



AWARDS

'Karate Kid,' 'Erin Brockovich': Movies delve deeper into their universes as TV series



Rebecca Breeds as Agent Clarice Starling in “Clarice,” a spinoff of the “Silence of the Lambs” universe. (Brooke Palmer/CBS)

By RANDEE DAWN

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TV these days looks a lot like the movies. And that’s not just because most of us were locked indoors throughout 2020 with our giant TV screens and comfy sofas. A quick flip around the dial reveals that some of the best TV out there these days has deep cinematic roots.

There’s the “Karate Kid” continuation, [“Cobra Kai”](#); the “Silence of the Lambs” universe-expander [“Clarice”](#); and the ever-expanding galaxy of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with shows like [“The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,”](#) to name just a few. And movies like “Erin Brockovich” are inspiring new series (“Rebel”) while at least one director has taken her own film’s concept and created a limited series from it ([“A Teacher”](#)).

Not that there’s anything wrong with that. For example, “Clarice” co-creator/showrunner Jenny Lumet is inquiring about Agent Starling’s doings in the period between “Silence” and “Hannibal,” and thinks it’s well past time for “the woman who actually won” to be heard from.

“We’ve been fed the male perspective for such a long time,” says Lumet. “We never got time to learn the back story of the hero. The stories of these women are singular, untold and amazingly cool. Clarice on TV gives us the time to listen to her, and that’s interesting to me.”

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Ralph Macchio and William Zabka revisit their "Karate Kid" characters in the Netflix spin-off "Cobra Kai." (TINA ROWDEN/NETFLIX/TINA ROWDEN/NETFLIX)

Having room to develop characters, plus slow-burn long-arc storytelling, is a priority for show creators these days. "With only 90 to 110 minutes, you don't have the time to dig deep on characters," says Jon Hurwitz, co-creator (with Josh Heald and Hayden Schlossberg) of "Cobra Kai," which is now in its fourth season after being picked up by Netflix from YouTube for its third. "Now, we have an extremely deep cast of characters and the real estate to do them justice."

Persuaded by a producer to explore what happens after her 2013 independent film “A Teacher,” director-writer Hannah Fidell was delighted to create an independent series that did just that for TV — but this time, in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement.

“I felt there was a fresh lens I could see this stuff through,” says Fidell. “We are as a society talking now about how complicated consent is and victimhood. And the great thing about a limited series is it still scratches the itch of a film — but you can spend more time with the characters than you would in a film.”

For “Falcon” showrunner Malcolm Spellman, the nuanced race discussion he wanted to have within the series could not have worked on a film. “I don’t see any way we could have dug in the way we did with a feature,” he says. “There’s nothing similar about storytelling on film and TV: Movie stories are vertical; TV shows are horizontal. You’re letting the audience into your house, letting them sit at your table and talk about it.”

Such rediscovery of pre-existing characters and story can feel like fan fiction on a pro level, a fact Lumet agrees with. “We are kind of doing that,” she says. “It really gives people [on social media] a sense of ownership — though they’re quick to drop the hammer, with that sense of ownership.”

But just who owns the story — and who gets to tell it — is a fundamental question here. One reason so many films are finding green lights for series is that the owners of the intellectual property want to keep them as revenue generators.

“[Intellectual property] is a great big trend,” says Krista Vernoff, showrunner of “Rebel,” which was inspired by both Erin Brockovich the person and “Erin Brockovich” the movie. “I think it’s rooted in that there are hundreds of shows now, all of these networks, all of these channels. Having a recognizable name is one more thing that makes people tune in.”

Anthony Mackie and Sebastian Stan in “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” (Marvel Studios)

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Easy branding has a downside, though — one that’s already playing out in the world of feature films: A marked drop in fresh new film concepts that could fuel a next generation of TV spinoffs isn’t really there. (Those pointing at the unique stories at this year’s Academy Awards should remember that those titles made it to audiences largely through TV, not big screens, in 2020.)

And Spellman, despite being deep in the heart of the many-tentacled MCU/Disney beast, is concerned about this ouroboros effect. “I don’t think there’s anything stopping people who fund TV from convincing themselves that the very thing that created this movement may turn into what’s happened in movies,” he says. “Originals are going to become harder to make, and that is not good business. Anyone who wants to dismiss this by saying that reboots and remakes have always existed — well, look at the film industry. There’s a price to pay. I do think it’s a problem.”

In the meantime, though, movie fans are enjoying it while it lasts — amid all the available channels and expanding platforms looking for content. And that should work for a while ... so long as the creators remain as big fans of the material as their audiences.

"['Cobra'] is born out of three guys who’ve been friends since we were teenagers, talking about ‘Karate Kid’ ad nauseum,” says Hurwitz. “We could have come up with our own karate thing but that wasn’t the story that was interesting to us. What is interesting is continuing the story of characters that millions are already fans of.”

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