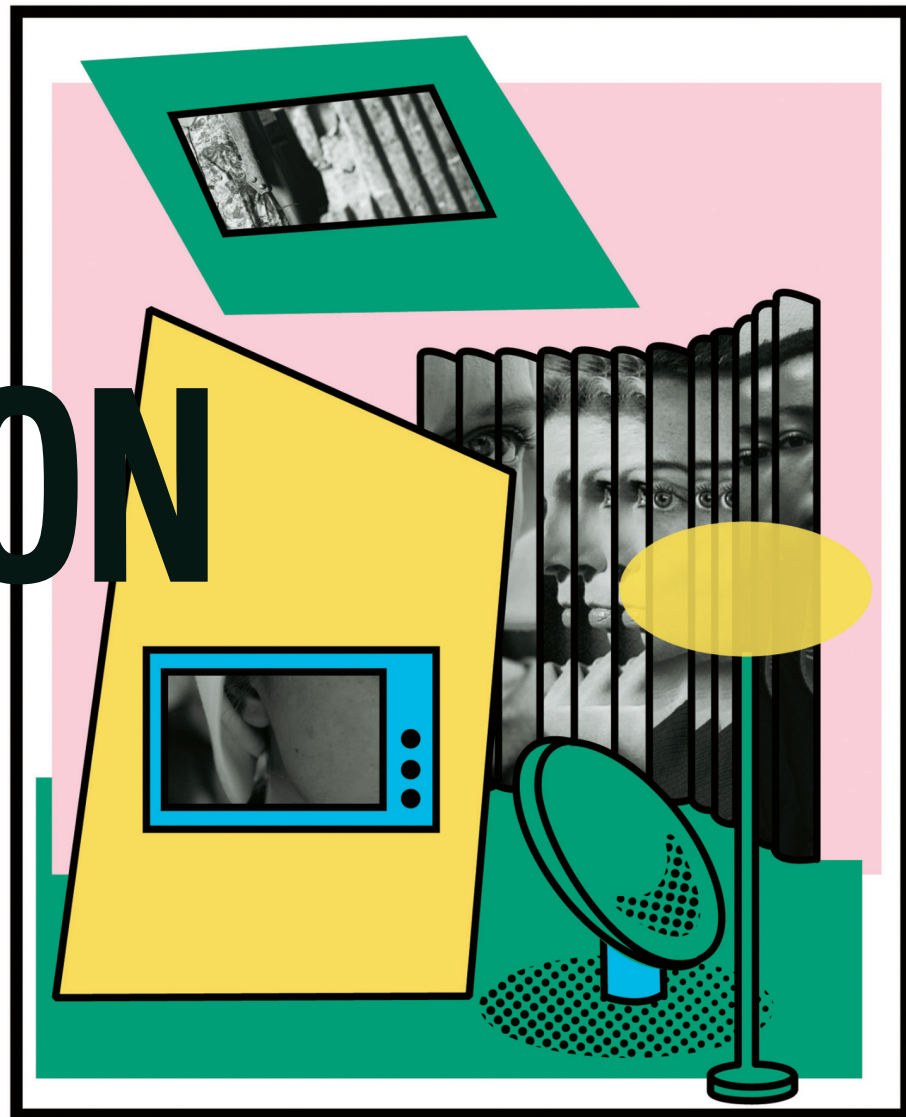


TV NATION

*In this golden age of box sets, downloads and live streams, Style's entertainment editor **Scarlett Russell** no longer knows where her small-screen obsession ends and her actual job begins. Don't feel too sorry for her*

Illustration **Amrita Marino**



AH, SUMMER. As if your schedule weren't hectic enough with barbecues, weddings and writing 16-page handovers before your holidays, there are dozens of hours of television to fit in, too. Stranger Things has just returned, Aisling Bea's buzzed-about new comedy is soon to air, you still haven't caught up with *The Handmaid's Tale* and you're already dedicating an hour an evening to *Love Island*. The amount of television that has to be watched in order to keep up with popular culture is endless. If it's possible, peak TV has hit another peak.

I should know. As Style's entertainment editor, part of my actual job is to watch television, much to the envy (and ridicule) of people around me. "How have you seen all of *Big Little Lies* already?" a follower will DM me after I've tweeted about how brilliant the new series is, ahead of its launch. "Scarlett, what shall I watch?" asks a friend on our WhatsApp group. And "Get a real job", my reporter pal from *The Times* likes to scoff, reminding me that while he's investigating knife crime,

I'm covering the latest series of *Instant Hotel*. I spend evenings attending TV launches and mornings watching previews of new programmes, so I can come into work knowing which show will be the latest cultural talking point, which scriptwriter we should commission, which actress we should put on the cover and which shows I can recommend to my colleagues. I think of myself as a walking, talking, brightly dressed *Radio Times*.

Luckily for me, and you, we're living in a new golden age of television — the streaming era — and we've never been so spoilt for choice. Just over halfway through 2019 and we've already been treated to *Game of Thrones*, *Chernobyl*, *Killing Eve*, *Line of Duty* and *Dead to Me*. Netflix viewers in the UK could consume the service's entire current quota — 32,600 hours of films, television drama and documentaries — nonstop for four years. You can even do TV on social media: Jada Pinkett Smith, along with her daughter, Willow, and mum, Adrienne, host weekly episodes of *Red Table Talk* on Facebook Watch, discussing everything from domestic violence to blended families. It's the thing

that has made me log back in after deactivating my account two years ago. Warner and Disney are both launching streaming platforms, too. Even the ways in which we're watching TV are changing. My morning commute was significantly brightened by downloads of *Glow Up* on my phone's BBC iPlayer app. Many of my thirtysomething friends — hell, even my seventysomething dad — don't even own a television any more. Thanks to downloads and series links, we can watch anywhere, any time, on pretty much any device.

Not only are we spoilt for choice, the quality of shows on offer is better than ever. Julia Roberts, Reese Witherspoon and Meryl Streep have sidestepped illustrious careers in film to work in television. Ten years ago this was unheard of: TV was where actors started out or stagnated, not where worshipped film stars would venture. Why? "British television is no longer just funded by British broadcasters; now we co-produce and that means that budgets are much higher and productions more sophisticated, which attracts talent," Piers Wenger, controller of BBC drama, tells me. TV seems to be where the best writing and meatier female characters are. "Great roles are being developed for women right now. They are not in film, they are in television," said Nicole Kidman, star and executive producer of the awards' darling *Big Little Lies* in an interview last year. It felt genuinely refreshing when Netflix cast Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda, 75 and 77 respectively when the show began, in the title roles of *Grace and Frankie*. And such was the impact of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's writing for *Fleabag* and *Killing Eve* that she has been drafted in to save the ailing *Bond 25* film.

I'm not complaining. Ahead of the last series of *Game of Thrones* in April, I binged 70 hours of the show in two weeks with a handwritten schedule. Don't judge me; I maintain that it is one of the greatest shows in television history, and my boyfriend and I shouting "Ya bastard!" to each other at random intervals never gets old (fans will understand). Of course, I'm not alone: Sky Atlantic's *Riviera* was downloaded 20m times in the UK in 2017, and the first series of *Killing Eve* has been streamed or downloaded more than 53m times.

And despite our love of bingeing on box sets, we still make time for the programmes with a weekly "drop", which means anyone on social media can join in the conversation. Part of the joy of watching the same episode as millions of others is seeing the rants, bantz and memes on Twitter as it plays out. Where else could a

grumpy screenshot of Thomas the Tank Engine reference a storyline in *Bodyguard* and somehow make sense? "Social media plays a huge part because it creates the community experience," says Wenger. "*Killing Eve* has a big public appetite and younger audience so we made it available at once, whereas *Line of Duty* was dropped once a week deliberately, making the audience play investigator and watch together."

Can there be too much of a good thing? Getting up an hour early to squeeze in an episode of *Euphoria* before work, or spending a Saturday in front of my laptop because Gwyneth Paltrow is in *The Politician* is hardly gruelling work, but, my God, it takes up a lot of time. I turned down the offer of dinner with friends recently as it was my only window to finish *The Good Fight*, and spent this summer's first "hottest weekend of the year" glued to my laptop as it coincided with the launch of Ava DuVernay's *When They See Us*. One mate reluctantly started watching *Love Island* purely so she could keep up with our daily group conversation about it on WhatsApp. Then there's the cost. Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hayu, Now TV and the ITV Hub app, plus a TV licence, works out at £43.50 a month. A Sky package starts at £22 a month for the most basic no-frills service and, with the advent of even more streaming services, the costs will only rise.

For now, though, it will take more than this to suppress our appetite. Not only are we being offered the best television for years, but I truly believe in its power to do more than just entertain. How many of us, who otherwise couldn't give a toss about football, congregated around the box during the sweltering heatwave last summer because the World Cup was on? The "surprise act" at Glastonbury wasn't a band, it was David Attenborough, and the crowd went nuts. Television has always had the power to influence, but in times of such political division, some moments seem particularly poignant. BBC1's *Years and Years* was an unsettling preview of what a post-Brexit UK could look like, while Ryan Murphy's *Pose* has shone a powerful light on the trans movement; it made history for having the largest trans cast in series-regular roles. In May, as Alabama imposed the strictest rules against abortion in America, women protested dressed in the now-iconic red capes and white bonnets from *The Handmaid's Tale*. The zeitgeist has spoken. Resistance is futile: our TV obsession isn't going anywhere. Maybe it's time to cancel that holiday? ■

NEW TV TO WATCH OUT FOR

● **Euphoria, Sky Atlantic, August**

Teen drama starring Zendaya about a 17-year-old drug addict and her peers navigating adolescence in the age of sexting. A must-see.

● **The Politician, Netflix, September**

Ryan Murphy's outrageous satire of a high-school student hell-bent on becoming class president sees enviable designer wardrobes and Gwyneth Paltrow back on screen.

● **Catherine the Great, Sky Atlantic, October**

Helen Mirren will play the title role in this big-budget historical romp.

● **RuPaul's Drag Race UK, BBC3, autumn**

The world's leading queen finally brings his cult show to the UK. Slay.

● **The Light (working title), Channel 4, autumn**

Bafta-winning writer Jack Thorne looks at disability and explores the repercussions of a catastrophic disaster that befalls a small community.

