething angst for television with a filmmaking style all its own. At its best, watching “Girls” feels like watching a series of poignant, infuriating, disarmingly penetrative short stories. Even when it seemed to unfold in some parallel universe, it was rarely a boring one to visit. — *C.F.*

19. **“Unbelievable,” Netflix (2019)**

Told with sensitivity and care, this limited series felt boundless in its ability to evoke both humanity’s worst and its ability to rebuild. A young woman (Kaitlyn Dever) endures first an assault and then the inability of law enforcement to trust or believe her; elsewhere, two cops (Merritt Wever and Toni Collette) work to solve the case of a serial rapist. Together, these stories braid into a moving, compelling narrative about accountability and about what it takes to move forward — as an individual, and as a society built to leave out its most vulnerable members. — *D.D.*

20. **“Key and Peele,” Comedy Central (2012-2015)**

One minute, Jordan Peele and Keegan Michael Key’s “Key and Peele” could deliver cutting social commentary with salient points about race and perception; in the next, it might indulge the comedians’ silliest instincts with hyperactive aerobics instructors and fanboy parking valets. “Key and Peele” also demonstrated a deep knowledge of

varying genres, making every homage specific, hilarious and, thanks to director Peter Atencio, downright cinematic. The series also proved invaluable during the Barack Obama era, when Peele played him at his calmest while Key acted as Luther, the president’s “anger translator” who could express his fury in ways Obama never could. In just three seasons, “Key and Peele” made clear just how smart, flexible, and straight up *fun* sketch comedy can truly be.

21. **“High Maintenance,” Vimeo/HBO (2012-present)**

Before webseries hit a saturation point and streaming services muddled the definition forever, Ben Sinclair and Katja Blichfeld’s “High Maintenance” was busy perfecting the form and laying the foundation for what would become one of TV’s most quietly brilliant shows. In theory, the show is about a weed delivery guy (Sinclair) whose life weaves in and out of countless New Yorkers muddling through their daily lives. In practice, “High Maintenance” is a deeply felt series about human connection and the extraordinary possibilities that even an ounce of empathy can yield. It’s beautifully shot and intelligently cast (despite airing on the same network at around the same time, the New York City of “High Maintenance” is not the monochromatic New York City of “Girls”), and as long as its writers keep finding new people to follow, it’s easy to imagine a world in which “High Maintenance” goes on for years to come without missing a beat. — *C.F.*

22. **“Mr. Robot,” USA (2015-2019)**

Sam Esmail’s first TV show may end up overshadowed by future work; his 2018 series “Homecoming” was an achievement that foretold more to come. But “Mr. Robot” deserves commemoration as a show that perfectly suited its era. Its protagonist, Elliot (Rami Malek), is a socially isolated man who hopes both to somehow ameliorate his painful loneliness and to fix the world’s ills. He’s righteous. His quest, filled with hope and with the frustration that comes with trying to shift a system skilled above all else at propagating itself, looks like a paranoid-thriller version of one that’s been unfolding since the Occupy movement in 2011. And he’s to be feared. We, as the viewers, are privy to the voices in his head; for those who are not, his unpredictability makes him a savior and a monster at once. Elliot moves the world forward by moving it closer to chaos and violence. And even those who can’t hear his internal voices live in the reality he creates. —*D.D.*

23. **“One Day at a Time,” Netflix/Pop (2017-present)**

“Norman Lear” has become shorthand for a genre unto itself. Any time a sitcom dares to address Real Issues, the legendary producer’s name isn’t far behind as an example of how it’s been done right. But that’s a harder balance than many give it credit for — which makes the success of Gloria Calderon Kellett and Mike Royce’s “One Day at a Time” reboot such an accomplishment. By updating the show to be about a Cuban-American family living in present day L.A. — led by the rock-solid duo of Justina Machado and Rita Moreno — it can take on a host of issues that one about a white family couldn’t, ones that are frankly far more pressing

in a post-Trump reality. This new “One Day at a Time” is as intelligent as it is warm, and most impressively, pulls off the trick of feeling as familiar as it does fresh. —*C.F.*

24. **“Party Down,” Starz (2009-2010)**

Taking as its subject a group of cater-waiters forced to work degrading, B-list gigs (and using as its structure for each episode a party, from beginning to end), “Party Down” artfully introduced a new corner of residential Los Angeles in each episode. The constant was the core team, trying hard to nourish dreams of stardom while passing eggrolls. Adam Scott’s and Lizzy Caplan’s cynical slow-burn flirtation over the series, generating sparks from the unexpected joy of meeting a person who hates the same things one hates oneself, was perhaps the best-executed sitcom “will they or won’t they” of the decade. That it wasn’t given the chance to wear out its welcome is perhaps the only reason to be glad the show left air after a short run. —*D.D.*

25. **“Superstore,” NBC (2015-present)**

If we were to put a handful of shows into a time capsule in order to let our future alien overlords know what was happening this decade, “Superstore” would be a necessity. The NBC sitcom, from “The Office” producer Justin Spitzer, has been one of TV’s timeliest shows since its 2015 debut. Set in a deceptively cheery facsimile of Walmart, “Superstore” has tackled everything from immigration to unionization with canny insights about how corporate

America functions (or, more likely, really doesn't). It's inventive with its single setting and, just as important, very funny. —*C.F.*

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