THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE: NERDS AND GEEKS IN AARON SORKIN´S WORKS

LA BÚSQUEDA DE LA EXCELENCIA: 'NERDS' Y 'GEEKS' EN LAS OBRAS DE AARON SORKIN

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Abstract: Aaron Sorkin has been described as "the most literate voice on TV". His undeniable style, whose overwhelming influence is more relevant today than ever in the way series are written is specially shown in his characters, the vehicle for his long sentences and never-ending monologues, owners of his funny, witty, high culture and popular references. Taking as a motto the idea that being smart is better than being stupid, and either they are fictional or taken from the real world, they are far away from average people. It's not only that every other character scripted by Sorkin talks like a Harvard graduated; in his personal pursuit for excellence, he has always reserved a place of importance for roles that have been traditionally a target of mockery in fiction: the geeks and the nerds. In Sorkin ideal reality, nobody is left out of normality because they're too clever.

We will try to analyze how the works of Sorkin, from his first Broadway hit (*A Few Good Men*) to his latest TV show (*The Newsroom*) he establishes a reverse high school dynamic in which the know-it-all rules the world (in *The West Wing*, that means literally). This roots back to some pieces of fiction from the eighties and spreads all over Sorkin oeuvre, his plays, his movies, and specially his television series. And it is also in television where this issue has the definitive impact. Lately we've come to accept as normal that the leading roles of a sitcom might be embodied by scientists that are also *Star Trek* aficionados or that people dealing with Washington politics should be especially talkative. And it is largely thanks to the inheritance of Aaron Sorkin that we've come to these standards. There are very few writers with such a clear voice, such a distinctive stamp and such a wide range. **Keywords:** Art; Television; Series; Sorkin; Screenwriting.

Resumen: Se ha descrito a Aaron Sorkin como "la voz más letrada de la TV". Su innegable estilo, cuya abrumadora influencia es hoy más relevante que nunca, se muestra especialmente en sus personajes, que son el vehículo para sus largas frases y monólogos sin fin, que poseen gracia e ingenio y que usan abundantes referencias de alta cultura y cultura popular. Tomando como lema la idea de que ser inteligente es mejor que ser estúpido y, tanto si son de ficción o inspirados en personal reales, todos ellos están muy alejados de la gente común. No es sólo que cualquier personaje creado por Sorkin hable como un graduado de Harvard; además, en su personal búsqueda de la excelencia, siempre ha reservado un lugar destacado a personajes que tradicionalmente en la ficción han sido objeto de mofa: los *geeks* y los *nerds*. En el mundo ideal de Sorkin no se rechaza a nadie por ser demasiado inteligente. Vamos a tratar de analizar cómo las obras de Sorkin, desde su primer éxito en Broadway (A *Few Good Men*) hasta su más reciente serie de televisión (*The Newsroom*), establecen una dinámica opuesta a la de los adolescentes en el instituto; una en la que el sabelotodo gobierna el mundo (en *The West Wing* es así literalmente). Esto se remonta a algunas piezas de ficción de los años ochenta y se extiende sobre el conjunto de la obra de Sorkin, sus piezas de teatro, sus películas, y especialmente sus series de televisión. Y es también en la televisión donde este tema alcanza un impacto definitivo. Últimamente hemos llegado a aceptar como normal que los papeles principales de una *sitcom* puedan ser encarnados por científicos que también son aficionados a *Star Trek* o que las personas que se ocupan de la política en Washington sean especialmente locuaces. Y es en gran medida gracias al legado de Aaron Sorkin por lo que hemos llegado a estos estándares. Hay muy pocos escritores con una voz tan clara, con una impronta tan distintiva y con un alcance tan amplio. **Palabras clave:** arte; televisión; series; Sorkin; escritura de guiones.

1. The Know-It-All Natural Habitat

Nerds and geeks have traditionally been treated in fiction as a comic relief, especially on TV, where we find a vast spectrum of personalities and characters, mostly in comedies, but also in dramas. Either they are sidekicks or the leading role, if that person is a know-it-all or a fan of a particular discipline, they are the one we will be most surely laughing at. Not the one saying the punchline but the subject of it. Diane Chambers in *Cheers* (NBC, 1982- 1993); Ross Geller in *Friends* (NBC, 1994- 2004); Andrea Zuckerman in *Beverly Hills*, 90210 (FOX, 1990- 2000); Steve Urkel in *Family Matters* (ABC, 1989–1997 and CBS 1997–1998); John "The Biscuit" Cage in *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997, 2002), are only a pocket full of names that exemplify the diversity in prominence, location and items a nerdy or geeky character might show in the past thirty five years of

television. *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-Present), *The IT Crowd* (Channel 4, 2006-2013) or *Community* (NBC, 2009-2014 and YAHOO! Screen 2014-2015) have recently epitomized the idea that geeks and nerds have, indeed, a never ending laughable quality. Of course there are exceptions. Lisa Simpson in *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989-Present), for instance; she might be the most remarkable nerd shielded from the general mockery these characters have so often been submitted to. And there is also a safe zone in television, a natural habitat for characters that are clever and proud to be so, where they are not derided but appreciated most that any other: Aaron Sorkin's world of fiction.

Brought up in a Jewish open minded family in New York, Aaron Sorkin professes a reverential admiration for the standards set by his closest relatives. His mother was a teacher, his father was a copyright lawyer and a World War II veteran, and his paternal grandfather was a syndicalist. And it is precisely the core of these professional activities, knowledge, rules, the Army and politics, what is going to be also the center of the plot in mostly every other Sorkin's script. And anyone should approach Aaron Sorkin's work taking into consideration all these many fronts, many items that have been permanent in his stories. His devotion to politics for once: he is a convinced and committed Democrat. Also, his natural inclination to nose around the backstage of everything, from the Army to the White House, the CIA to a television broadcast. He is drawn to what happens behind a big scene, what is hidden to the general public, maybe a trace back to his early years as an actor, which was his first professional call (as it was coincidentally for contemporary fellow writer, Matthew Weiner). He graduated from the University of Syracuse and went back to New York to try and find a job in the theatre. He was completely unsuccessful (although he sometimes have appeared in the films he writes), and he started writing plays instead. It was through the writing that he finally stopped feeling out of place (de Jonge, 2001): "[…] I enter the world through what I write. I grew up believing, and continue to believe, that I am a screw-up, that growing up with my family and friends, I had nothing to offer in any conversation. But when I started writing, suddenly there was something that I brought to the party that was at a high-enough level".

His talent soon peaked and with just couple of librettos (*Removing All Doubt,* and *Hidden in This Picture,* which became *Making Movies*) he became a Broadway hip writer by the end of the nineteen eighties, well know enough to have his following play *A Few Good Men* sold to make a movie before it premiered on stage in 1989 (*A Few Good Men.* Rob Reiner, 1992). The "Sorkin sound" lured everyone who listen; the "lightning-quick, repetitive, emotionally supercharged" but also "culturally allusive banter that tornadoes into a spiral of stagey one-upmanship" (Crouch, 2012). This is a guy who's interested in smarts and in

characters that are anything but coy when it comes to intellectual display. They all speak with his undeniable style, in his distinctive voice, "the rapid-fire word-play, the whirling crosstalk among characters, the soaring oratory that sometimes accompanies conversations about totally banal subject matters" (Adalian, 2002). That singular "Sorkin sound" is a tailor-made vehicle for his characters to express who they are, i.e., a bunch of smartasses. Either they are true or fictional, Sorkin's men and women are really away from normality. And this is not just because they are not your regular nine to five employee. Quoting the man himself, Sorkin have stated that when building a character, he doesn't pay attention to who the characters are but what they want. "I think I know what 'character development' means, but I don't really," he says. "I'm interested in intention and obstacle. I don't like to tell an audience who a character is; I want to show an audience what a character wants" (Adalian, 2002).

Well they always aim high: the President of the United States, TV anchors, CIA agents, artists, and they all talk like Harvard scholars. They are people with great aspirations. All of them are the best at what they are, either they want it or not. Sometimes, this excellence comes as a burden and the journey of the main character is to get to accept their true nature. His first leading man, Daniel Kaffee the main character in *A Few Good Men* (Reiner, 1992), is a good example.

His usual leading roles are occupied by standard "capraesque" heros, funny and good looking, intelligent enough not to show off their well-hidden integrity, ready for a chance to redeem their frivolities with an idealistic adventure, always with a witty and self-deprecating remark. Winners even when they lose. And this is something that also separates Sorkin from the key points that define the leading roles in nowadays fiction, where the antihero is the center of the story almost every time. As Thomas Schlamme, (a long term Sorkin collaborator) stated, "if Frank Capra were making movies now, he would have to endure the same con-descending assumptions that exploring the darkness in people is better art than celebrating the good in them" (De Jonge, 2001).

But along with this born-to-be leaders, Sorkin always has had a place for those secondary characters that since the mid-80's of the xx Century, have been traditionally a target of mockery in fiction: the geeks and the nerds. According to Wikipedia, the recognizable traces of a geek are: a person obsessed with intellec-tual pursuits for their own sake; a person who is interested in technology, espe-cially computing and new media; a person who relates academic subjects to the real world outside of academic studies; a person who has chosen concentration rather than conformity. And the definition for the nerds is very similar, both terms are often mistaken for one another. I partly agree with Reid Goldsborough in his specification in the article 'Are you a nerd or a geek?': "The best distinction I've

heard is that the word nerd connotes social awkwardness, while geek conveys specialized expertise and devotion. The former is negative, the latter positive" (Goldsborough, 2016).

I would add that "social awkwardness" would be common to both geeks and nerds when relating to the general population, but while the geek has a joyful attitude towards his particularities and tends to be gregarious (to a particular herd), the nerd is often overwhelmed by them and tends to isolation. Also geeks have a natural tendency to science fiction and technology while nerds are mostly identified with the traditional good student.

Geek can also be described using the comparison Paul Feig and Judd Apatow established in the classic *Freaks and Geeks* (NBC, 1999-2000). Freaks are yet another outcast social circle rooted in high school years with no intellectual ambition whatsoever. They are proud to be proscribed; freaks truly don't care about what other people think, while geeks have their own group but long for general acceptance. They want the others to understand that what they are interested in is fun, they don't give up in trying setting the bar higher. Exactly what Sorkin has tried all through his career: "Yet, from its first episode to its last, *Sports Night* spent most of its time arguing about just how artistically and intellectually ambitious a television show can be (this was just before the HBO revolution)" (Crouch, 2012).

Both geeks and nerds often are overly intellectual individuals, people considered outside the mainstream because they are too smart. All of them have been outcasts since high school and, nevertheless, will find their way in the grown up world of Aaron Sorkin. He would build up a fictional environment where mediocrity is the enemy. Even evil is acceptable in Sorkin's world when it comes with intelligence, wit or both. Why does Will McAvoy, the television anchor in *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-2014), despise The Tea Party doctrine when he is a convinced Republican himself? Not because they are extremely conservative, but because they are narrow minded, the "American Taliban" he calls them in 'The Greater Fool' (The Newsroom, season 1, episode 10).

2. The Nerd As Jiminy Cricket

A Few Good Men (Reiner, 1992) is a story of a court martial, a trial in the Army loosely based in a true case Sorkin's sister Deborah, an occasional military lawyer, was once involved in. Corporal Dawson and Private Downey are two obtuse marines accused of killing a platoon fellow member when they really were taking orders from a superior officer. Their defense is taken care by a very charming and very lazy lawyer who is not particularly interested in spending too much time researching, but wants to have fun and get the job done as soon as

possible. The funny, attractive, joyful and bright rascal is called Daniel Kaffee and it was played by, already then, mega star Tom Cruise. Unfortunately for Kafee, his co-counselor is a nerd by the book. Joanne Galloway, part played by Demi Moore, will force Daniel to take responsibility. Joanne is a nerd who always had the homework done on time. Kaffee is bright without effort but he insists in being average, he doesn't want to be exceptional. Joanne admires his natural gift, the fabulous things he can do that takes her so much effort. She pushes him to do the right thing, to play at the top of his game.

This references of social status mirrored in high school life that is a constant in Sorkin's stories gets magnified in his next screenplay, *Malice* (Becker, 1993) a "mannerist noir", as Robert F. Gross described (2005: 19), inspired by *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *Witness for the Prosecution* (Wilder, 1957) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1946). Although *Malice* is the less 'sorkinian' of all his works since it is not a personal project but an assignment, it reckons a huge amount of Sorkin's key points. It is a noir and also a thriller, focused on murder, mystery and treason. A college dean, Andy Safian, played by Bill Pullman, has an average boring life being married to a primary school teacher, Tracy, played by Nicole Kidman. Until a super sexy, super skilled surgeon, Jed Hill, played by then heartthrob Alec Baldwin, appear in their life. Jed is not only adored by every other nurse but also spreads his allure upon Andy (in a very hetero-nineties way). So Andy, this intellectual worker, a used-to-be-nerd, wants to befriend, to be close to the most popular kid in school. In this dark tale, Andy might be deceived and manipulated, but he is never a moron, and he is, definitely, the moral compass of the story.

You don't get to see many underage people in Aaron Sorkin universe, so this teen dynamic gets to be used as accepted adult behavior. *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995) is the first time Aaron Sorkin openly declares his likes for academics and for the brains. This romantic comedy, which served as a backdoor pilot for *The West Wing,* is a milestone in Sorkin's work. He makes the statement: being smart is better that being stupid, in that many words. Widower President of the United States, Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) says so to his teenager First Daughter, Lucy (Shawna Waldron). When he falls in love with an environmental lobbyist, Sydney Wade (Annette Bening), the most powerful guy on Earth feels insecure and takes dating advice from an over-mature Lucy (Shawna Waldron). In exchange, the proud father insists his nerdy daughter (she's a trombonist) she might be even nerdier (he encourages her to become a History aficionado).

3. The Vindication of the Geek: the Reversed John Hughes Movie

Most of this geeks and nerds are supporting characters, but he's written, nevertheless, the definitive geek protagonist, a very much complex character, in *The Social Network*. Mark Zuckerberg, was a young student at Harvard, smart way above average. He had computer skills that would have made him head of IT in any major company at the age of eighteen. But all he wanted was to be popular. This is the first time Aaron Sorkin takes the quintessence of the geek and turns it into his main character. He described Zuckerberg as an anti-hero for most part of the film and a tragic hero for the last part, a hero that must face the consequences of his acts. Be as it may, *The Social Network*, as David Denby brilliantly described, is built around a "melancholy paradox" (Denby, 2010), one that pushes beyond simplicities and portraits Zuckerberg as many-sided and ambiguous.

This tale of a Harvard dropout becoming the more powerful nowadays entrepreneur, *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010) was once called by his director, David Fincher, "the Citizen Kane of John Hughes movies". This is not (although it could might as well be) an arrogant display of Fincher, but in fact an accurate description of this film, which is the perfect example of the triumph of the most awkward guy in high school. Actually, Mark Zuckerberg (the character in the film, not the actual Facebook mogul), is a bitter grown up version of Brian Johnson, the timid, prudish nerd portrayed by Anthony Michael Hall in *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985).

The transition of the geek from a laughable bit to the oracle of the story is clear in *Sports Night*, a half hour series about a New York based sports program Sorkin wrote for NBC in 1998. The main characters are the people that make this program, co-anchors Dan Rydell (Josh Charles) and Casey McCall (Peter Krause), producer Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman), and the rest of the production team. All of them are really good at their jobs, great professionals that control every aspect of their field: sports. They are really smart and not shy of showing it. Not only their knowledge of the subject goes beyond their job description, they also have a witty remark and the appropriate reference always ready on the lips. They might as well be considered geeks by the general population, because they know everything there is to know about sports. But they have their own private geek in the mix, the geekiest guy of all, Jeremy Goodwin played by Joshua Malina. He is a guy with an encyclopedic knowledge on sports, the wisest among the wisest. They turn to him for information with admiration and respect. He is never portrayed as ridiculous or diminished. He belongs to a group of special individuals, all of them with a common interest, but also with genuine skills that should be recognized and saluted. As it also happens with nerdy economist,

statistics genius, turned out to be baseball guru, Peter Berg (Jonah Hill) in *Moneyball* (Miller, 2011), the hero, Billy Beane (Brad Pitt) lets him know that they share a bond and that his skills are needed: "I'm the first person in baseball who's ever talked to you this long, right?", and that he respect his singular view and approach to this discipline they both love. He shouldn't be caged, he should share his knowledge: "I'm not about to beat you up, say what you've always wanted to say". This is the classically handsome quarterback addressing the overweight kid without condescendence, treating him as an equal for the first time: "Peter, don't apologize for what you believe", what means, don't apologize for being smart.

The social shortcomings of geeks and nerds are not overlooked in Sorkin universe, but they are used to build part of the charm of their personalities. Nearly every time they look back and talk about their insecurities at a young age, it is always with a mixture of nostalgia and self-deprecation, as Cal Shanley (Timothy Busfield), Technical Director of Studio 60 in *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006) expresses: "I´m a real World War II buff, I used to set up scenes with toy soldiers that I used to paint myself, and then I'd shoot it in super-8, which would help explain why I didn't kiss a girl until I was 19", 'The Wrap Party' (*Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, season 1, episode 6).

So, Sorkin systematically avoids making fun of the geek or the nerd for his knowledge. Sometimes that "Big Bang Theory quirkiness" finds its way as a running gag, like *The Newsroom* junior writer Neal Sampat´s obsession with Bigfoot, but it doesn't get beyond the anecdote and very few individuals get the amount of respect Neal has from every other character. When mockery tried to make its way into *Sports Night*, the attempt was also always stopped. Jeremy is not treated as a funny sidekick but a grownup whose insecurities must be attended, also when it comes to lovemaking. This is particularly strong in 'The Head Coach, Dinner and the Morning Mail' (*Sports Night*, season 1, episode 6), when he obsesses with the idea of taking Nathalie (Sabrina Lloyd), his love interest, to a good restaurant, and he expresses how far he is from the stereotype of a "strong" man: "I'm not a big man (…) I can't beat people up and I don't carry a gun, I'm a research analyst with a degree in Applied Mathematics (…) What does she need?".

We find the most circumspect nerd Sorkin has ever written in *Charlie Wilson's War* (Nichols, 2007) and he is used for a joke, but this time is not on him but on the main character. The film leading man is, once again, a charming and cynical guy that refuses to be a hero. Congressman Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks), mastermind of the USA 80's intervention in Afghanistan, needs an expert in strategic weapons and Secret Service agent Gust Avrakotos, played by Philip

Seymour Hoffman, takes him to a park where a group a people is playing chess: "You see the nerdy-looking kid in the white shirt playing against the four guys at once?" Avrakotos says, "Which one of the guys do you think is a strategic weapons expert with the CIA? That was a trick question, Charlie. It's the nerdy-looking kid in the white shirt. All right, no reason this can't be fun, you know".

4. A Little Bit Too Much

–Tom: This is pure Strindberg.
–Matt: August Strindberg?
–Tom: This is right out of "The Father", scariest play I've ever read.
–Matt: How did we move from baseball to August Strindberg?

'The West Coast Delay' (*Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, (2006), season 1 episode 4).

After *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999- 2006), Sorkin's following TV program was *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006). It's about a TV sketch show and it's what Sorkin basically used as an exorcism for his demons as addict to work and drugs. The two main characters, executive producers Matt Albie (Matthew Perry) and Danny Tripp (Bradley Whitford), are based in Sorkin himself and his long-time collaborator, director Thomas Schlamme. In this series, we find the TV geek embodied by mostly everyone that works in the TV show Studio 60. Sure, every Sorkin character is opinionated, but comedians quoting Swedish nineteenth-century dramaturgs in network television were a little bit too much for the average viewer.

During 'The Wrap Party' (*Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* season 1 episode 6), comedian Tom Jeter's parents from Columbus (Ohio) are visiting the studio. They are the kind of people that watch TV just for the fun of it and also to avoid thinking about their other son, who's serving in Iraq. This situation is as a symbolic catharsis: the average viewer of a network series confronts the TV geek (that here is also a comedian, a TV worker). Tom tries to explain to his parents the importance of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first", a classic comedy routine that made the transition from radio to TV. Tom is passionate about this and gets frustrated when his parents simply do not care. They don't get it and, although Sorkin does not picture them as "bad", they're certainly displayed as narrow-minded, a pair of hillbillies.

Study 60 was a failure that only lasted for one season. Most of the people felt like Tom's parents, they thought they were taken for stupid. It was a great program but it was too many long phrases, way too many intellectual references, too

much behind the scenes for most of the people. It was too geeky, so the geek was left alone. Again.

5. The Nerd Should Rule the World

The West Wing premiered in the United States in October 1999. One year later, George W. Bush got elected President. The irony, as Sorkin likes to point out, is that during the campaign Al Gore, former Vice President with Clinton and Democratic candidate, had to play dumb in order to be appealing. In order to be likeable. In order to be accepted. *The West Wing* (NBC,1999-2006), Aaron Sorkin TV masterpiece, takes place in a White House headed by Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen), a PhD, Ivy League Doctorate, Nobel Laureate in Economics, who speaks four languages and likes to show off how much of a Bible geek he is. If ever a nerd there was. The senior staff of that White House, the men and women who work side by side with the President, are the most intellectually brilliant dedicated people ever. Nerdiness and geekiness seems like a job requirement in Bartlett administration.

In 'The Two Bartlets' (*The West Wing*, season 3 episode 13), the President is running for a second term and Toby Ziegler, the White House's Communications Director played by Richard Shiff, has gone to take a look to the Republican candidate President Bartlet is going to be running opposite to in the upcoming election. The Republican candidate is a simple man, a man "from the people", a "Bush" type of guy. The election "is between educated and masculine; or Eastern academic elite and plain spoken". Toby is worried the President might want to pretend he's not as intelligent as he is just because people might like him better. Bartlet is a successful nerd, he is the President, for crying out loud, but sometimes, he is again that smart kid who is afraid of being rejected because he is too smart. Toby suggesting the President should not hide his brains is Sorkin stating that the world would be better with a Nobel Prize in the White House.

Aaron Sorkin always has been grateful to his teachers for failing him. He looks up to knowledge and advocates for the brains, and willingly gives the top of the chain to the smarter guy, one that loves Latin quotes and never picks the easy way but the right one. As Sorkin said to his eleven year-old daughter in his acceptance speech for his 2011 Golden Globe Award, "«elite» is not a bad word is an aspirational one". There's nothing wrong with being the best at what you are.

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