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**CONSUMING THE PAST:
TELEVISION AND THE POPULAR AMERICAN
HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

By

Jennifer L. Stevens

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

CONSUMING THE PAST: TELEVISION AND THE POPULAR AMERICAN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

By

Jennifer L. Stevens

This dissertation explores the shape and content of the American popular historical consciousness and how Americans think about history and the past, and the meaning and use that it has for them. The main subject of inquiry is the mediated versions of history that are disseminated through television, but this inquiry takes place within a larger consideration of the popular historical cultural environment in the United States today.

While professional historians have become increasingly self-conscious about their own encounters with the past and how those encounters are turned into “history,” outside the academy Americans are much less aware of or articulate about historical thinking and their connections to the past. For scholars of American society and culture, it is important to understand how Americans think of their history and the meaning and use that it has for them. It is important, not only because it is an integral part of the larger cultural landscape, something that surrounds us all the time, but also because it provides context for any study of American culture or American history. The particular circumstances of the American past—our ideological foundation, our national birth in rebellion against tradition, our existence as an immigrant nation where nearly everyone is from somewhere else and, in becoming American, breaks with the past—gives Americans an almost hostile relationship with the past. Many commentators have also observed that in our contemporary fast-paced, rootless society many Americans seem to seek a sense of “rootedness” in the present by becoming preoccupied with and enamored of connections to the past. These seemingly contradictory reactions, wishing to ignore or escape history while at the

same time expressing or acting out an affinity for it, provide a fascinating framework within which to consider the American historical consciousness, its shape and content, its characteristic features, its dynamic, and its popular practices.

This study also includes an exploration of terms and concepts connected to understanding popular conceptions of history, including nostalgia, heritage and tradition. It also suggests new terminology to facilitate an understanding of how Americans outside the academy think of and use American history.

Exploring both the framework, theoretical and practical, and the popular American historical consciousness itself, this study draws on history and memory scholars such as Michael Wallace, Michael Kammen and David Blight, and popular culture scholars like Janice Radway and John Fiske, to cross disciplinary boundaries and situate popular American conceptions of history into a historical and cultural framework.

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As I contemplate the completion of this task that has been so long in the making, it occurs to me that I will never be able to thank all of the people who have been so helpful and supportive of me as I have worked on this project. Truth be told, I am sure that if I tried I would surely forget to mention many who, in one way or another, have inspired me and influenced my thinking on this subject. I hope that along the way I have expressed my gratitude and appreciation to them personally, and that they know how much they have meant. There are a few people, however, that I do want to single out to recognize and thank in this more public way, for without them, I would surely not be writing these words today.

When I think back on the academic mentors that have helped me to reach this place, I realize that I have to go back a great many years. Though I had many wonderful teachers during my years in the Alma, Michigan public school system, there is one in particular whose impact on me and my academic career has been particularly profound. Mrs. Barbara Kell was my teacher for three years at Alma High School. Through her English classes I learned to love not only literature and writing but also to enjoy critical analysis and academic debate. Her humanities course during my senior year gave me my first opportunity to extend the themes and ideas of the classroom into the larger cultural environment, something I have never stopped doing. After giving me the tools to understand and appreciate Shakespeare and Bradbury, to name just a few, she allowed me my first foray into popular culture scholarship as I explored such themes as courtly love in the contemporary music of rock groups like The Police. I can still remember the details of the assignment today, and though I don't often think on it these days, I know that it opened a door for me that I can't imagine having missed.

At Carleton College I encountered many more wonderful teachers, and friends and classmates who challenged and supported me as I began to flex my academic muscles. But, once again, it is one particular person who stands out as especially influential. Professor Diethelm Prowe was one of the most challenging and most supportive teachers I have ever had. From the first introductory history class that I took from him in my freshman year, to his rigorous senior seminar that I struggled through in my last year, he made me stretch my thinking and sharpen my writing and I am forever grateful to him. But it was his support as I proposed and completed my senior thesis that I am most thankful for. Most of my teachers in the history department at Carleton were not too keen on my intention to use popular film as my primary resource for exploring the role of women on the World War II homefront, but Dr. Prowe gave me the support I needed to see it through. It was in his class, too, that I got my first taste of college teaching as he allowed me the opportunity to substitute for him one day and present my research to his class as a lecture. Both the opportunity to engage in the academic melding of popular culture and historical scholarship, and the support he offered as I was doing it were extremely valuable for me, and I can't imagine ever reaching this point without them.

Going back to school after a number of years absence, I finally found myself in a program that not only allowed popular culture scholarship but insisted upon it. My years in the master's program in popular culture at Bowling Green State University solidified my interest in popular culture as a subject for academic inquiry. It seems nearly everyone I met there had an influence on my thinking. But once again, I had one particular mentor who helped me take my general interest in history and popular culture and channel it into a more focused and productive area of research. Dr. Christopher Geist was not only a teacher but also a colleague, who shared his own research and the ideas behind it and gave me the chance to do the same. Though my research interests have

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INTRODUCTION

In Search of the Popular American Historical Consciousness

The popular American historical consciousness is an elusive phenomenon and concept. While professional historians have become increasingly self-conscious about their own encounters with the past and how they are turned into “history,” outside the academy Americans are much less aware of or articulate about historical thinking and their connections to the past. The particular circumstances of the American past—our ideological foundation, our national birth in rebellion against tradition, our existence as an immigrant nation where nearly everyone is from somewhere else and, in becoming American, breaks with the past—gives Americans an interesting relationship to the past. Hell bent on revealing the future as quickly as possible, we often thumb our noses at tradition and lack the reverence for the past that is more readily seen in other countries. And yet, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we have seen a distinct rise in the casual interest in history demonstrated by the American public. Increased participation in historically based leisure activities such as genealogy, antique collecting and heritage tourism reflect a certain interest in the past. Many commentators have also observed that in our contemporary fast-paced and rootless society many Americans seem to seek a sense of “rootedness” in the present by becoming preoccupied with and enamored of connections to the past.¹ In this same period,

¹ See, for example, William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press,

however, cultural critics and scholars alike have bemoaned the lack of historical knowledge and understanding that Americans seem to have regarding their national history. The American obsession with the new and improved seems to many to have erased our knowledge of American History, if not our interest in the American past.

It would seem that it is not that Americans are uninterested in their history, but that the history that they are interested in and the way they understand may simply be different than the history that scholars and cultural critics prefer. History as it is taught in the classroom and analyzed in academic monographs may fail to engage many Americans, but there is clearly a popular interest in it. It is not that there is not a popular American historical consciousness as some have suggested. There clearly is a popular understanding of and engagement with the past. What seems equally as clear, though, is that the popular conception of the American past is not necessarily in sync with the more critical, scholarly understanding of it. And while this may be as critical a crisis, it is an important distinction. For scholars of American history, society and culture, it is important to understand how Americans think of their history and the meaning and use that it has for them. It is important, not only because it is an integral part of the larger cultural landscape, something that surrounds us all the time, but also because it provides context for any study of American culture or American history.

The relationship between Americans and their history has been a complex one from the very beginning. Unlike many other nations that are rooted in their past, the United States is rooted in its ideology. Our devotion to such ideals as freedom, equality and success most ostensibly drives our culture, and our expectations for ourselves. Our national origin as rebellious colonies determined to break away from the ties of the past and build a nation based on ideas instead of

1999), and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

historical realities gave us an almost anti-historical foundation. Our earliest sense of identity was built on a rejection of the past and all the ties that went along with it. As a nation we were all about what was new, and set out to establish ourselves as counter to everything that had come before. Our penchant for the new and revolutionary has come to be our most recognizable characteristic, and one that as a nation we take great pride in. Americans pride themselves on being on the cutting edge, breaking through barriers and finding the new and better way to do something. And in fact that is a reputation we have come to have throughout the world as well. All of these traits stand in direct conflict to the past and traditional modes of behavior. It has often seemed as though Americans would prefer to be without any ties to the past. But a nation cannot exist without a sense of its past, and as our country ages, our history has become more and more a valued asset taking its place alongside those valued ideas. It is a complicated circumstance, though, because as we strive ever forward, we do not wish to be slowed down by our past, yet we do want to keep it around as a reminder of where we have been and how far we have come.

Seeking to Define the Nature of the Popular American Historical Consciousness

Historian Michael Wallace has noted about the American people that we “prefer the present.” We live in the moment, always looking toward the future as we seem to believe it is the best place to be. But this preference for the here and now is “deeply rooted in our history and economy.”² In a way, we must look to our history as a reminder of how we have never been bound by it. This is a very complex notion, but one that begins to get at the kind of relationship that Americans have with History. It is not that we deny having a past, or that we feel that the accomplishments of the past are not significant and worth acknowledging, but it is not how we

² Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), ix.

prefer to orient ourselves, preferring a future-oriented outlook instead. Take for example the great value we place on freedom in our culture. Not having ties to history, of course, only increases that feeling of freedom, an appealing prospect for Americans, and yet it isn't possible, of course, to free oneself from time. Wallace suggests the term "historicidal" for a culture that encourages such "fantasies, not because it extinguishes some sense of history but because it promotes "an ahistorical temper," obscures "the ways the past continues to shape the present," and leaves "us marooned in the now, adrift on the temporal surface of things."³ Is the United States, then, a historicidal culture, or do we merely orient ourselves to the past differently than other cultures? This is a difficult question to answer, but one that scholars are devoting greater consideration to recently.

Americans do demonstrate an interest in their past from time to time, and at no time has this been more true than in recent decades. Even Wallace recognizes that "ahistoricism" is not the only relationship that Americans have with their history. There is a significant interest for many Americans in specific aspects of history, often personal in nature. Wallace also acknowledges our recent interest in things historical, from museums and memorials to historically based television shows and movies about time travel. He contends, however, that this interest is not necessarily in opposition to an ahistorical consciousness. He says, "We rummage around in them for pleasure and profit, we appropriate them, we consume them, but we do not think it crucial to understand them in order to understand ourselves. We do not focus on the ligaments connecting then and now, nor acknowledge the past's ongoing constitutive power in the present."⁴ So what does that mean in terms of our relationship to history? Must we use it for purely historical reasons in order to have a significant relationship to it, or is its existence in our lives, regardless of the purpose behind it,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wallace, x.

enough to constitute a meaningful presence in our lives? Most Americans would probably say that the presence alone is significant, though many historians would probably disagree.

Alternatively, David Glassberg has suggested several reasons for the increase in “historical activity” in recent years that really have very little to do with any real affinity for History itself. The first is the growing number of groups with the economic and political wherewithal to celebrate their pasts and share them with the larger society. Monuments and historic sites that recognize the experiences of women and specific racial and ethnic groups are becoming more prevalent, for example. While this may reflect a certain amount of pride in a distinctive past, it could also be seen as an act of asserting power, taking advantage of an opportunity to be recognized and acknowledged that was previously unavailable.⁵

Another explanation that Glassberg offers is the recognition by communities of all sizes that the creation and/or preservation of historic sites can provide for a tourism base that is beneficial for the local economy. Of course, this is really a chicken and egg question. Is this an impulse responding to a perceived interest on the part of Americans to patronize historically significant sites, or are Americans visiting more historic sites because they are more available to visit? The answer to this is unclear, but it suggests the possibility that at least some of our perceived affinity for things historical is driven by economics and not by history.

This same kind of logic could apply to the increase in the amount of history being presented on television and in the movies. This has been a trend that has been considered by both historians and popular culture scholars. In particular, television has been identified as the chief purveyor of

⁵ David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 207.

history in our culture today by a number of scholars.⁶ History has come to be “big business” for television today, meaning that we are seeing more of it and it is receiving a lot of attention from producers and advertisers alike. Since the early 1970s, there has hardly been a television season that has not included a number of historically based prime time series, and the ever growing collection of cable channels includes several history specialty networks, as well as many other channels that include a significant percentage of historical programming, in the form of documentaries, narrative series and series reruns. Since the phenomenal success of *Roots* in the late 1970s, historical miniseries have also been a consistent presence on television, from the Civil War era blockbuster *North and South*, broadcast in the late 1980s, to Stephen Spielberg’s most recent production for television, *Into the West*. Scholars also see television’s characteristics as a medium, for example its affinity for close-ups, its existence as a part of our homes and our intimate connections to it, as particularly well suited to drawing viewers into the history that unfolds on the small screen, giving it the power to have a significant impact on its audience. The ability of television shows “to embody current concerns and priorities with the stories it telecasts about the past”⁷ is also appealing to both audiences and producers, who recognize a value in considering the past through a contemporary filter that is meaningful to them, though it is of great concern to many historians who reject the notion of interpreting the past in light of a contemporary mindset. So too is the idea that the media is creating history, or at the very least interpreting it, though they may not have the knowledge necessary to accurately do so, nor the motivation to either. The power of the media in our culture today cannot be overestimated, and its place in mediating our relationship with our past is significant.

⁶ See, for example, Gary R. Edgerton, “Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, eds. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1-16.

⁷ Edgerton, 3.

Whatever the motives for creating mediated history, the results do have an effect on the audience and their connection to the past. Scholarship acknowledging these effects documents that whether or not the history people get through the media is “pure” or “accurate,” it is meaningful to them and it does become a part of their understanding of the past. Does that mean that our culture is hostile to History, or does it mean that there is, perhaps, more than one kind of history available to be had? Once again, the answer to this question may depend on who is asked, history professionals or “regular folks.”

In his book by the same name, David Glassberg identifies what he calls a “sense of history” that is present in our hearts and minds. He describes it as “a perspective on the past at the core of who [we] are and the people and places [we] care about” that “reflects the intersection of the intimate and the historical...”⁸ Different from the understanding that History professionals have of their subject as an entity to be interpreted based on prevailing levels of evidence and theory, those outside the academy consistently merge personal and public events to form an understanding of the past that creates and reinforces their sense of who they are and where they fit into the world. And while professional historians acknowledge the ever changing understanding that must accompany any sort of historical inquiry, for everyone else the past remains relatively constant.⁹ In an attempt to find “a sense of locatedness and belonging”¹⁰ we use the History we encounter in our lives, and this includes *all* the history we encounter, from celebrated historical monographs to historically based television dramas, to help us make sense of who we are and where we are going. And while it may not be the kind of relationship with history that many professional historians would like us to have, it is in fact an embracing of the past, and it is in keeping with the personal connection to the building of their history that Americans are said to have.

⁸ Glassberg, 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Glassberg, 7.

Perhaps the most significant influence on the historical consciousness of the American people is the history that is disseminated on the screen, both large and small. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of movies and television programs that include historical content. These cinematic and televisual histories range from period pieces where the history provides the backdrop for the story being told to actual interpretations of specific historical events or particular historical figures, but each one contributes to the historical understanding of the audience in some way, whether or not the audience realizes it or the creators intend for it to do so. Each dramatization of the past that is presented on the screen becomes an interpretation of the past, a reading of what life in the past was like and what was significant about that past. In this way, the documentary films created by the Public Broadcast Service's popular director Ken Burns and the period atmosphere created on serial situation comedies such as *M*A*S*H* can have a similar influence on the collective historical understanding of the American public. This degree of influence that these interpretations have is not necessarily equal to the degree of historical accuracy they contain, however. The degree of impact may in fact be more closely related to the ability of a particular historical interpretation to engage not only the minds but also the emotions of the audience, its context and its prevalence in our lives. Instead of simply critiquing the history that we see disseminated in the media, it is necessary for us to recognize that history for what it is and consider the impact that it has on the popular American historical consciousness or the collective memory of the American past.

This is not to suggest that the inclination to call attention to the historical inaccuracies and omissions that are a part of popular historical interpretations is somehow unfounded. Indeed, it is important for these discrepancies be recognized and acknowledged. It is the responsibility of professional historians to educate the public about history in an accurate manner, in the classroom, in print, and in the public arena. Attempting to correct inaccurate information is part of that

responsibility, for a more accurate understanding of history allows a society a better understanding of itself, and therefore better enables it to move forward. However, the pervasiveness of the media in our culture makes its impact significant, and it is important that we realize that whether we like it or not, the history that is presented through a television miniseries, say, will have a greater impact on a larger number of Americans than a respected scholar's critique of it in a scholarly journal. And while it is true that we as scholars should do what we can to encourage the accurate and thoughtful interpretation of American history in popular culture, it is also true that if we truly want to understand the impact that popular culture has on the American historical understanding we have to set aside our dismay at the lack of historical accuracy and instead focus on the history as it is presented and try to understand that impact.

This call for attention to the popularized interpretations of history in American culture is not an isolated one. Indeed, the recognition of our recent culture-wide interest in considering the American past has been made by a number of scholars in a variety of disciplines since the late 1980s. Michael Kammen, for example, in his book *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture*, has analyzed examples of popular history and their influence on our collective memory, as well as the reasons that such historical interpretations are presented in often incomplete and sentimentalized ways. But just as Kammen has concluded, this study is based on the belief that the reasons behind the particular interpretations are not as important as the consideration of the interpretations themselves, for the influence that they have on the popular American historical consciousness is generally felt without regard to, or even recognition of, the reasons behind it. To best understand the place and the influence of the American past in the American present (and, by extension, the American future) it is necessary to see it as it is presented in the American public sphere.

Historical Capital

To do this we can consider popular historical artifacts and practices in terms of the degree of historical capital they possess. The coining of this term, with proper deference paid to Pierre Bourdieu, to is meant refer to the degree of impact a given artifact is likely to have on the larger collective historical consciousness. Historical capital can be attained in a variety of ways, but its impact is the same regardless of its source. To explain the origin of the term, its inspiration should be considered.

Working with the Marxist tenet that class membership is defined by an individual's access to economic capital, Bourdieu coined the phrase cultural capital to describe how access to educational and cultural resources defines individuals in a society as well.¹¹ The greater an individual's access to cultural capital, the better situated he is to succeed in society, as he is able to better negotiate the cultural and social landscape and form the most beneficial relationships. Because the dominant culture is controlled largely by those with the economic wherewithal to command power, access to cultural capital often goes along with the accumulation of economic capital. Similarly, the term social capital has been used by individuals in a variety of positions to describe the connectivity that exists between individuals and institutions in a given society. Individuals with social capital are well-connected in their society, and therefore have distinct advantages over those in that society that do not.¹² In a fashion similar to the coining and usage of these terms, we can use the term historical capital to discuss the measure and significance of history to a cultural artifact, event or activity, and thereby its degree of significance to our popular

¹¹ See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, "Sport and Social Class," in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, 357-73 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹² An extended discussion of this term can be found in chapter one, "Thinking about Social Change in America," of Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2000).

historical consciousness. In this case it is not an individual's access to a particular kind of capital that is being measured, but an object's or practice's degree of historicity that is being evaluated.

The degree of historical capital something has is not necessarily based on its accuracy but on its influence on the larger historical understanding in a society, or the amount of history and historical connectedness it conjures up for the audience. Accuracy may play a role in that influence, but so will other factors, such as the centrality of history to the event, practice or artifact, or the sense of the past that it creates for those who are involved with it. Any or all of these things may determine historical capital. It is the contribution to our "sense of history" that we are measuring here, the degree of impact that it has.

Scholars such as Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in their survey of American's historical connectedness and James Loewen in his critique of American history textbooks and historical sites have noted that the history that gets remembered and internalized is the history that touches our emotions and creates a personal meaning for us.¹³ By extension, then, those historical artifacts and activities that engage our emotions and touch our lives are most likely to affect our historical connectedness. Though we may know intellectually that movies and television shows, say, are not historical documents meant to educate us, once we become personally engaged with them that knowledge may be lost, and whether we realize it or not what we see on the screen makes its way into our historical understanding.

Though it can be used to discuss all manner of historically based artifacts and activities, the concept of historical capital is especially useful when looking at popular interpretations of history found on film and television. Because of the way televised material comes to us, through engaging

¹³ See Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995) and *Lies Across America: What Our Historical Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1999).

stories broadcast to us in the comfort of our own homes, its impact on our thinking, whether we realize it or not, is significant. But the vast and diverse historical content that comes to us on the screen cannot be discussed practically as a single entity. Some of that content has a greater impact than others. Those character based dramas that draw us in on a nightly or weekly basis, for example, wield enormous influence over audiences. If we consider that content based on the degree of historical capital it has, however, we can better understand how movies and television contribute to our collective memory.

Television As Historian

Though both movies and television programs that portray the past influence us, it is the history that comes to us on the small screen that tends to leave the most lasting impression. The pervasive and comfortable nature of television makes it especially powerful. Television has an intimacy about it that many other forms of mass culture do not. Its place as part of our homes and our daily lives makes it comfortable and familiar in a way that a movie theater experience could never be.¹⁴ This comfort level can't help but influence the way we view things on the small screen. We are more likely to receive information in a casual, uncritical way from television than from film, literature, music and the many other mass media forms that are a part of our everyday lives. The history that comes to us through our televisions, then, has the potential to slip unknowingly into our consciousness, making an impact on our understanding of the past.

Because of its high degree of historical capital, any investigation of the popular American historical consciousness must start with the consideration of the impact that television has on our collective memory. Its specific characteristics and its pervasiveness make it the most far-reaching

¹⁴ An extensive discussion of the place of television in our daily lives can be found in Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

medium in our highly mediated culture today. The history that is interpreted via television, then, is the history that is most available to us. As our collective memory is most influenced by our common information and understanding, television is the chief transmitter of history today.

Regardless of this distinction, however, little has been written on the impact of television on the American collective memory. The majority of scholarship in the area of history and memory has been focused on the “memory clashes” that have taken place through more traditionally accepted channels of historical information such as museums and public memorials. To be sure, these are important subjects of inquiry, as our collective memory is influenced by a variety of sources, and those official and respected channels of information have an authority about them that makes their impact significant. But the far reaching influence of television in this area has been relatively unexplored by scholars to date. More attention has been paid to the impact of film on our historical consciousness, but a great deal of that has been devoted to critiquing and correcting the many inaccuracies that are to be found there. Some of this same attention has been paid to television programming as well, but little beyond that. And while the field of television studies is a continually growing area of scholarship, very little of that scholarship had addressed the transmission of history through the medium.

The focus of this study, then, is to analyze television programming in terms of its historical impact. Through a consideration of a variety of programming types and television characteristics, the place of television as purveyor of history will be revealed. This investigation will be conducted within the framework of current scholarship in popular culture, history and memory and related disciplines and a larger conception of the American cultural historical environment.

It is important to recognize the distinction between popular conceptions of history and those understood within the academy as this study is considered. It is not the intention of this project to critique the history presented on television in terms of its historical accuracy, but to

recognize that history for what it is and consider the impact that it has on our collective historical understanding. As a starting point, then, it is necessary to define the nature of basic popular historical understanding.

First, it is important to acknowledge the value that most non-historians assign to history. Seldom recognized as a body of knowledge valuable in its own right, most Americans attribute significance to history in terms of its ability to comment on and inform the present and future. For instance, the ability of history to educate us and keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past is often cited as a reason for a historical education, as is the development of an appreciation for contemporary life. A greater understanding of who we are as a people is a third oft given value for historical knowledge. This assessment of value based on a contemporary framework is an important distinction between popular understanding of history and scholarly understanding of it. While few history professionals would deny the value of history in achieving these goals, most would balk at the notion that historical inquiry should be undertaken simply for these purposes.

“I Have One Question for You, Sir...Is Time Travel Possible?”

For the world outside the academy, history and the past are fixed, knowable entities. It is not the shifting elusive concept that it is for professional historians. As such, the notion of retrieving and recreating the past seems entirely plausible. The consumption of history through leisure activities tends therefore to be done in a less critical way. Because the question of whether or not it is possible to authentically represent the past is not an issue, there is a level of uncritical acceptance for the general public that does not exist for the professional historian. This is a critical distinction, and despite the despair with which many scholars feel about it, it is a distinction nonetheless.

To illustrate the popular perception of the past, we can look to an example of popularized history itself. *Somewhere in Time*, a well-known historical romance movie with a time travel component, provides an interesting analogy for understanding popular conceptions of the past. Released in 1980 and based on the novel *Bid Time Return* by Richard Matheson, this film has achieved cult status in the years since its original release, reaching a far larger audience through VHS and DVD than in its theatrical release, and establishing itself as something of a historical romance classic.

When the movie opens it is 1972, and Richard Collier (Christopher Reeve), a student at Milford College, has just seen the debut of a play he has written. At a party celebrating the play's opening, he is approached by an old woman, unknown to him and everyone else present, who presses an antique pocket watch into his hand, gazes intensely into his eyes and whispers "Come back to me," before she turns and walks away. Perplexed by the situation, Collier stares in the direction in which she disappeared for a second, then returns to his friends. Flash forward eight years, and Collier is now a successful playwright, fighting writer's block on his latest play. He takes off in order to clear his head, and finds himself in the vicinity of his alma mater, at the Grand Hotel, a historic hotel. He decides to stay the night there. He is helped to his room by an aged bellhop, Arthur, who has lived at the hotel his entire life, having come there as a child with his parents who worked at the hotel.

Waiting for the dining room to open, Collier wanders into the hotel's "Hall of History" to pass the time. While there, he is drawn to a photograph of a beautiful young woman. Collier is mesmerized by the photograph, but finds the nameplate on the photograph is missing. Unable to put the photograph and the woman out of his mind, he queries Arthur about it and learns it is Elise McKenna (Jane Seymour), a famous actress who once performed in a play at the hotel theater back in 1912. But this knowledge only intensifies his obsession with the woman, and he stays on at the

hotel so that he can learn more about her. At the local library he finds biographies and magazine articles about McKenna, eventually happening on a photograph of the actress in her later years. He is awestruck when he recognizes the woman as the one who approached him with the watch and the cryptic invitation years before.

Further driven to learn more, he goes to the local home of McKenna's biographer in hopes of uncovering even more information. The woman is reluctant to speak to him until he shows her the watch. She is shocked to see it, explaining that it was prized possession of the actress that disappeared on the night of her death. She invites Collier in to see some of the memorabilia that she has saved from McKenna's life. There Collier finds a copy of a book, *Travels Through Time*, written by his former philosophy professor. The biographer tells him how McKenna read the book over and over again. He then finds a model replica of the Grand Hotel that the actress had made. It is a music box, and when she opens it, it plays Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody On a Theme by Paganini*, which Collier identifies as his most favorite piece of music. The visit convinces him that there is some sort of connection between McKenna and himself and his obsession intensifies. He pays a visit to his old professor to ask "Is time travel possible?" "That is a question," the professor responds.

As further response the professor tells of an experience he had while visiting Venice and staying in an old hotel. Taken by the highly historic environment, he began to conceive of the possibility of experiencing the past as it was when his "aged" environment was new. The distinctly historic environment, the sights and the sounds, was essential to the possibility of successful time travel, and while lying down one day, he attempted to hypnotize himself into believing he was in 1571 instead of 1971. By repeating the details of his delusion to himself over and over again, he felt that, for an instant, he may have existed in the past. He was unsure, however, and equally unsure that he would ever wish to try such an exercise again, as it left him completely physically drained.

He speculates, however, that if he were to ever try it again, he would take pains to ensure that no evidence of the present existed in his frame of reference as he attempted his experiment. He deems a complete disassociation from the present as central to successful time travel.

Inspired by the professor's story, Collier commits himself to travel back in time to meet this woman, following the procedure described by his mentor. Cautioned by the professor's warning that objects from the present disrupt engagement in the past, he rushes out to acquire the appropriate objects necessary to immerse himself in 1912 (clothing and haircut, money, etc.), and removes all modern traces from his room, taking them out of his sight. With the help of a mantra he records on a tape recorder, he lies on the bed and tries to hypnotize himself back in time. His attempt fails. Frustrated but not giving up, Collier returns to the Hall of History and the photograph. This time he notices an old hotel register in one of the display cases, and, with Arthur's help, is able to locate the register from 1912 in the hotel's storage area. He finds the names of Elise McKenna and her manager William Robinson (Christopher Plummer), then, shortly after those, an entry for himself, Richard Collier from Chicago, in his own handwriting. The entry lists his room number and check in time as well. "*I was there,*" he tells himself.

Armed with an even stronger conviction, and some specific details, Collier tries again, hypnotizing himself, this time without the aid of the modern tape recorder, and wakes up in 1912. He seeks out his Elise, eventually finding her. She is taken back when he approaches her, but almost seems to be expecting him as well. There is an instant rapport between them, a palpable connection, but her lack of understanding as to that connection frightens her, and she is reluctant to trust him. Their meeting is interrupted by her manager, Robinson, who attempts to scare Collier off, but Collier persists. After several more attempts that are also thwarted by Robinson, Collier finally convinces her to spend the afternoon with him. By the end of their time together, they are deeply in love, and when Robinson attempts to interfere again, Elise stands up to him. Collier

attends her play that evening, where, in an impromptu dialogue during the play, Elise expresses her love to Collier. Before the end of the performance, however, Robinson sends an emissary to Collier's seat, calling him out of the theater so that they can talk. There Robinson tries to convince Collier to go, and when Collier refuses, has him beaten and tied up and left in the hotel stables. Robinson returns to the theater to inform a devastated Elise that Collier has gone, and reminds her of the theater company's imminent departure.

When Collier awakens the next morning, he manages to free himself from his bonds and rushes to Elise's room to find her. She is not there, and upon hearing that the theater company has left, he retreats to the hotel grounds, devastated. As he mourns his loss, Elise is also seen wandering the grounds in despair, having stayed behind when the company left. She recognizes him, calls out to him and they rush to each other in a passionate reunion. They consummate their love, and are basking in their joy, when, through casual conversation, Collier happens upon an errant 1979 penny that has somehow become mixed in with the 1912 change in his suit pocket. This sends him spiraling back to the present, leaving Elise calling out to him as he is powerless to stop what is happening.

Exhausted and devastated from the experience, Collier returns to his hotel room to desperately try to return to 1912, but he cannot. He wanders aimlessly, haunting the Hall of History and the locations where he spent time with Elise, but eventually returns to his room where he languishes, despondent, for several days. When Arthur becomes concerned and brings the hotel manager to his room, Collier is found near death, in a catatonic state. As the hotel doctor struggles to keep him alive, a smile comes over his face and he dies. He leaves his body, first taking in the scene in the hotel room and then responding to the bright light that beckons him out of the room. The light leads him to Elise, reaching out to him, and they are reunited in their 1912 glory as the movie ends.

This movie, and others like it, reinforces the idea that the past, history, is a fixed point, a place that can be visited or returned to. It almost seems to exist as some sort of parallel universe that is accessible to us somehow. With the proper antiques and enough will power, it is possible for someone in 1980 to return to 1912 and move within it as an actual participant. This is not to suggest that the average moviegoer believes in her own ability to travel through time, but stories like this that suggest the possibility are made more believable for the audience because of the accepted notion of the past as certain, and, at the same time, reinforce this very idea. It also reinforces the popular belief in the cyclical nature of time and history, further suggesting that the past is a knowable entity.

Other aspects of the film are also reflective of the popular conception of history. The suit that Collier attains to help him blend in on his time travel turns out to be older than he believes it to be, thereby making it out of fashion in 1912. This fact is commented upon by a number of the turn of the century natives that he meets on his journey, and yet for Collier, and for the audience, it is old enough to work, old enough to play the necessary role in his hypnosis. Collier is typical in his disregard or lack of need for the specific details of the past. His lack of recognition that the suit was of the wrong era, and his subsequent lack of concern for that fact reflect that of the audience, distinguishing them from the more knowledgeable and concerned history professional. At the same time, however, once in 1912, Collier is concerned that the specific details that he does know about where he is not be altered in any way. For example, when the hotel clerk initially gives him a different room from that that was listed in the register that Collier found during his pre-travel research, he momentarily panics and is relieved when another clerk intervenes to say that the room is reserved and he subsequently receives the correct room. Similarly, he is insistent that the clerk record the right time of his checking in, having waited until the correct time to register despite the fact that he arrived a day earlier. Harkening to the belief that the past is the past and cannot be

altered, Collier sees to it that the details remained unaltered, even as he remains unconcerned about his inappropriate clothing. Reflecting the popular belief that the history is in the details and that those details are absolute, Collier acts as the audience would act, concerned that history as they understand it is preserved, even in this fantastical, hopelessly romantic, story.

Like Richard Collier, the media allows us to time travel through the historical interpretations it creates and delivers. Recreating a time and place for us to visit, in an often romantic, appealing manner that touches our hearts as it influences our minds, these popular historical artifacts mold our popular historical consciousness. Though the history textbooks of our schooldays may have told the story differently, they did not engage us as these stories do so their impact is ultimately less significant. The textbooks did not allow us to go back somewhere in time.

The Nostalgia Factor

One nearly constant element in popular interpretations of the past is the use and/or influence of nostalgia. Though used differently and in sometimes complex ways, nearly every mediated historical interpretation presented to the public uses nostalgia in some way. In fact, it has become so much a part of our cultural mindset that this once elite word has now become a part of our popular vernacular.

This consistent use of nostalgia in historical interpretation is not an insignificant thing, for as familiar as we have become with both the word and the concept, it is still an elusive yet powerful force to contend with. Consider, for example the etymological transformation of the word itself. Once a term used by doctors to identify an extreme case of homesickness that brought on depression in sailors and soldiers who were separated from home and family, today the concept of

nostalgia has nothing to do with medical diagnosis, or even homesickness for that matter.¹⁵ And yet the original definition and use of the term can give us some insight into the power and influence that nostalgia has for us. Though the term no longer retains its connection to homesickness in the way we most often think of it (that is as a longing to physically be in the place we know as home and with the people and things that are associated with it), nostalgia does cause us to “return” to an earlier place and time in hopes of experiencing something nicer or simpler (or in some other way preferable) than our present reality. If we think of our past as the place that we come from, as part of the root of who we are (as our physical home is), then nostalgia retains some of its original definition and, along with it, its original power which was originally thought to include actual bodily disease.

This is not to suggest that the nostalgic portrayals of history that come to us through the media have the power to make us physically ill, but it does provide some insight into the power of nostalgia, even when we are aware of the fact that is in play, as contemporary audience have become more able to identify in recent years. Nostalgia inherently separates us from our own present day reality, and yet the past that it returns us to is uncomplicated by the trials and tribulations of the day. Nostalgia is a powerful force as it draws on a combination of emotion and memory. When we experience nostalgia, or when we are swept up in a nostalgic presentation, it is easy to blur the line between fact and fiction because the realities of the present which we cannot ignore are no longer an issue. If the nostalgia is successful, we lose ourselves in the past and it becomes our temporary reality. This temporary displacement, of course, has tremendous impact on the history that is being nostalgized, if you will, and the way that it is remembered. When

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of the etymology and use of the word and concept of nostalgia, see Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), particularly chapter one, “The Nostalgic Experience: Words and Meanings.”

nostalgia is added to the equation, the history is not only selectively presented, but emotionally presented as well.¹⁶

As nostalgia has become a regular part of our public history, its use has become more and more complex. To be able to talk about the concept, and all its various forms, it is necessary to identify these various kinds of nostalgia that are used in popular historical interpretations. Even the most familiar brand of nostalgia should rightfully be broken down into two categories. Keeping in mind the original conception of nostalgia that affected individuals on the basis of their own personal history, it is first necessary to remember that nostalgia as we most often think of it today, and certainly as it comes into play in historical interpretation, refers to our common, public culture. This is an important distinction, as much of the nostalgia that is created is for places and events that individual members of the public do not have personal experience with themselves. They are acquainted with it as it is part of the collective knowledge of the culture of which they are a part, but may not have been an actual party to the nostalgized subject itself. Still other historical subjects may be within the personal memory of individual members of the public. To truly consider the impact of the nostalgia on the historical interpretation, then, it is necessary to differentiate between these two different situations.

What might be called true nostalgia exists when the audience has lived through the time that is being depicted or remembered. It is within the actual memory of those experiencing the nostalgia, and they have a genuine personal connection to that place and/or time. Their memory of it may not be completely accurate, indeed it almost never is, but they do have an actual experience

¹⁶ The use and significance of nostalgia in American culture has been a subject of interest for scholars in a number of disciplines, including sociology, history and literary and cultural studies. For examples of such scholarship see, for example, Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979), Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), and the works of David Lowenthal in texts such as *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

that they can recall. False nostalgia, on the other hand, exists when the audience does not actually have a personal experience that they are recalling but rather are drawing a picture of a time and place of which they were never a part. They are remembering something that is not in their own memory. This “memory” is based on what they have heard or seen, and so every encounter they have with it simultaneously creates and reinforces their conception of it. Ironically, it is often this false nostalgia that is actually the most powerful. With no personal experience to temper the nostalgia or through which to consider it critically, the presentation becomes the memory, and by extension, the reality. The more distant the history that is portrayed, then, the more impact the interpretation is likely to have on the historical consciousness of the audience. This is not to discount the power of true nostalgia, however, as the more often a nostalgic interpretation of something that is in the personal memory of the audience is viewed the more likely it is to become a part of the actual personal memory itself, mixing with and even replacing the details of the lived experience itself. The use of nostalgia, and the degree of its impact, is often the same, regardless of whether it is true or false (and, in fact, any given nostalgic portrayal is often simultaneously true and false for different members of the audience, depending on their age), but the kind of impact may differ depending on the category into which it falls.

For contemporary audiences, historical settings have long been the home of romantic popular culture artifacts. From romance novels to sweeping television miniseries, setting a story in the past and incorporating historical events into storylines seems to add to the mystique of the romance. This effect is not surprising, of course, as the nostalgia we have for the past often makes it seem a romantic place, where things were simpler and everything is tinted with a rosy glow. We easily forget the underdeveloped reality of the past for its less complicated lifestyle, and the appeal that that has in our often hectic contemporary lives. Nostalgia is, after all, a romantic notion. This heightened familiarity and recognition of nostalgia as a vehicle for considering the past has led to

some twists on the concept that are becoming more prevalent in popular historical interpretations, particularly those presented through the media. Many of today's historical dramas are bringing a "bite" to the nostalgia that they serve up for the audience. The romance of the past is there, in the setting, in the plot line, in the characters that allow those that experienced the time first hand to remember and those that haven't to dream about the experiences that they never had. But also there is a sense of reality that brings the shortcomings of that piece of the past that is being displayed, which are, coincidentally, the same kind of problems we experience in our own time, to light as it simultaneously reminisces about its nostalgic characteristics. The beautiful clothes and the quaint aspects of daily life are there, but so are reminders of the reasons that the past is the past, of why our culture has changed since that time. We are asked to simultaneously regret the loss of the things we see depicted on the screen as we recognize the value in the improvements that have been made. Examples of this "biting nostalgia" include the 2003 film *Mona Lisa Smile* and the television drama *American Dreams*, which debuted in the fall of 2002. In both cases the mid-twentieth century settings are pivotal characters in the drama that plays out on screen, essential to the story, the meaning and the essence of what the audience sees. These stories could not be told in another time and place, and yet they are, at the same time, timeless stories that a contemporary audience can understand. But along with the nostalgia comes a storyline that tempers the rosy glow on the past that nostalgia brings to historical interpretation. The sobering storyline is not enough to dispel the nostalgia, but it does, perhaps, keep it in check, or, at the very least, complicates the portrayal for the audience. This twist on traditional nostalgia is not an entirely new phenomenon, having been used by marginalized groups to interpret and portray the past for some time, but its emergence as a growing part of mainstream American historical interpretation is a relatively recent trend. It reflects both the influence that nostalgia has on our appetite for history and the growing awareness of the power and use of nostalgia in historical interpretation.

More recently, a new variety of nostalgia related interpretations have begun to emerge, interpretations we can call anti-nostalgic. In these interpretations, the intent seems to be to dispel the possibility of a nostalgic view of the past by emphasizing the harshness of life in the past and its distinct inferiority to contemporary experiences. Though anti-nostalgic popular historical interpretations are still a rarity in American culture, the emergence of this kind of portrayal is significant and important to consider as part of the larger popular historical influences. It is, perhaps, part of the same public recognition of the prevalence of nostalgia in our historical conceptions that inspired the biting nostalgic portrayals mentioned earlier. But it takes that recognition one step further, attempting to remove the nostalgia from the interpretation rather than simply tempering it. And yet, even this impulse, the attempt to eradicate nostalgia from historical interpretation, reflects our nostalgic tendencies and reifies nostalgia as a cultural force. These anti-nostalgic interpretations rarely succeed in removing the nostalgia. The attempt, however, does not go unrecognized, and that is where the significance of this approach can be found.

The prevalence of nostalgia, be it true or false, biting or antithetical, is among the most significant characteristics of popular historical interpretation in the American media, and its impact on the popular American historical consciousness cannot be ignored or overestimated. This impact is a great cause of concern for many professional historians and cultural critics who see an equation between nostalgia and inaccuracy. Their concerns may, in fact, be well founded, but as nostalgia has become well entrenched in historical interpretation, it is a force that must be recognized and understood. Does a nostalgic view of the past always equal an inaccurate view of the past? What effect does the nostalgia have on the telling of the history? Is it possible for nostalgia to lead to greater historical knowledge and understanding? These are questions that deserve consideration and will be central to analysis being undertaken here.

Parameters and Limitations

The research on which this dissertation will be based will be focused on developing an understanding of the popular American historical consciousness as it exists today. It is simply not possible to ascertain first-hand the nature of the historical consciousness of the past or the future. Whenever possible, the characteristics of contemporary life and contemporary historical conception that make it distinct (or likely to be distinct) from that of the past will be acknowledged, and where considered predictions for the future seem apparent and significant they will also be suggested. However, the purpose of this project is concerned with addressing our contemporary popular American historical consciousness. By considering this moment in time in terms of its popular historical conceptions, something which has not been done previously, a point of contrast will be established against which future considerations can be measured.

For the purposes of this project, “historical artifacts or programs” will refer to artifacts/programs with historical settings and/or content. If history or things historical are the subject of the television show or movie, if it is set in the past, or if the characters and/or plot focus on history, then it will be considered historical. The one exception to this is those shows or movies that fall into the category of westerns. Although westerns are almost always set in the past, and dramatize specific historical events and/or a way of life that no longer truly exists, their generic affiliation renders them separate from other types of historical dramatization. Like other formula driven genres like detective and adventure stories, westerns are based on the conventions and expectations of both creators and audiences who are drawn to the genre. Westerns are judged by formulaic criteria. Part of the formula, in this case, is the historical setting, though when the genre was developing that was not necessarily the case. Once a specific kind of adventure story, as the lifestyle dramatized in westerns became more and more a thing of the past, westerns became more and more distinct and are now distinct from other kinds of adventure stories. This genre not only

has a distinct formulaic foundation, but its own history, and as a result, it cannot be considered as just a part of all things historical, just as it can no longer be considered as part of the adventure story genre. Westerns have to be considered separately in order to be considered completely and accurately. And while this is a subject deserving of attention, this project is not set up to do that, and so westerns will not be included here.

Another limitation on the material being considered here is that only artifacts related to the American past are included. The purpose of this project is to investigate the relationship between Americans and their own past, not the past of all of world history more generally. The majority of movies and television shows produced in this country with historical content are focused on the American past, but there are exceptions. Though mention may be made of historical material with non-American subject matter, the analysis and conclusions contained here will be based on the American material alone.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Foundations

Though little research in this particular area has been done to date, this study is built on a foundation drawn from work in a number of disciplines. Primary among these are the fields of History and Memory scholarship and Popular Culture scholarship. Also influential has been some work done in the field of material culture. To provide context for this study, and to offer acknowledgement to those whose scholarship has helped to shape the premise of this work, a discussion of the scholarship that has been most influential follows. Organized by field of study, this discussion will serve as an introduction to the scholarship that has come before. Though work that has been done in the fields of Popular Culture and History and Memory are equally important to the foundation of this inquiry, the fact that a popular medium is the focus of the research in this study necessitates discussing the popular culture influences first. That having been accomplished, a discussion of history and memory scholarship will follow, as well as a consideration of work in material culture. Finally, two texts that have proved particularly influential to this study will be discussed.

Popular Culture Foundations

In his 1972 essay "Popular Culture: Notes Toward a Definition," Ray Browne defined popular culture as: "all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media. Popular

culture consists of the spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects and artifacts.”¹

Acknowledging that this was indeed a broad definition, Browne suggested that as the field grew and developed, adjustments and limitations would be made on this definition. Thirty years later, many alternatives have been offered to this definition, but the field remains a broadly defined one.

Scholars of different mindsets work from their own definition, most of which fall somewhere in Browne’s early broad one, but what ties the scholarship together is the nature of the subject matter that they study.

Even when Browne first published this foundational essay, there were other scholars offering alternate definitions, some of whom were co-founders of the field with Browne himself. Russell Nye, one of those “co-founders,” offered a different definition that turned more on locating popular culture historically and emphasizing its mass distribution and consumption aspect. Nye said popular culture “describes those productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption, which appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of the majority of the public, free of control by minority standards.”² Though certainly more narrowly defined than Browne’s definition, this definition still encompasses a vast array of subject matter. Browne and Nye disagreed over the parameters of the field more than anything else, but were united in their belief that the “common culture” that has increasingly become a driving force in the lives of societies all over the world was worthy of serious, academic consideration, and was indeed a crucial key to understanding the nature of the human condition.

As problematic as this dispute over definition has been, there has developed over the past thirty years a body of work that has come to be known as popular culture scholarship. Highly variant

¹ Reprinted in Marilyn F. Motz et. al., *Eyes on the Future: Popular Culture Scholarship into the Twenty-First Century* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 245.

² Reprinted in Jack Nachbar et.al, eds., *The Popular Culture Reader* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1978), 22.

in method, in theory and, more and more, in subject matter, the scholars who produce the work and the works themselves reflect a belief that components of culture do not have to be unique and specialized in order to deserve consideration, and that perhaps it is through those components of culture which do not meet those criteria that we have the most to learn about ourselves and our culture as well as the cultures of other societies, past and present. These cultural artifacts, after all, are popular for a reason.

Though disagreements on the parameters of popular culture have never truly been resolved and preferences for theoretical and methodological frameworks vary widely, opinions on the value of the subject matter and the kinds of insight it was perceived to provide did achieve a certain amount of consensus. That consensus has been interpreted in this way: popular cultural forms are built on mythological foundations particular to the society that supports them. The underlying assumption is that all cultures have commonly understood and largely revered ideals or myths, and that societies act on those myths in their everyday existence. Cultural forms become popular because they are in tune with those myths and reflect them back to their audience. It is because its connection to these underlying myths that popular culture has so much to offer in the way of understanding a given society. Studying the artifacts for the meanings they provide and monitoring any changes that can be found over time allows scholars to understand a culture at its most basic level.

The analogy of a house has been used to help introduce new students to the nature of popular culture. The myths or “bedrock beliefs and values” mentioned above provide the foundation of the house. In the basement above the foundation exist the more transitory beliefs and values that shift between generations over time. These two levels are seen as reflecting the cultural mindset of the society to which the popular culture is appealing. The icons, heroes and stereotypes that popular culture revolves around can be found on the first floor of the house. Whether real or

fictional, these are the elements of which popular culture is composed. The second floor of the house is composed of the popular arts and rituals that incorporate the elements found on the first floor of the house. Resting at the top of the house, in the attic if you will, is daily life, suggesting that our everyday existence is built on all the levels below.³

Popular culture studies is a relatively young discipline but it is built on a well established foundation. As an interdisciplinary field, the theoretical and methodological framework of popular culture studies has always been diverse, but in that diversity it has become strong. Over the years that the field has been recognized, preferred theories and methodologies have shifted as they do in any academic discipline, but they have always remained diverse in nature, drawing on scholarship from a number of related fields. Early American Studies scholarship is considered to have had a significant influence on popular culture scholarship, particularly in its earliest years. A relatively young field of study itself, American Studies developed in the years just before popular culture studies did, within a post World War II American society that was flourishing in the 1950s. Along with a swell of affluence and patriotism, there was a movement on the part of many American humanities scholars to identify and celebrate the uniquely American characteristics found in American culture. This movement is most notably reflected in a theory that has come to be known as myth-symbol. Epitomized by Henry Nash Smith's seminal work *The Virgin Land*, myth-symbol sought to connect the use of certain symbolic images with deeply rooted American myths.⁴ The myth-symbol school was in part a response to the New Criticism that suggested that it was not important to know the context of art in order to analyze it. Smith and others believed that art could only truly be understood in its context, and that it was only in understanding art as a

³ The house analogy is used in a number of popular culture texts. See, for example, Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 22-31.

⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

reflection of the society that produced it that true valuable analysis could exist. This theory and method were well suited for those scholars interested in studying the Americanness of American culture. *The Virgin Land*, for example, considers the importance of the American landscape in American culture, seeing it as a symbol that reflected deeply held myths (or beliefs) and values. Symbols such as these, scholars in the myth-symbol tradition believed, existed so widely in our culture because of their reflection of our myths and values, and in their use helped to reinforce those same ideals. Though the subject matter considered by Nash and other early American Studies scholars was located firmly within the category of elite culture, the influence of this mode of thinking can easily be seen in the kinds of rationale used by those interested in studying popular culture mentioned above.

Smith's use of the concept of myth is based on earlier scholarship on the construction and application of myth, as are many of the foundations of popular culture scholarship discussed earlier. Working from Carl Jung's concept of archetypes, Joseph Campbell, one of the leading scholars in this area, created a detailed study of mythology and folk tales. Campbell studied the elements of these tales across cultures to gain a greater understanding of the individual components of the stories. His most acclaimed work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, follows the development of the myth of the hero.⁵ Using examples from different hero stories from all over the world, Campbell looks at the hero's journey and the changes that he goes through to prove that a single archetype seems to be present in multiple mythologies. Campbell, like Jung and also like Smith and many popular culture scholars, believes in the power and comfort of myth, and attributes that to its natural innate place in our psyche.

Scholarship on the use and impact of mythology has continued to inhabit the world of cultural criticism and exert its influence on new scholarship. Structuralist Vladimir Propp has

⁵ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

expanded this framework with a study of folktales, whose constructions are often equated with those of myth, across different cultures. He was interested in the structure of the tales and in developing a formula that could be used to analyze stories in an almost scientific way. By assigning a series of letter and number combinations to various plot points and outcomes commonly found in folk tales, Propp developed a system where a story could be transcribed into a series of code, thereby simplifying the process of comparing stories and studying the recurring structures. Propp focused on his native Russian tales in his study, presented in his book *Morphology of the Folktale*, but believed that the system he created was applicable to all folk tales.⁶

This scientific approach to studying the common threads found in the native tales of different cultures offers a certain amount of objectivity in the comparison process, but Propp's theory and method are very limited in their usefulness as they attempt to remove the tales from the context in which they are created and maintained. Campbell's work also minimizes any consideration of context, but not to the degree that Propp's work does. In fact that is the very purpose of his method, to strip away all but the basic structure of the story in order to study its essence - its skeletal core. This, of course, takes Jung's theory to its most extreme. If we do share a common unconscious state with a collection of archetypes from birth, then the basic structures of our tales should be similar, and Propp's method, as well as Campbell's, allow us to see that clearly. It is this same mindset that informs the myth-symbol school.

One of the most influential popular culture theories of its time, and a classic example of a revised myth-symbol approach was suggested by John Cawelti. In his important book *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Cawelti introduces the concept of

⁶ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

formula as a crucial element of popular culture and a tool for understanding it.⁷ Though Cawelti's work focused on formula fiction in various genres, the theory has had an impact on the scholarship of other popular culture mediums as well. Cawelti's premise is very artfully crafted as it uses the very objections that his contemporaries were raising about the legitimacy of popular fiction as a subject of academic inquiry, that the formulaic nature of that fiction precluded any real meaning from being found there, as his key reason for advocating its significance. The use of formula, Cawelti suggested, was the key element to the long standing popularity of popular fiction genres, thereby necessitating its consideration in an academic arena. Any component of culture that could remain so popular for so long merited consideration. Consumers of popular fiction were drawn to a particular genre precisely because of the formulaic plots that the genre offered. Cawelti suggested that the appeal these stories had for the audience grew out of the comfort found in knowing, to a certain degree at least, the kind of story they were going to find on its pages. The conventions of a popular mystery, for example, guaranteed to a certain degree that what the reader would find on the pages of her latest acquisition would satisfy her reasons for choosing it, and by extension satisfying the internal need that drew her to the genre. The inventions that a particular author brought to the formulaic structure insured that each story, while familiar, was still a new story for the reader. Cawelti strengthens this theory by demonstrating that fans of a particular popular fiction genre were, in fact, disappointed and unsatisfied with books that strayed from the formula too much. By using too much invention without an appropriate amount of convention to structure it around, the story failed to meet the expectations of its audience.

The reason these formulaic stories are so important to consider, Cawelti asserted, is that they have a great deal to tell us about the mindset of the society in which they exist. Formulas are

⁷ John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

popular because of some connection they have to the myths of that society and the desires and values of its individual members. It begged the questions: What could be a better subject for understanding the mindset of a culture than its most popular formulas? How can scholars get a more accurate read of what kinds of morals and meanings a population is looking for than by considering those texts created to reinforce those morals? Cawelti's theory was so well founded and so useful that it is still the basis for many new theories and methodologies as well as a great deal of scholarship in the popular culture field.

While much of the earliest popular culture scholarship centered around written texts, an area of inquiry that continues to be very popular in the field, subjects of study soon broadened out to include other mediums as well. Studies of popular movies and television, for example, have made up a significant portion of the scholarship in the field, from fairly early in its history up until the present day. Just as many studies of popular fiction drew on literary criticism and its techniques for a theoretical and methodological base, scholarship on popular movies has often been built on the practices of film criticism that were earlier applied to films that had been deemed worthy of an artistic label. Film scholarship, of course, is itself linked very closely to literary studies, so many of the same theories and questions that had been useful in considering written works were appropriate tools for studying film, even in the more popular movie vein, as well. Postmodern theory has had a significant place in the analysis of film on both its popular and more artistic levels.

But while many scholars found the consideration of literature and film similar in terms of how it was presented and ultimately consumed by an audience similar in scope, television presented a different scenario. Its omnipresence in the consumer's home and its highly and overtly commercial nature made it different from these other sorts of subjects in very significant ways. Televisual viewing is conceived of as a more intimate experience for the viewer because it happens within her home. The removed environment of a movie theater provides a less comfortable or

personal atmosphere for viewing, and therefore the viewing experience in these two instances is likely to be different, thus effecting the reception of the artifact being viewed. And while the theories and methodologies applied to fiction and film had their place in analyzing the storyline of television shows, they were not sufficient for understanding the way in which those stories were consumed by their audiences, not how they were controlled by their producers. Leading television scholars such as John Thornton Caldwell, Robert Allen, Jane Feuer and John Fiske have established a well grounded foundation by addressing these issues unique to television, and this area continues to be a popular area for new popular culture scholarship.⁸ Marxist and neo-Marxist theory is often used to analyze these aspects of televisual culture. Eventually, however, these kinds of considerations have been included in the scholarship on other kinds of popular media, most notably in studying popular movies once they became available to most consumers as video cassettes and DVD discs that allowed them to come into the consumer's home in much the same way as television shows do.

Sociology also has much to offer the field, especially in the study of the production aspect of popular culture, as well as the place of the media in our society. Todd Gitlin's work on television and discussions on the concept of cultural capital such as those by Paul DiMaggio are examples of how the tools of sociology can be brought to bear on popular culture studies.⁹ Especially in today's highly mediated society, the work of sociologists provides insight into the relationship between the different power structures in our society as well as a consideration of the

⁸ See, for example, John Thornton Campbell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987); John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁹ See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and *Watching Television* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 374-97.

different demographic components of the popular culture audience. Especially in complex societies such as ours, the connection between culture and society is often quite complicated and sociological scholarship can help to illuminate those connections.

Coming out of the literary tradition, the work of Janice Radway has provided another seminal moment in popular culture scholarship similar to Cawelti's contribution in scope. Using communities of romance novel readers and members of the Book of the Month Club as her subjects, Radway demonstrated the usefulness of reader response or reception theory to the popular culture field.¹⁰ Not only has this theory become very influential, but Radway has also provided a versatile methodology by combining the theory with an ethnographic approach.¹¹

The value of Radway's work is magnified as she has chosen some of the most extreme cases of popular culture as her subjects. The romance novel, for example, is something for which disdain is often shown even within the popular culture studies community. By focusing her attention on these novels and the women who read them, Radway proves to popular culture scholarship advocates and detractors alike the tremendous worth this kind of scholarship has. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway studies a community of readers whose only connection to each other is their genre of choice, in this case the romance novel, and their position as customers of a particular store that sells these novels. This community is composed entirely of women, but other aspects of their background differ. The Smithton Women, as they are known collectively, reveal to Radway, through their own comments as well as Radway's observation of them, why they choose to engage themselves with these particular texts and what they gain from the time spent reading them. And although Radway herself reads and responds to the particular texts in question, it is the response of

¹⁰ See Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), and *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹¹ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

the women to the texts that forms the core of her scholarship, not a critique of the texts themselves. She also includes a look at the romance novel publishing industry in order to present a comprehensive analysis of the place of romance novels in our culture.

This study fits solidly into the framework of popular culture studies that its originators hoped to establish. It looks at a popular culture artifact, not in an evaluation of the text and its literary or cultural worth, but as an integral part of these women's lives and effects it has on them, and by extension, the society in which they live. Whatever one might think about romance novels and their literary or even entertainment value, recognizing that they provide meaning and value for at least one portion of the culture allows for a greater understanding of the culture at large. A second study in this vein, *A Feeling For Books*, looks at the well known Book of the Month Club in an attempt to not only understand how the readers respond to the texts they receive through this distributor, but also at how the structure of the club and its own practices effect the end consumers, the readers themselves. In this second work, Radway expands her study to include the modes of distribution of reading material into her quest for an understanding of how and why people read.

Besides the disciplinary influences mentioned above, other early influences on the development of popular culture scholarship include the Marxist theory that came out of the Frankfurt School and the neo-Marxist philosophy that developed later in the century. This school of thought centered around a consideration of the relationship between the base and the superstructure known in Marxist thought and the concept of hegemony as suggested by Antonio Gramsci.¹² Scholars such as Theodor Adorno, who belonged to this group of thinkers, saw popular culture as a hegemonic tool of social authority used to maintain the status quo by the ruling

¹² See, for example, Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, reprint ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

classes.¹³ As a mass distributed cultural form, popular culture was seen as easily manipulated by those in power to transmit messages that would keep the subordinate classes subordinate. The scholarship that came out of this school was highly elitist in nature and reflected a certain kind of nostalgia for an early time and place when popular culture was not a part of the equation. Though they did find any value in popular culture itself, they recognized a need to study it for the power that it possessed.

Similarly, the concept of hegemony, around which much neo-Marxist criticism is structured, purports that the elite or ruling classes remain in power by imposing a set of conditions over the subordinate classes in a society. No overt force or domination is necessary to maintain their power because they exert control of the economic capital, which allows them to determine the cultural hierarchy of the society. This is achieved due to the relationship between the base (the social existence of the community or the mechanics of everyday living) and superstructure (ideas, arts and forms of expression). By controlling ideas and access to various forms of culture, the ruling classes ensure that the subordinate classes accept as true the existence they are living. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest the same basic notions in their important text, *The Social Construction of Reality*.¹⁴ Because the reality in any given society is constructed by certain institutions in that society, controlled by those in power, and imposed on all members of that society, members of the subordinate classes accept that reality because they know no other alternative.

The great effect of the Marxist and neo-Marxist approach to criticism can be seen in collections of scholarship such as *High Theory/Low Culture*, edited by Colin MacCabe, which focuses

¹³ See, for example, Theodor Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁴ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

specifically on the analysis of popular film and television.¹⁵ As MacCabe suggest in his introduction devoted, once again, to arriving at a working definition of the term popular culture, the nature of mediums such as these which are produced not by the people but for them creates a problematic situation both for analyzing them and teaching about them. Traditional Marxist thinking that sees the masses as being driven by the economic, in this case commercial, structure that is regulated by those in power runs into an obstacle when confronted with the nature of popular culture that mandates that the production of these artifacts be in keeping with the moods and desires of the masses themselves.

Neo-Marxist cultural critics, as well as those working outside that school of thought have begun to reevaluate the structures of society as suggested here, in part because of the work being done in the field of popular culture. The theory is seen to be too deterministic, and does not allow for the possibility that the subordinate classes have the ability to reject the culture that is presented to them or subvert in their own way. As popular culture examples can show, the “masses” are intricately involved in the cultural production process in a capitalistic society, and while the institutions of power do indeed exert a great deal of influence on the society at large, they are not immune to alteration from “below.”

In scholarship that combines a literary perspective with the hegemonic perspective of the neo-Marxists, Lawrence Levine has suggested that a particular cultural artifact’s status as a part of one category of culture or another has less to do with the nature of the artifact itself and more to do with its form of distribution and its reception by the audience. In *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Levine uses examples from the past to demonstrate that what is considered “lowbrow” culture by one generation may be designated as “highbrow” by another, thereby suggesting that the hierarchy is socially constructed and reinforced by cultural practice, not

¹⁵ Colin MacCabe, *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film* (New York: Palgrave, 1986).

by any innate sense of value found in the artifact itself.¹⁶ One especially convincing example of this presented in the book deals with Shakespearean plays, now considered one of our most elite and revered collections of literature. The original production of the plays, he reminds us, were often offered as entertainment for the masses, and presented in rowdy, makeshift theaters. Shakespeare was, in his own time, “popular.” Even in their first incarnations in this country, Shakespeare’s plays were material for theatrical productions not only in the elite theaters that served the moneyed and educated classes, but also for the less formal and bawdy music halls frequented by those in the lower classes.

Clearly, then, the content and construction of Shakespeare’s work cannot be seen as the reason for its elevated status in our society today. A reverence for these works and an educational system that relegated them to the high end of the cultural hierarchy had to be established by the society, and then had to be accepted as “right” by the larger society in order for our perception to exist as it does today. Levine’s work provides yet another piece of evidence to suggest that the broadest approach to culture provides us with the best possible understanding of the societies that create and consume it. Here the concept of cultural capital is very clearly seen. This term, coined by Pierre Bourdieu, makes an analogy between access to cultural knowledge and access to financial capital in its effect of the class status and opportunity available to different segments of society.¹⁷ Those in power in any given society determine how cultural knowledge and access to culture will be dispersed, and in so doing, attach meaning and privilege to certain cultural forms over others. Those with access to the most revered and privileged kinds of culture are afforded more status and

¹⁶ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, reprint ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977).

opportunity than those without that access. This concept, related closely to the concept of hegemony, helps to explain how culture both shapes and reinforces reality in our society.

Yet another influential theory in popular culture scholarship was developed by John Fiske, which suggested that it was not the artifacts themselves that constituted the popular culture, but that it was created in the process of assigning use and meaning to mass produced objects by the consumers who bought them. For Fiske, popular culture does not actually exist until a consumer adopts a product and incorporates it into his everyday life. The object itself is meaningless, but when it is given meaning by its owner, it becomes a part of popular culture. Fiske also feels that a certain amount of opposition on the part of the consumer is involved in the process. Consumers can subvert the existence of mass produced items, which by their nature as a product of a mass production system have no inherent meaning, by finding meaning in them. One of Fiske's classic examples is the trend during the 1980s of tearing blue jeans as a fashion statement. The mass produced jeans themselves, which many would identify as popular culture artifacts, did not become a part of popular culture in Fiske's view until their owner tore them. In the act of altering the jeans to suit their own desired fashion statement, the owners were participating in and in fact creating popular culture. When the fashion caught on, however, and manufacturers saw the opportunity to capitalize on the trend by producing jeans that were already ripped, the torn jeans ceased to be a part of popular culture, because the consumers themselves were no longer participating in the process of tearing them.¹⁸

Fiske's theory places the creation of popular culture in the hands of the consumer as opposed to the production system. For Fiske, then, the crucial component of popular culture is not its mode of production but its use. "Popular" for Fiske has less to do with statistics that show that

¹⁸ See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), and *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

an artifact is desired by large amounts of people, and more to do with the definition of the word that declares it to be “of the people.” Society, and the individual members that it consists of, makes something popular not simply by buying it, but by using it with some level of meaning. They are truly consuming the item.

Analysis of the images and celebrities that a highly mediated culture such as ours produces and sustains is an important and well represented component of popular culture scholarship. The seminal text for understanding the use of perception of images in our culture is Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*.¹⁹ An analysis specifically devoted to American culture when it was first published in 1962, many of Boorstin’s assertions can now be seen to apply to other highly mediated societies as well. Coining new terms and definitions as he presents his views, Boorstin educates his readers on the media saturated nature of their culture where the existence of what he calls “pseudo-events,” events, like press conferences, for example, that are constructed and carried out solely for the purpose that they can then be reported on by the media, have become accepted and natural parts of our daily lives. It is in this text that we are also introduced to the definition of a celebrity as someone who is famous simply for being famous, a concept that seems perfectly ridiculous when stated in that way, but which in fact describes a large group of well-known figures in our society and has come to be a well entrenched part of our perceived reality. Boorstin, and many scholars who have followed him, remind us that this is such an entrenched part of reality that we no longer think to question the existence of these things.

This interdisciplinary collection of scholarship is the basis on which both the theoretical and methodological foundations of this study are built. Though some of these works are more directly applied than others, the collective power of the scholarship had influenced the very premise of the study that follows. But popular culture scholarship is not the only field of influence at work here.

¹⁹ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, revised ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

The growing body of history and memory scholarship has had a tremendous degree of influence as well.

History and Memory Foundations

The consideration of memory in American history and culture is part of a larger interest in the nature and power of memory worldwide. The concept of memory seems to have a great deal of appeal to scholars of history and culture because of its collective nature and because of the power it has for both individuals and communities alike. Why memory has become such a compelling issue in American society in recent years is an interesting question, and one that is difficult to answer precisely, but it truly is a cultural phenomenon, existing not only within academic and other intellectual circles but in other social arenas as well. In many ways this is not a particularly new area of interest at all. Evidence of similar interests can be found throughout the past century and even before, but the level of interest seems much greater now than ever before, especially in this country.

Memory studies have been a distinct area of inquiry for some time now in countries like Germany and France, which have had to face major ideological schisms as a result of their experiences in World War II. The development of a scholarship on American memory has been a little slow in developing compared to some of the European scholarship. This could be explained in a number of different ways. The majority of the interest in this area of inquiry appears to have its roots in the post World War II era. The United States, though actively involved in the war, had a much different postwar reality to face than many other nations. We did not have to deal with the tremendous devastation of land and resources, for example. We also came away from the war believing that it was our involvement in the conflict that led to its successful outcome. Any mistakes or shortcomings associated with our involvement were minimized or even completely

ignored, leaving us with less need to understand and make peace with the complexities of the conflict. It is the need to understand the complexity of the past that leads to the creation of distinctive memories, a subject that has a great appeal to scholars who recognize the potential they offer in understanding the culture that creates them.

Not only is the timing of an interest in memory in this country different, there is also a difference in the dynamic found in American memory scholarship compared to that being done in Europe. In Germany, for example, “memory work” is understood as a socially activist activity, aimed at insuring the voices of certain groups and the remembrance of specific events within the national consciousness. It is understood as a “bottom-up” movement, one that is undertaken by the “people” in order to insure that more official, or “top-down,” versions of national memory will not erase certain events or interpretations of the past. The vast majority of the work that has been done on memory in this country, however, focuses on “official” uses of memory and the public backlash that occasionally results from a perceived manipulation of the past. American memory is often discussed as a “top-down” entity. And while there is most definitely a tradition in this country among members of historically marginalized groups to fight for their histories to be included and understood as part of a larger American history, that tradition has yet to be fully incorporated into the study of memory in this country. The subjects of memory study that have received the most attention from scholars are subjects such as the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian in the mid 1990s, and the development of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. The memory of Watergate and the creation of the Vietnam Memorial have also been early subjects in the field. In all of these cases, the scholarship centers around the government’s perceived manipulation of history to elicit a specific national understanding of the events in question and the responses of “the people” to that memory, or the concern on the part of the public of how academic analysis and interpretation of “sacred” and personal events might threaten important connections to the past.

The study of the Civil War, another popular topic of study in the field, is perhaps the most linked to the agendas of marginalized groups, as it questions the reasons that slavery disappeared from the memory of the war. But in this case as well, it is the position of the government on the war and their attempts to regulate thinking about it that often takes center stage in the scholarship. The conflict that often exists between “official” versions of history disseminated through government and media channels and the “popular” memory of individuals and communities within a society are among the most studied aspects of American memory.

But there are really two distinct components of any scholarship of memory. The first element deals with the study of these memory issues that erupt in society. This scholarship looks at the sources of the conflict and investigates them for both the causes and the significance in hopes of revealing something about both the contemporary society's attitudes and its use of the past. The second area looks at how memory itself works. This is where the consideration of why certain groups remember certain things, and how the very fact that there are competing notions of history out there affects the way we interact as a nation when it comes to understanding our past. The majority of the work that has been done on memory in this country falls into the former group. The scholarship consists primarily of what could be called case studies where specific historical events are investigated in terms of how they have been or are being publicly remembered. Given this fact, it is not surprising that the role of the government and the media in directing memory should figure so prominently in American memory work. The very fact that there has been a clash over the issue signifies that there is disagreement over the subject, and the “official” position on the issue would certainly be an important element in the conflict. It is especially compelling in a society such as ours the prides itself on a democratic orientation, where the government is expected to be working in tandem with the populace and not manipulating it in a predetermined direction.

But given the tremendous diversity in this country, it should really be the later kind of memory scholarship that we are focusing on to get the most salient results from the study of American memory. The divisions that exist within our country-- on racial, ethnic, class and gender lines in particular-- are perhaps our biggest challenge as a nation, and an understanding of how memory works within these different categories of people as well as how it functions on a national level would seem to be an important aspect of the division to consider in addressing that challenge. The work that currently exists opens the door for this kind of inquiry, but has yet to truly probe it. And although the two areas of memory scholarship are most definitely related, the field can not really come together as a cohesive whole until both areas have been addressed.

The current body of work that comprises American memory scholarship is somewhat uneven. There are many interesting studies being done that raise compelling questions, but they remain separate studies and have yet to come together as a cohesive whole that addresses the specific nature of American memory. Several scholars in particular have made a name for themselves in this area of inquiry, and their work will most likely prove to be the foundational texts on which further scholarship will be built, but there is still a great deal of work to be done, particularly in investigating the way the collective memories of different groups within our larger society interact in a national arena.

In his comprehensive text on history and tradition in American Culture, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Michael Kammen quotes Robert Penn Warren, saying that "to be American is not... a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea -- and history is the image of that idea."²⁰ This quote illuminates the conflicted relationships that Americans have with their history, and suggests why that relationship is different from the way citizens of other nations understand and relate to their

²⁰ Quoted in Michael, Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 11.

own history. That the origin of the United States is based on ideological rather than historical foundations is central to its existence as a nation, and to its citizens' understanding of themselves.

In *Mystic Chords of Memory*, Kammen surveys the scope of American history for evidence of how Americans understand and use their history, and provides an excellent starting place for trying to understand this complex relationship. Rather than using the term history, however, Kammen talks of tradition. The choice in terminology is significant. As Kammen explains, the traditional concept of History that is understood to mean the people and places of years ago has never had the same importance in the United States as it has had in other places. Unlike citizens of other countries, Kammen sees Americans as putting more import into themselves and their immediate forebears than ancestors or leaders from long ago. Attaching historical significance to their everyday actions is also something that Americans do that is not common in other places. In this way, describing the American connection to its past in terms of traditions rather than History works better. Traditions are things that are developed and are connected to the lived experiences of those that acknowledge them. Americans' sense of their own involvement in creating history makes the term tradition more appropriate for discussing their relationships to the past than the term History, as it implies a more participatory involvement. This comes much closer to the American sense of the past as Kammen understands it. Along with this inevitably comes memory, that is the way the past is remembered rather than how it "actually was." If in fact Americans view history as more of a lived experience than a treasured past, memory would trump history. For Americans, then, the past is more about what they themselves have accomplished and the remembrance of it than the acts of others on which their lives are built.

In undertaking his study of the American past, Kammen divides two centuries of American existence into four epochs. While acknowledging that the divisions do not always break out easily and that overlap definitely does exist, he structures his discussion around well known historical

events, and it becomes easy to see how our understanding of history is very much affected by the history itself. The first period he discusses is the antebellum period. During this time, the foundations of the country were being built and, conscious of the novelty of what they were doing in building this new country, Americans were ever conscious of how they were breaking from history and creating it at the same time, setting the stage for the history making mind set that has been with us ever since. The disruption of the Civil War provides the break that begins what Kammen refers to as the second epoch that lasts until the First World War. The trauma caused by the Civil War and the subsequent rebuilding that was necessary provided an incentive for creating a sense of unity in the country. The effort to ensure that the remembrance of the war would focus on unifying terms rather than in terms of the potentially divisive regional disagreements that the conflict had revealed signals a turn toward establishing a sense of national memory, where a single narrative is meant to speak for everyone, a new concept for the young country. Other changes that occur during this period such as the tremendous growth of industry and the influx of immigrants also provide a feeling of instability in the face of change that encouraged the development of national myths, based on the national history up to that point, to pull the growing nation together and encourage a sense of pride and confidence. The period between the two world wars makes up Kammen's third epoch. The growth of consumerism and mass culture during this time has a great deal of impact on the American conception of the past, allowing for a truly common culture for the large country for the first time. It also provides a new arena for developing and maintaining a national sense of memory. The last epoch begins at the close of World War II and continues to the present day. Kammen recognizes the tremendous patriotism and pride in American ingenuity that characterize our understanding of American history today and that are rooted in the postwar confidence and prosperity. It is in this last period where Kammen recognizes a concerted effort on the part of government to manipulate history for its own purposes, providing as much amnesia for

its citizens as memory. This comes as a result of the tremendous pride and confidence that Americans take from their successful involvement in World War II, and also in response to growing diversity in the country in the years following the war.²¹

Kammen's periodization and the tremendous scope of his study provide an excellent starting point for trying to understand the American relationship to the past. From Kammen's discussion it is easy to see how the history itself has affected our notions of it. To truly understand the relationship, though, as well as its depth, we must go on from where Kammen has left off and try to determine how and why Americans relate to history as they do.

This brings us back to the distinction between history and memory. It would appear as if what our culture truly embraces could best be termed memory, or perhaps heritage or tradition to use Kammen's terms. Our culture may not be particularly receptive to History (with a capital H), but it is quite responsive to the past. If it is in fact memory or tradition that we embrace, then that necessitates a consideration of how that is used in our society. The growing scholarship on memory has pointed to the fact that there can be multiple collective memories in a culture as diverse as ours, and that memory can be used by groups or forces in society to effect change or maintain the status quo. The power of memory, then, is potentially great, particularly in a culture that demonstrates an affinity for it. This is potentially problematic, as memory can easily be manipulated and is inherently malleable. Still, it does allow for a multiplicity of perspectives, which is appealing to a diverse society such as ours.

John Bodnar has characterized American history and memory as being divided into two categories: official memory, meaning history that is invoked to promote unity and consensus, and vernacular memory which is history that is recalled in a particular and immediate way. He

²¹ Michael, Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

describes them further by saying that official memory consists of abstract history, while vernacular memory is made up of concrete remembering. One example he gives to illustrate this point is the creation of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. While government interests lobbied for a traditional kind of war memorial that would reinforce the valor of the military effort despite the eventual loss and controversy that the war caused, many American citizens, veterans and their families and non-veterans alike, were more interested in a memorial that would recognize the many individual sacrifices that were made in the war, and not the engagement in the war itself. The Memorial was officially dedicated in such a way as to establish it as a monument to military valor, but the voice of the vernacular became heard as individual Americans visited the site and left mementos to honor the veterans whose names appeared on the memorial, and used the site as a place of reflection on the war and all of the issues that it raised. In the end, the official voice is represented in the memorial itself, the vernacular in the way it has come to be used.²²

Bodnar's work suggests that the vernacular voice, or the voice of "the people," is necessarily subversive, reacting to the official voice rather than contributing to the shaping of it. This is in keeping with many other memory scholars who suggest that memory is something that is primarily manipulated from above, a power tool that helps to direct the ideals and thinking of the nation as a whole in the direction it deems most appropriate. And to be sure, there are examples of this happening in both our past and our present.

Recent work by memory scholar David Blight provides an excellent example of how future scholars might consider American memory. In his book *Race and Reunion* and in articles and speeches on the subject, Blight has investigated the memory of the Civil War as it developed in the fifty years following Appomattox with admirable scope. Blight's work does focus on a particular

²² For more on this discussion see John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

event in American history, but unlike many other memory studies, he does not seek to explain a “memory clash” or even chronicle the process of a memorialization of the event. He does address the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the close of the war, but as part of the ongoing development of memory about the war. Blight recognizes that there were multiple responses to remembering the war, emphasizing not only the complexity of reconstruction but the subjective nature of collective memory in general, particularly in a large and diverse society such as the United States. The “official” position promoted by government interests is addressed, but so is the powerful movement on the part of veterans from both sides and other Americans who desperately wanted to remember the war in a way that would allow them to honor the sacrifice of the soldiers and the eventual reunification of the country without having to confront the difficult issues of slavery and race relations that caused the conflict in the first place. Blight also includes a discussion of the emancipationist view of the war held by many freedmen and abolitionist activists, and how it became buried by the “popular forgetting” that swept the nation, motivated not only by politicians who had a vested interest in unifying a nation that was facing many obstacles and challenges as the twentieth century dawned, but also by a white citizenry that was eager to remember the war on reconciliationist and progressive terms.²³

Though a tremendous contribution to the scholarship on American memory based on its discussion of the Civil War, arguably the most influential event in American history *and* memory, alone, Blight’s work is perhaps most valuable to this growing field in the example it offers in its construction and approach. Considering the simultaneous existence of conflicting memories of diverse communities, and the ways in which an “official” and national memory came to be constructed despite their existence, Blight suggests an understanding of how collective memory has and does work in our country. By considering the political, social, and cultural climate in which

²³ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (New York: Belknap Press, 2001).

the memory was forged, Blight also reminds us that the broadest base of consideration for understanding the creation and meaning of collective memory is the most sound. And though his work is grounded in an analysis of collective memory as it developed in a specific time and place, Blight's work offers tremendous insight into how that memory has shaped and is a part of our current collective memory on the subject, and on many other subjects as well. It is this kind of scholarship that realizes the true potential that memory studies have to offer.

Some of the best known work in the field focuses on the political aspects of American memory. Edward Linenthal, in particular, has written extensively in this area. Studying such sensitive areas as the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit controversy, the United States Holocaust Museum, and most recently the memorial to the Oklahoma City bombing, Linenthal has probed the meaning behind the historical memorials we erect and the way we go about erecting them. The events he has considered are quite different from one another, but Linenthal has found similar tendencies displayed in each. He has contributed a great deal to the field by acknowledging that as much as our memorialization of historical events is about how we want to remember them, it is also reflective of a sense of moral integrity we hope to capture in facing some of the uglier parts of our past in what we deem to be a frank way.²⁴ Linenthal's work is limited, though, in that it focuses on individual examples of memory clashes and memorialization, and while raising important points along the way, is not as comprehensive as it might be in acknowledging this trend in American memory in general. Other scholars have contributed similar studies, considering specific acts of memorialization in recent years in light of how academics and professionals have characterized the events in question and how the public has reacted to them. These studies are very

²⁴ See for example his consideration of the U.S. Holocaust Museum in *Preserving Memory: the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking, 1995) where he discusses how Americans' interest in and willingness to memorialize the tragedy of the holocaust reflects a need to show acknowledgement and repudiation of the event in addition to actually honoring those who were killed and those who survived.

valuable in themselves, but the field of American memory has yet to produce a comprehensive look at how all of these individual memory clashes and debates reflect a larger understanding of the power and functioning of American memory.

The study of history and memory, both here and abroad, takes its cue from theories of collective memory that were put forth by sociologists in the early twentieth century. In particular the work of Maurice Halbwachs has been foundational to this growing field of study. Credited with coining the term collective memory, Halbwachs suggested a notion of memory that contradicted understandings of it as a distinctly personal process. For Halbwachs, memory was a distinctly social process, highly selective and only truly possible when individuals were functioning in a social sphere. He believed that all kinds of groups could have collective memories, and that individuals could participate in multiple collective memory groups at any given time. He made a clear distinction between history and memory, acknowledging that while the events of history might well figure into collective memory, the memories of them were significantly different.²⁵ Memory is understood by Halbwachs, and the many scholars who have followed his lead, to be an emotional entity, and one that becomes foundational for communities and the individuals that comprise them. Historical events will be remembered, but once those memories are created, they become separate from the history of the event. For memory scholars, memory is often much more powerful than history, because of the emotional component and because of its tendency to become a foundational part of group and personal identity.

Though there is still debate among scholars from a broad range of disciplines as to whether collective memory does, or even can, exist, the scholarship on memory generally works on the assumption that collective memory not only can and does exist but has enormous power and is central to the functioning of a society, whether the individual members of the community recognize

²⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

it or not. Halbwachs' influence can be found in nearly every consideration of American memory, and it has opened up new lines of questions within the field. David Glassberg, for example, uses Halbwachs' theory to introduce his inquiry into an investigation of what he terms "a sense of history" that he believes is prevalent in the United States at this time. He says, "Through conversations with others, we learn about a past before our own experience, share versions of the past with others, and seek to have our version of the past accepted in the larger society."²⁶ This leads him to ask the questions: "with all the possible versions of the past that can circulate in society, how do particular accounts of the past get established and disseminated as the public one? How do these public histories change over time?"²⁷ These questions are being addressed slowly by the scholarship on American memory that is developing and can serve as orienting foundation for further scholarship on memory.

But why has Halbwachs' work and the interest in understanding the nature and power of memory become so prominent in the United States recently? As was suggested earlier, in many ways this interest has been with us for some time, though it may not have been defined and described in the same terms. David Blight describes his first use of the term memory in his own work as coming from its use by African-American activist Frederick Douglass in his speeches in the late nineteenth century.²⁸ Douglass' use of the term is similar to its current use in the scholarship on memory, signaling that perhaps this recognition of the existence and power of memory is not as recent as we might think. Indeed, within communities of Americans that have been marginalized by the larger society a conscious awareness of the functioning of history and memory has been well recognized for some time now. Though their marginalization may have kept that awareness out of

²⁶ David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 10.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Speech given at Michigan State University, February 13, 2003.

consideration in the larger society, to say that we are just now becoming aware of it would not be completely true.

So why is the interest in memory so visible now, or, perhaps, why has it become such a popular area of academic inquiry in recent years? A number of reasons have been suggested for this, some particular to the United States and some more universally applicable. Many of these reasons reflect larger social and cultural trends in our society rather than trends within the academic community, but which have definitely influenced the scholarly climate in this country as well. One factor that is often suggested to explain the current vogue of memory is the fall of the Soviet empire and end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. Certainly in Europe this had a tremendous impact on the functioning and identity of former Soviet block countries and their neighbors. But its effect was also felt strongly in this country, though perhaps in a different way. The end of the cold war, though seen as an American capitalist victory, left us with an identity crisis. We had positioned ourselves for so long as the enemy of communism and the countries who espoused it, that when that enemy no longer existed as we had known it, we were forced to rethink who we were and where we stood in the world. And while many of the ideas on which our culture was based did not change, how we talked and thought about them had to be redefined, less in terms of oppositional and in more straightforward terms. Particularly with the vogue of multiculturalism and identity politics that had become popular since the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a strong sense of American patriotism and identity seemed in jeopardy, at least to some. When we no longer had a common enemy in communism, our diversity became a threat to our unity. The potential danger of a fragmented nature was seen as a direct threat to American prosperity and our powerful standing in the world. Reestablishing a collective memory based on American success and solvency was viewed by many conservative segments of society as a potential safeguard of unity.

Of course that same identity politics has also been offered as a reason why memory studies have become so central to the exploration of American culture and history. Since the social movements for rights that exploded in the 1960s and 1970s, there has come to be an expectation of equal representation among the many groups that make up our larger society. This is, of course, in many ways a highly positive thing for our culture and for individual citizens. It is also, however, potentially highly divisive. In reaction to the splintering of a national consciousness that occurred during this period, there has been a backlash of conservative thought aimed at maintaining unity at all costs. Even in more recent years when our comfort level with our diversity has increased, there is still the underlying fear of that same diversity destroying a sense of commonality that is seen as essential for a stable and productive nation. Those inside and outside of the academy were introduced to the concept of collective memory in a very immediate and real way during those years and the ones that have followed, and this may well have set the stage for the current vogue of memory that we are now seeing. With the acceptance of the new social history that recognized the importance of recapturing the pasts of groups that had previously been omitted from the national narrative, the discipline of history was especially well situated to begin to include a consideration of memory in its scholarship. Of course this increasing complexity of the national narrative has also been seen by some as potentially threatening to a sense of American identity, eliciting a similar response to the post Cold War mentality mentioned above.

To bolster a sense of unity that these social and political forces were seen to threaten, the power of American history and the way it is remembered by individual Americans has been harnessed by “official” channels, such as governmental and cultural leaders. How memorials and museum exhibits are designed, for example, in terms of the message they send about the history they are portraying, has become a subject of great concern. The increase in the use of history as material for popular culture artifacts such as television shows can also be linked to this. As an

“official” definition of history, disseminated through cultural forms, is being constructed, however, the reaction of the public has not always been in agreement. Recent years have seen clashes of memory unfold in this country, the most well known being the controversy of the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute in the mid 1990s. What was initially envisioned as an exhibit commemorating the end of World War II and the American military initiative that caused it, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, eventually became a very small and neutral display of the plane that had dropped the bomb. Public reaction and concern on the part of museum and government interests about how the originally conceived exhibit would be received given the controversy that has always existed over whether using the bomb was the proper course of action or not changed the way the exhibit was eventually presented.²⁹ This is a clear example of how memory interests on both sides of the issue were powerful and also how that power has come to be recognized.

The public nature of clashes like these has also contributed to the vogue of memory as we are experiencing it today. As the controversies unfold, the public becomes more aware of the concept of collective memory and its significance in both our personal and national lives. At the same time, academics are made even more aware of its significance, and both the underlying concept and the clashes themselves become topics that cry out to be studied.

Another possible explanation for the increase in the interest in memory is that we currently find ourselves in a culture that seems to favor things historical, at least on the surface. The increase in the speed of our lives that has continued to accelerate over the course of the entire twentieth century is often seen as at least partially responsible for our recent cultural interest in the past. If in

²⁹ A number of books and articles have been written that discuss this controversy and the historical event itself. See, for example, Michael J. Hogan, *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), and Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: the Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996).

fact our fast paced existence is responsible for an increased interest in the past, then it makes sense that the past found in memory would be more appealing than the past found in history. Often seen as a rather cold body of information with little immediate import to the present and the daily lives we are living, History can offer little solace to a culture reeling at the speed of its own pace. Memory on the other hand, with its emotional base, can be reassuring in a number of ways. First, it may conjure up images of a simpler time and place that makes for a pleasant escape, even if it is for a short time, to avoid the whirlwind of the present. Second, it may serve as a reinforcement of the progress that has been made up to that point, and provide encouragement to carry on despite sometimes daunting prospects of the future. This reinforces the belief on the part of many scholars that Americans are not all that interested in History and the lessons it offers for the present at all, but in their comforting conceptions of the past, found in their memories and not in their knowledge of history. This important distinction is being recognized by a widening number of scholars who are studying the social and cultural dynamics it suggests.

The academic consideration of memory by historians and cultural scholars is also in keeping with an increased recognition in the scholarly world of the subjectivity of academic inquiry. High levels of objectivity in scholarly pursuits have long been deemed preferable to subjective considerations, and until fairly recently it was accepted by many that scholarly objectivity in areas such as History and cultural studies was entirely possible. The feasibility of such objectivity is being called into question more and more recently, as scholars in many fields recognize that the nature of scholarship mandates its distinction as interpretive work, based on evidence but inevitably influenced by the experience and perspective of the author and the society in which it is undertaken. Memory's distinction as a highly subjective entity may very well have kept it out of scholarly consideration in the past simply because of its inherent subjectivity. The recent shifting of

opinion on issues of objectivity within academia may well have ushered in a period that is more welcoming of such areas of consideration.

In this new vogue of memory in the United States there are distinct conceptions and approaches that are being established. And although similar attention may have been paid to similar subjects in the past, today's memory scholarship seems more defined. David Glassberg has suggested that what makes the current scholarship of memory distinct from earlier historical inquiries is not a matter of subject but of approach. He sees that "where earlier studies primarily sought to characterize a single group or institution's beliefs about its past, the new studies primarily seek to understand the interrelationships between different versions of the past in the public arena."³⁰ Recent scholarship is organized around the investigation of "what the anthropologist Robert Redfield termed 'the social organization of tradition': how various versions of the past are communicated in society through a multiplicity of institutions and media..."³¹ He recognizes an expansion in "the types of institutions and ideas that historians customarily examine in the traditional historiography course, situating professional historical scholarship as not the only thought about history but one of several versions of the past competing for public influence in a particular place and time."³²

While the study of American memory can be seen as part of a larger scholarship on memory that is growing worldwide, there is also a distinct character to it that separates it from other bodies of work on the subject. In addition to the reasons for being in vogue mentioned earlier that are particular to this country, there is also the nature of American history and ideals that comes into play here. Michael Kammen has described this recent vogue of scholarship as concerning "the nature and functions of collective (or social) memory in American life, particularly

³⁰ Glassberg, 8.

³¹ Glassberg, 9-10.

³² Glassberg, 9.

given the traditional propensity of this society for being present-minded and having an unreliable attention span-indeed, having a clear penchant for reconfiguring the past in order to make it comfortably congruent with contemporary needs and assumptions.”³³ He also mentions what he sees as “a major cultural paradox: historical amnesia amidst so much apparent interest in the past displayed at museums, historic sites and thematic historical places”³⁴ This seems to be a characteristic of American memory.

Arthur Neal has suggested that there are three specific events in American history that can be said to have shaped American identity, and the same three events can be used to mark the development of American memory. Neal says, “The epic struggles of the American Revolution, the trauma of the Civil War, and the heroic undertakings in winning World War II required extensive personal sacrifices and permanently changed the content of what it means to be an American.”³⁵ In terms of American memory, the Revolutionary War is what established Americans as the heirs to an ideological foundation rather than a historical one, but it is also the event that is perhaps the most mythologized in American thought. The stories that Americans have been telling themselves about this war and the reasons for which it was fought and our victory in it against immense odds, go to the core of what Americans believe about themselves, and provide a foundation on which everything that has come since has been based. Until the disruption of the Civil War, the memory of the American Revolution was what formed the foundation of the concept of American exceptionalism that drove the development and expansion of this country and established a sense of identity for the citizens of the new country. This marks the first real use of memory in our history to establish a collective consciousness.

³³ Michael Kammen *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ix.

³⁴ Kammen, xii.

³⁵ Arthur Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the Twentieth Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 22.

The division caused by the Civil War called the sacredness of that earlier memory into question, and the first true memory crisis that this country faced erupted. As David Blight has described in his book *Race and Reunion*, the half-century that followed the end of the Civil War was characterized by a persistent effort on the part of both the government and a large percentage of the public to focus the memory of the war on the common sacrifice of soldiers from both sides and the eventual reunification of the country rather than on the causes for the conflict and the legacy of slavery that was not being successfully dealt with. The effects of that remembering can still be felt today as we as a nation still remember the war on many of those same terms and deal with the problems of race relations that can be traced back to the failure of our predecessors to deal with the issue head on.

The third event that Neal lists is the American involvement in World War II. This has perhaps had the most effect on the state of American memory today. It is in the postwar period that a concerted effort on the part of the state to create and maintain a national collective memory can be most clearly seen. The necessities of the Cold War that followed World War II and the ever growing diversity of American culture made a unified sense of the past seem crucial to government interests and comforting to a wary citizenry. The same events made for a feeling of instability among the American people who relished the opportunity to embrace a cohesive, patriotic and reassuring notion of the past. The effects of this postwar memory can still be felt today, and is most directly seen in our current affinity for things historical and in our embracing of the vogue of memory.

It is useful to employ historical landmarks as signposts in constructing a periodization of American memory, but there have been many influences on how American collective memory has been formed. Our distinction as an immigrant nation, for example, is evoked in our celebration of our multiculturalism, despite our underlying uneasiness with it at times. Our belief in our

seemingly endless natural resources, though seriously in question today, remains an important part of not only our collective memory but of our national identity. In addition to suggesting the period markers discussed earlier, Arthur Neal has also suggested that national traumas of various kinds have shaped our collective memory and subsequently our national identity. Extending the definition of trauma as it is generally understood to effect individuals, Neal sees national traumas as particularly influential on collective memory because they are “shared collectively” and have a “cohesive effect” on communities.³⁶ In addition to wars and similar historical events that can easily be recognized as traumatic, Neal also discusses historical moments such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. as traumatic events that have forced us to question our ideals and our values and have therefore shaped our collective memory. In understanding how American memory has developed, it is important to consider not only the historical events that have shaped it, but the kinds of immediate reactions that individuals have to those events and the kinds of values they call into questions. By broadening out the scope of events that we consider when studying American memory, Neal has reinforced this kind of consideration that can only strengthen the body of memory scholarship that is being developed.

A number of film scholars and historians have also taken on the consideration of memory and how it is both used and influenced in film production and consumption. A great deal of this scholarship is produced by historians set on righting the historical wrongs that are disseminated through film. They seek to set the record straight by analyzing and judging films based on their historical accuracy.³⁷ Film scholars have been more interested in the ways in which film influences

³⁶ Neal, 4.

³⁷ See, for example, Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Mark C. Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Owl Books, 1996); George MacDonald Frazer, *The Hollywood History of the World: From One Million Years B.C. to Apocalypse Now* (New York: William Morrow, 1988); Peter C. Rollins, ed., *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, revised ed. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998) and *The Columbia Companion to*

collective memory and also how collective memory has influenced the interpretation of history in film.³⁸ Though the goals of the scholarship by these two groups are clearly different, together they have educated not only those inside the academy but also those outside it about the power of film to influence our public perceptions of the past.

The exact framework that is used to hang the study of American memory on is not nearly as important as the results of the scholarship itself. The consideration of American memory, particularly when it is taken as part of a larger scholarship on American history and culture, has a great deal to teach us. The effects of this knowledge are far reaching. There are implications for the pedagogy of teaching history, for the functioning of politics in this country on all levels, and for cultural industries that seek to educate their audiences while simultaneously entertaining them. There is also a great deal to be learned about the way individuals and communities develop a sense of identity and how communities function based on those developments. The potential exists for a tremendous increase in the ability of diverse groups within our society to understand and relate to one another. Of course the study of American memory can not do all of these things alone, but it does offer information and insight that can help in achieving these goals. There is a great deal of value in considering memory, not only for scholars, but for a nation that is often at odds with its value of diversity and its need for unity.

American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Frank Sanello, *Reel v. Real: How Hollywood Turns Fact into Fiction* (New York: Taylor Publishing, 2003); Robert Brent Toplin, *History By Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

³⁸ See, for example, Paul Grainge, ed., *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Landy, Marcia, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Peter C. Rollins, ed., *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, revised ed. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998) and *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Have Portrayed the American Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

Material Culture Influences

Some of the most foundational work that has been done in the field of material culture has also been important to the creation of the analysis found in this study. This is particularly true for the work of material culture scholars that has tempered traditional historical scholarship. For example, the notion that by considering the artifactual evidence left by early Americans in addition to the written records familiar to historical scholarship, James Deetz, in *In Small Things Forgotten*, was able to challenge previously held notions of life in the past that were highly romanticized and understood as similar to present day life only more simple.³⁹ This new understanding of the past as more “messy” and substantially different from our present day reality affected not only the way history was written and taught, but also how it was interpreted and presented to the public in historical sites and museums, and, to some degree, in the media as well. While borrowing techniques from archeology and demonstrating a wider application for them, Deetz simultaneously provided historians with a potential way of rethinking and expanding their research.

As Thomas Schlereth has noted, drawing on the research of other disciplines does not preclude material culture scholars from establishing new explanatory theories. Just as it has developed methods particular to the study of objects by drawing on the techniques and perspectives of other disciplines, the field of material culture may develop new theories for understanding them as well, theories that may well prove useful to the related disciplines in turn. Indeed, the environment of material culture studies that boasts a cadre of practitioners trained in a wide variety of disciplines can only encourage the development of new and innovative ways of applying theory as well as new theories themselves. An important example of this is the work of Mihaly

³⁹ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 254.

Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochbert-Halton in *The Meaning on Things*.⁴⁰ In their investigation of the significance of the objects and places that people surround themselves with, these scholars brought the methods and perspectives of sociology to bear on both the construction of their research and their interpretation of the results. Their contribution has had an influence on subsequent scholars working in material culture studies, not only in suggesting ways of applying the study of objects to a more contemporary category of evidence and in suggesting a slightly different perspective on the possible connections between people and things, but also in demonstrating new methods for doing so. Their work has changed the character of the larger field, and, in addition, has broadened the perspective of the influencing discipline, in this case sociology. If we extend the understanding of objects to include more abstract things like movies and television programs, this theory had tremendous potential for use in popular culture scholarship, especially in the consideration of historically based productions.

Two Foundational Texts

Two additional pieces of scholarship that have significantly influenced the most foundational thinking behind this study share its tendency to bring together previously unconnected disciplines and theories. Though the authors of these texts are a part of traditional established academic disciplines, their work suggests more far reaching applications than most other disciplinary research.

The first text works from a primarily sociological perspective to explore the waning civil engagement in American culture. During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States witnessed a period of tremendous civic engagement. Growing steadily over the course of the twentieth century

⁴⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

up until that point, American involvement in community activities, from membership in social and service groups to participation in the political process, peaked during this period. In the last third of the century, and continuing into the first few years of the twenty-first century, however, the trend has reversed, and Americans are now less civically engaged than at anytime since the dawn of the twentieth century. What has been the cause of this reversal of involvement? The answer to that question is anything but clear. In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam explores the decline of civic involvement in this country, its impact on our communities and our society as a whole, and offers suggestions for how we might reverse the trend to recapture the “glory days” of civic involvement of the not so distant past.

A central component to his discussion of this phenomenon is the concept of social capital. Noting that this term has been coined numerous times over the course of the century and in a variety a ways, Putnam defines the term as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁴¹ It is a loss of social capital that is the most devastating result of civic disengagement, Putnam contends, as it compromises our ability to function efficiently as a society. The benefits of mutual obligation and interconnectedness which not only enrich our individual lives but also provide the basis for smooth interactions on a day to day basis flourish in an environment rich with social capital. To live without it in substantial amounts is to be disconnected from one another which complicates even the most basic of social functions. Putnam makes it easy to see that the more social capital that is lost the more difficult it is to get it back.

But we are not yet at the point of being completely isolated from one another. We make connections, but they are narrow, short lived, and largely self-motivated. Rather than connecting with a large community, we are focused on a small one, built around the specific circumstances of

⁴¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 2001), 19.

our lives and convenient to them.⁴² But these kinds of connections do not offer the benefits of the kind of social capital that used to characterize our culture.

And Americans seem to recognize the environment of decreasing social capital that they are living in. We sense that socially and morally we are not doing as well as we could be. When surveyed, Americans identify themselves and their neighbors as selfish and recognize a “breakdown in community.” They acknowledge that previous generations were more successful in showing concern for the needs of others and for the community as a whole. Many even seem to acknowledge it with longing, but still the situation remains. There is a recognition that our contemporary society privileges the development of the individual over the development of the community.⁴³ This conflict between individual and community has been an ongoing struggle in this country since its inception, and both this trend and the Americans themselves seem to be acknowledging that the individual seems to be winning the battle, at least in our most recent past. For Putnam and many of the people he discusses, this is problematic.

Though Putnam’s assessment of these social factors does not prove to be entirely conclusive, he did find that certain changes in our lifestyles between the 1960s and today can be connected to the decline in civic engagement. For example, increasing time and money pressures have decreased our amount of leisure time and increased the amount of stress that we deal with, thereby limiting the amount of time and energy we have available to put into community activities. The effects of suburbanization and residential mobility can also be blamed for contributing to the decline, by continually separating us from one another in space and perspective. The advancement of technology and electronic forms of entertainment have also taken over much of our leisure time, decreasing our need for and interest in community based forms of entertainment. The area that

⁴² Ibid., 184.

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

Putnam found most likely to be effecting our community connections, though, has to do with generational change, where the generation that drove the “glory days” of civic engagement are becoming more and more outnumbered by generations raised in an environment characterized by the alienating social factors mentioned above.⁴⁴

Throughout his discussion of our contemporary civil disengagement, Putnam discusses the power of nostalgia, and takes precautions against letting it disrupt his objective investigation of the waning of social capital in our society. He remains firm throughout his discussion that we are in fact witnessing a decline in community involvement, and it is not simply nostalgia for the past and its days of greater civic engagement that we are experiencing. He does, however, acknowledge “that on the eve of the millennium the market for civic nostalgia was hotter than the market for blue-chip stocks.”⁴⁵ This nostalgic trend, many would argue, is something that has been with us for sometime now, as witnessed in our television shows, our fashion trends and the rise in the popularity of the hobby of collecting in this country. And it appears as though the rise in nostalgia may coincide with the waning of true civic involvement. And although Putnam would most likely claim that these two trends do not have a causal relationship, it does seem possible that they could be related in some way.

For along with the rise in nostalgia has come a rising interest on the part of many Americans in historically based activities, reflecting a need or desire to make connections with the past. Increased visitation to historical sites and museums, an explosion in the interest and participation in amateur genealogy, the proliferation of popular movie and television accounts of historical events, and the rise of heritage tourism as a profitable industry all attest to interest on the part of Americans in incorporating the past into their lives. Yet, even with this increase in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 283.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 288.

historically based activity, at the same time there has developed a recognition on the part of historians and educators that Americans are woefully undereducated in and misinformed about the history of their country. Some have gone as far as diagnosing our society as suffering from historical amnesia. Partly in response to this perceived deficiency in our historical knowledge, the field of American memory studies has developed, where historians and cultural scholars seek to understand the nature of collective memory as it applies to historical events in order to explain how and why history is presented in particular ways in the public forum and how that effects the way Americans understand history. Is it our collective memories of the past, often distorted from and out of sync with the actual history, that are destroying our historical knowledge? Or are the teachers to blame?

The correlation between this increase in historically based activity and the simultaneous weakness in our historical knowledge has not been investigated, and perhaps there is no direct correlation. After all, many Americans profess a distinct distaste for “History” as they know it from school. The tendency of Americans to minimize the significance of history and the past has long been considered one of our defining traits. Historian Michael Wallace has characterized the United States as an “ahistorical” nation, and suggested that we may even go beyond that to be “historicidal,” or hostile to the past.⁴⁶ Certainly Americans are known for the way they embrace the future, always striving to move ahead and to find bigger, better and faster ways to do things. Yet even Wallace acknowledges that we do display some interest in the past, even if we choose not to label it as “History,” and even if it is only to showcase our history of advancement and forward-thinking.

In many cases the historically based activities that we are choosing to participate in can be seen as evidence of similar societal characteristics as those that Putnam identified as detrimental to potential community involvement. A random survey of Americans, conducted under the

⁴⁶ Michael Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), ix.

supervision of historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in the 1990s, uncovered some of the ways in which Americans outside the academy engaged the past in their everyday lives. Finding and exploring personally meaningful components of the past rather than a commitment to understanding the “big picture” of American history characterized the respondent’s professed involvement with history. The embrace of genealogy for example, one of the activities identified as appealing by the survey respondents, could be reflective of those narrower, more self-indulgent connections that Putnam found we have become more likely to create. Genealogy is, after all, the study of one’s particular family history, connected to a larger history, but only to the degree that the individual researcher chooses to connect it. The growing predominance of the use of technological resources for genealogists could be seen as another isolating characteristic of this form of historical activity. Where once genealogists met in groups at local libraries to compare notes and share strategies, today’s practitioners are more likely to monitor an online bulletin board or list-serve where they can be a part of the community only as much and when they choose to be. Viewing historical material on television or at the movies, another popular response on Rosenzweig and Thelen’s survey, is also a fairly solitary event. As Putnam has noted, television and other electronic forms of entertainment only inhibit our interactions with others, and the viewing of historical material through these mediums is no different than any other type of material viewed in this way.

Is there a connection between the decrease in civic involvement and the increase in participation in activities related to the past? While there has been no research into any direct correlation between these two concurrent trends, there are enough potential connections between the two to warrant further consideration. Those seeking to explain the increase in historically based activity often cite some of the same social factors as Putnam has suggested for civic disengagement as potential explanations for our need to make connections with the past. To name

but a few, the increase in the pace of our lifestyles, residential mobility that takes us away from family and leaves us “rootless,” and the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s the lead to increased self-consciousness on the part of many groups of Americans regarding their position within the larger society are all used to explain both of these trends.

It seems natural that if Americans do in fact recognize the decline in civic engagement and feel that it is a weakness in our contemporary culture, as Putnam’s research suggests, that there would come with that a longing for the past that is expressed in nostalgic terms. But how closely connected is nostalgia to a true interest in the past? Nostalgia is defined as a longing for the past, and is often emotional and sentimental in nature. It is certainly possible to feel “warm and fuzzy” about the past without feeling any need to engage in an activity that creates a meaningful connection to it. And yet it also seems reasonable that for some people at least, nostalgia might lead to a need to create more meaningful connections to the past.

However, the historically based activity in which we are engaging does not appear to be moving us any closer to reversing the trend of civic disengagement. Putnam, in his presentation and analysis of extensive research in this area, does not consider the nature of the popular historical consciousness or the levels of participation in activities connected with the past. They do not figure into the measurement of social capital, and therefore do not appear to be a likely suspect in the decline of community involvement. That does not mean, however, that they are not related in any way. If we are able to reverse the trend and recapture some of the social stability and community feeling that existed in the not so distant past, using Putnam’s suggestions or other methods, will we see a decline in historically minded activity? Or will it only grow stronger? Though not the stuff of Putnam’s analysis, it is certainly an intriguing subject, and one that will certainly benefit from the discussion of community found in Putnam’s text.

The second text that has provided a foundation for this study was researched and written by historians seeking to understand the perception and understanding of their subject outside the walls of the academy. In the late 1980s, a group of professional American historians, spearheaded by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, met to discuss what they saw as a crisis within their discipline: a distinctive lack of connection between professional historians and professional history and the popular historical consciousness in the larger society. Their perception was that the historical scholarship being produced in the academy was not reaching the public, and even more that most Americans were not even interested in that kind of scholarship. Out of a felt need to address and overcome this barrier, Rosenzweig and Thelen created and distributed a national survey, mentioned above, aimed at uncovering the way Americans understood their history and the ways they made use of it in their lives. Their survey also grew out of a recognition in the late 1980s, similar to that by scholars like Michael Wallace, that many Americans seemingly experienced historical amnesia, while at the same time there seemed to be increased popular participation in historically based activities, such as visiting museums and historical sites. The results of their work provide some of the foundation for this dissertation.

In *The Presence of the Past*, the chronicle of their experience and results, Rosenzweig and Thelen established that history is actually an integral part of the lives of many Americans, and that it is distinct and different in numerous ways from the kind of history that is constructed and practiced within the academy. Unlike historians who are generally motivated by an interest in understanding the scope of American history and specific aspects of its dynamic and its legacy, when “ordinary Americans” engage in historically based leisure activities, they are generally motivated by more personal needs, and the history they are interested in is generally more narrow in scope. They seek to understand the past in terms of their own lives and interests, and internalize it as part of their very identity, where it becomes part of their sense of who they are and how they fit into the larger

society. On both individual and community levels, Americans use the past to make sense of the present and their place in it, and to show pride in the part that they and their ancestors have played in its development. *The Presence of the Past* also reflected the interest of professional historians in bridging the gap that exists between academic history and popular historical consciousness in the United States. The survey and its results are an important step toward gaining an understanding of that popular historical consciousness.⁴⁷

While a good foundation, however, the work of Thelen and Rosenzweig provides only a first step in understanding the presence of the past in American lives. It is a crucial first step to be sure, but one that cries out to be developed. Through their survey, Rosenzweig and Thelen identified the kinds of historically based activities that Americans choose to participate in, such as patronizing historical sites and museums and doing genealogical research. They also began to identify a general sense of how Americans connect to the past. However, because of the nature of their investigation (a telephone survey designed to compile information from a fairly large and diverse group of respondents in order to determine trends) they were unable to investigate the named activities or to directly probe the respondents' reasons for participating in them on a detailed level. As the first real investigation into this popular American historical consciousness, Rosenzweig and Thelen were interested in getting a sense of the scope of the phenomenon. They designed their survey to elicit initial responses from a primarily randomly chosen group of Americans in order to provide a foundation for understanding the presence of the past in the lives of "regular Americans." In providing that foundation, Rosenzweig and Thelen have laid out a map for exploring popular participation in historically based activities more in depth.

⁴⁷ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

This study explores one area of that map, focusing on the most pervasive and therefore most influential arena of popular historical engagement, television. Working from the conclusions reached by Rosenzweig and Thelen regarding the presence of the past in American society and culture, and with an understanding of the nature of social interaction and civic engagement suggested by Putnam, this consideration of American historical programming on American television seeks to illuminate the role of the medium in molding our national collective memory, and introduce it into the field of history and memory scholarship. It also seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship in television studies while simultaneously drawing on previous work in this area as well as other popular culture scholarship.

CHAPTER TWO

The Power of Television

Before a consideration of any medium's effect on the popular American historical consciousness can begin, it is necessary to ground that consideration in the context of the medium itself. Though it is the programming found on television that is the focus of this study, it is necessary to consider television itself first. The history of the medium and its particular characteristics play a role in how the programming affects the viewer.

The Rise of Television

It is hard to overestimate the impact of the media on contemporary life. No longer the novelty it once was, it has become so commonplace that the impact it is having might easily go unrecognized. But there is virtually no aspect of American life today that is not touched by the media. It is our major source of information and a chief source of entertainment, to say nothing of its use for communication. And there is no one singular mass medium that is more integrated into daily life than television. According to Nielsen Media Research, the leading media research organization, by the year 2000, 98% of American households had at least one television, and the vast majority of those (76%) had multiple sets.¹ The average number of viewing hours per day is

¹ *2000 Report on Television: The First Fifty Years*, by John A. Dimling, president and chief executive officer, Nielsen Media Research (New York: Nielsen Media Research, 2000), 13.

seven hours and twenty-four minutes.² Television ownership and the number of hours devoted to watching television have increased fairly consistently over the medium's fifty year history, continually increasing the amount of influence that it has on our culture. Both its physical existence as a standard part of the home and its cultural existence as a source of common information make life without it seem almost inconceivable.

It is precisely because television has become such an integral part of our lives that its impact, not only on our day to day routines but also on our minds and our thought processes, cannot be ignored. Our very understanding in the world around us and the formation of our opinions and attitudes toward any number of things are influenced by what we see on the small, yet ever growing, screens that surround us nearly everywhere we go. Indeed, television has become so integral to our lives that it has even been called an environment in which we live. Cecelia Tichi, in her book *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*, suggests that in the decades since its first appearance in our lives and in our homes, television has become so pervasive that it has become a space within which we exist as a culture.³ Just as we inhabit cities and the countryside, Americans live in world shaped by television. Unlike the skyscrapers and farmland that help us identify and recognize our physical surroundings, however, the television environment, though it exerts a strong influence on our lives, has no real tangible signposts, and is, therefore, virtually invisible, and it is only when we go looking for it specifically that it becomes visible. Most Americans do not think or care to go in search of such an abstract construct, but that does not mean that they do not exist within its grasp. And the very invisibility of this environment magnifies its influence, as it does not occur to us to critically consider or question our existence within it. This is especially true for the growing number of Americans, born after 1950, for whom there was no

² Ibid., 14.

³ Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

life without television, as they were born after it gained its stronghold on American life, and therefore have no outside vantage point from which to consider it. The television has become a modern day hearth, around which homes are organized and families gather. It has, literally and figuratively, become a focal point of our everyday lives.⁴

It is natural, then, to expect that our historical understanding, and even knowledge, is shaped by the historical interpretations that we see on television. In fact, there may be no other medium that has more of an impact on contemporary collective memory. Its omnipresence in our lives has also given it a certain air of authority, setting a new standard, the “as seen on TV” standard that acts as a common cultural yard stick of sorts against which Americans can measure themselves and their knowledge.⁵ No other medium has the reach that television does, and no other is as pervasive a part of day to day life.

Of course, this was not always the case. It has taken many decades for television to rise to its current level of influence. Though we commonly think of television as a 1950s invention, it actually has a much longer history. The earliest cultural references to television can be found in the 1920s, and by the end of that decade the idea and the feasibility of television seems to be well established. It was a part of the fantastical “homes of the future” that were springing up at world’s fairs and on newsreels in the late 1920s and the 1930s, when the rate of technological growth allowed people to dream about the extraordinary lives they might be able to live in the near future with the help of these fantastic new technologies. When television did become a reality and was offered to the public as a potential part of their own living rooms, consumers responded, and by the

⁴ Tichi surveyed a variety of popular cultural genres, including comic books, advertising and even television itself, for their references to television and the messages that were sent through them. She also considers many of the public opinions of the medium, both the positive and the negative, to reveal how Americans have thought and do think about television. She concludes that the gradual development of the television age and television environment contributes to its “naturalization,” as does its association with long held American values and goals.

⁵ For more on this see Tichi’s chapter six, “Certification-As Seen on TV,”

1950s, Americans were ready to embrace the new medium as part of their homes, and, eventually, their lives. The first television season was broadcast in 1946, with two networks, DuMont and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and a sparse collection of programs that reached only those who resided in select metropolitan areas, such as New York and Washington, D.C. By 1948 a more complete, far reaching schedule was in place that included two more networks, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS), and the broadcast of old movies as well as original programming of all sorts. Many of the earliest television programs, such as *Amos and Andy*, *The Goldbergs*, and *My Little Margie*, were based on popular radio series, thereby bringing with them a familiar audience. Four networks were in place which offered a nearly complete prime time schedule, seven days a week. No longer an East Coast phenomenon by this time, stations, though still largely unrelated to one another, began to appear in the Midwest and all the way to the West Coast. Television ownership grew along with television programming itself, and by 1955 two-thirds of all American homes had a least one television receiver.

A decade later that number had grown to ninety percent, and there was no longer any doubt as to the survival of the medium. Though the number of networks had shrunk to three with the demise of the DuMont network in 1955, the prime time broadcast schedule was complete, and, on most stations, so was the daytime schedule. Television was available in nearly every market as well. The landscape of television broadcasting was well established by this time, and remained essentially unchanged until the advent of cable a few decades later.⁶ Along with an explosion of specialty networks available on cable networks across the country, several other networks were

⁶ A number of histories of the medium and the television networks have been written that describe their rise in American culture. See, for example, J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (New York: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1994), James Von Schilling, *The Magic Window: American Television, 1939-1953* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2003), and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

established beginning in the late 1980s, the Twentieth Century Fox Network (FOX) in 1987, and the Warner Brothers television network (WB) and the United Paramount Network (UPN) in 1996.

Access to television and the number of viewing options for audiences have grown, as has the impact of the medium, and with it, the amount of concern over the effects of television viewing. Once the acceptance and survival of the medium were no longer in question, public leaders and sociologists became concerned about the ill effects that television might have on society at large, and on specific segments of society in particular. Studies have been conducted to determine the number of viewing hours consumed by Americans and the possible effects of an excessive amount of television on both personal and cultural lives. In particular, the effects on children have been studied and discussed, with recommendations being made as to how much television is acceptable for children of different age groups.⁷ Content concerns such as sex and violence on television have also been a concern of government, academic and public interest groups in the days since television's tremendous influence has been recognized. Such content has even been blamed for such social problems as increased school violence. The power of television and its cultural influence on our society have certainly not gone unrecognized, and has been proven time and time again over the past few decades. What has been less recognized, however, outside small circles of scholars inside the academy, is the nature of television and its contribution to the power the medium exerts. Though a growing area of research, there is still a great deal to be done in the area of significant content analysis that allows us to see what kind of influence television is having on our society.

⁷ Studies in this area are ongoing and recommendations change regularly. For recent examples see, Jerry Odland, "Television and Children," *Childhood Education*, 80 (Summer 2004): 206B-C, and David Buckingham, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

Watching TV

The nature of television watching plays a significant role in the kind of impact that the activity has. Though television programs share many stylistic and production characteristics with theatrical films, the experience of the audience of these two mediums is very different. The essence of the difference can be found in the very terms used to describe the activities. When we speak of viewing theatrical films we speak of *moviegoing*. When we talk about viewing television, we talk about “watching TV.” In the first case, there is a set of actions and behaviors, as well as expectations and rules that surround the consumption of the movie. First, there is the act of going to the venue where the movie is being shown. The theater itself often plays a role in the activity, as a variety of types influence the kind of experience had by the audience. There are the acts of purchasing tickets (which, today, follows the choice of deciding which movie to view after selecting from the often wide variety of choices) and refreshments (also a selection from a variety of choices), and then the choice of seats in the theater (relative to the screen, the entrance, etc.). It is only then that the actual viewing of the movie begins (after viewing the advertisements and previews that inevitably precede the feature itself). Movies receive a great deal of promotion, in the form of previews shown before the presentation of other theatrical films, but also through other media forms like television and popular magazines. As a result there is often a set of expectations that a moviegoer brings to the experience before it even starts. The particular actors or director might be familiar to the viewer, they may have enjoyed the trailer of the film they saw in a preview or a television commercial, or read a positive or negative review of the movie in the newspaper. Any or all of these things may affect the way the movie, and the entire moviegoing experience, is received.

The movie is viewed in the presence of others, many of them strangers, in an environment where the viewer exerts minimal control over the surroundings (i.e. temperature of the room,

level of noise, etc.). There is also a moviegoing etiquette that the audience is expected to follow. Staying quiet during the movie, respecting the personal space of the other theater patrons and remaining seated during the duration of the movie are all commonly accepted modes of behavior in movie theaters. This is presumably to allow each viewer the opportunity to lose herself in the story that is unfolding on the screen without any interruptions from the outside world. It is a very public experience, shared not only with the viewer's movie going companions but with others the viewer will most likely never know, and yet there is that expectation that each viewer will be left unbothered to absorb the action onscreen individually.

Watching television, on the other hand, requires less effort. Though it occasionally happens in friend's homes or in a public setting such as a bar, watching TV generally takes place in the comfort and privacy of one's own home. The environment is much more under the control of the viewer. There are no tickets, though there may be refreshments of some sort (the methods of procuring them, however, are usually less formal). Where movie going is a public and shared activity, television watching tends to be private, and often, solitary. As discussed earlier, movie going is a fairly active process, involving physical activity such as going to the theater and decision making such as choosing a seat and refreshments, where television viewing is often quite passive. Certainly there are expectations and choices to be made while watching TV, but those expectations require less risk and the choices are much less binding, as less investment is made in the experience prior to viewing a program, and a channel can easily be changed or the environment can usually be altered quickly. While watching a movie, the viewer's attention is generally focused on the film, and it is the primary activity that is being undertaken. Any number of concurrent activities may occur while watching television, and the show on the screen may not even be the main focus of the viewer at any given moment. And then there are the regular commercial breaks that occur periodically throughout the broadcast. These expected interruptions cause us to become involved

in a television show in a different way than we do a theatrical film. We do not become temporarily lost in the story the way we do in a film because there are consistent “reality breaks.” This does not mean that we are unable to become as absorbed in televisual presentations, but it does mean that the way we take the story in is different. The more casual intake of television programs leads to a less critical intake, and therefore a less critical experience. There also tends to be less expectations involved in watching television, from the program being watched (which is likely to be familiar to the viewer in one way or another), to the behavior of the television watcher himself.

Because television is most often viewed within the privacy of the viewer’s home, it is hard to measure how much attention is directed at what is on the screen. The audience is prone to involvement in other tasks while viewing television, so it can be assumed that in at least some instances what is being presented on the screen is not receiving the complete attention of the viewer. Televisions have even become a standard part of bedroom furniture, bringing the device into our most intimate quarters, where it has become a part of both our sleeping and waking rituals. And yet, in some ways that does not necessarily decrease the impact of the television programming, and may, in fact, even increase its subconscious effects. Less focused viewing generally equals less critical viewing, and so the information coming from the program may well be received without questions that might otherwise occur. Indeed, the comfortable and familiar nature of television lends itself to less critical and more credulous viewing. It is not that we accept everything that is presented to us on television without doubt or question. To be sure, we have learned to be highly suspect of the medium during its tenure in our cultural life, having realized that what is broadcast on the screen is not always truthful or accurate, even when it appears to be. And yet it continues to play a significant role in our daily lives, and its influence does not seem to lessen, but grows over time. Though we may know intellectually that everything we see on television cannot be trusted, practically it does exert a strong influence on our cultural mindset.

Another reason we must seriously consider television as an important influence on our collective memory is its pervasiveness in our culture. It has become expected that every American has a television, at least one, in their home and that he will watch some television programming every day. It has become the social norm. And with the increase in homes with multiple televisions, it becomes ever easier to insure that each member of the family will be able to watch what she likes at any given time. Unlike moviegoing and many other leisure activities, once access to a television is acquired, little other investment except time is necessary to consume it. In that way, television is a highly inclusive medium, even democratic, if you will, in a highly diverse and stratified society. And even with the growing impact of cable programming with its ever increasing number of channel options, television is the most common source of information and entertainment in American culture today. As such, its impact on our collective historical consciousness is sure to be great.

It is also important, however, not to overlook television's other, generally less appealing characteristics. It is a highly commercial industry, driven by its ability to attract advertisers, who in turn are driven to find the largest possible customer base. As such, the driving force behind television is, and always has been, financial rather than artistic. It is this very characteristic, of course, that has led to the delay in the medium receiving the scholarly attention that an industry of its scope rightfully deserves. Scholars, and audiences too for that matter, recognize the commerciality of television. But again, that recognition has not dampened our interest in the medium, or the amount of attention we pay to it. And, in fact, the highly commercial nature of television gives us an easy way to measure the impact of different kinds of programming and individual shows. Given that the shows with the biggest audiences attract the most advertising support, which in turn results in the increased network support necessary for an extended run, we can assume that those shows with not only the highest ratings but also the longest television lives

have the greatest impact on the culture at large. Similarly, by comparing ratings and the length of a program's run we can uncover which characteristics or subjects capture the greatest amount of attention and leave the greatest impression.

The continually changing landscape of television is another aspect of the medium and the act of consuming it that must be considered. Since its earliest years, television has been growing, first with the addition of networks and programming hours available, then with the advent of cable broadcasting that expanded viewing options at any given time during the day and allowed for the development of niche channels that focused on a particular subject or kind of viewing experience. The advent and continual growth of the internet and the virtual communities that it offers have also affected the way that viewers respond to the programs that they watch. Fan communities and easy access to additional information about favorite shows give television consumers a way of extending their viewing experience and negotiating their reactions to what they have seen. The more time that is spent with the televised material the more influence that material is likely to have.

The most recent industry change to effect the consumption of television is the explosion of the DVD market and the trend of packaging television programs, including both those still in their original run and those that have been off the air for some time. Though consumers have had the ability to view theatrical release movies at home on their own schedule for decades now through the purchase and/or rental of VHS tapes and equipment, very few television programs were made available through the video tape market, and those that were produced were less available through the popular rental store venue, meaning that access to the shows necessitated the often expensive purchasing option. In its earliest years, DVD production also focused almost exclusively on theatrical movies, but now that its supremacy in both the rental and purchasing markets has been established, a much wider range of programming is available. An ever growing number of television series are being released on DVD, generally sold in season sets and released on a regular

schedule so that consumers can eventually acquire an entire series run of their favorite programs. Even with price points that far exceed the average DVD movie release, the market for these sets continues to grow. In the six-month period that ended in March 2005, there was a 24% increase in sales over the previous year.⁸ In 2004, DVDs of television programming generated \$2.3 billion in sales, 17% of the all DVD sales for the year.⁹ Given the relatively small number of titles available in the genre, these figures reflect significant interest in the American public in not only viewing but owning their own copies of television programs. "TV on DVD" is also becoming more available through rental channels, as the consumer response to these releases has been high. Nearly three-fourths of all moderate to large (10,000 titles or more) rental stores include television titles in their inventory and even with the smaller pool of titles available rentals of these DVDs make up almost 5% of their business.¹⁰ The popularity and subsequent increase in DVD production has also resulted in the lowering of purchase prices for the discs as well as the players. Consequently, ownership of DVDs is becoming more and more common.

In addition to the programs themselves, which are usually made available in their entirety without the editing and cuts that are often made when the shows are broadcast in syndication, DVDs now routinely include "bonus material" which includes deleted scenes, interviews with cast and crew members and documentary style programs that show the behind the scenes aspects of the program's production. Also included in this extra material is the occasional documentary that provides background and contextual information for historical or technical content that the program may deal with. The inclusion of this bonus material means that audiences are offered a more complete viewing experience than they were with the programs original form. Of course, the viewing of the bonus material is controlled by the individual, but the inclination to buy or rent

⁸ "The NPD Group: TV-on-DVD Titles Continue to Increase in Popularity, Sales," *Wireless News*, 5 June, 2005, 1.

⁹ Doug Desjardins, "Classic TV Sitcoms Fuel Growth in DVD Sales," *DSN Retailing Today*, 9 May 2005, 34.

¹⁰ Thomas K. Arnold, "TV DVD," *Video Store Magazine*, 3 October 2004, 2.

the DVD, and the subsequent action of doing so, implies an interest significant enough that consumption of the bonus material seems likely.

Watching television on DVD does change the nature of the experience to a certain degree. The increased effort necessary to procure and watch DVD material suggests that the material on the screen will receive more concentrated attention by the viewer, in a manner similar to the consumption of theatrical films. Of course the home environment remains the same as “regular” television viewing, and that is a significant component of the viewing experience. The availability of television programming on DVD, as well as the wide variety of films available, also brings a greater variety of television viewing options to the consumer. Now, in addition to the programming available in first-run and syndicated programming on the ever growing number of channels available to television audiences, the DVD material also becomes an option for the hours designated for television viewing. The ever increasing freedom that American audiences have in their consumption of television may result in a decreased commonality of the television viewing experiences. However, the increased availability of programming, both old and new, may increase that commonality as the ability to view a larger number of television programs that was once restricted by time increases.

It is too soon to tell exactly how the proliferation of “TV on DVD” will affect the collective viewing experience, but it is not too soon to recognize the extended life, and by extension, the extended impact, that television programs have gained through this commercial move. Programs that have been off the air for years, as well as those shown more recently on exclusive cable networks that are not as widely available, are now finding new audiences, as well as recapturing the attention of their original viewers. This “new life” that television programs have been given make shows that were once limited in their influence due to their lack of broadcast availability more significant for contemporary audiences. And with the growing channels of community building and

information gathering that the internet provides, viewers have outlets to discuss and investigate the programs in as much detail as viewers of current programs have through normal social channels today, if not more so.

Considering Televised History

This explosion of television programming on DVD is sure to become the subject of scholarly consideration as part of the ever growing body of work being done in critical television studies today. One of the last forms of popular culture to gain significant critical attention despite its pervasiveness and recognized influence, the medium has finally gained the attention of the academy. Consideration of television as a social force, as well as more technical considerations and content and thematic consideration of particular shows and networks are becoming more and more prevalent in popular culture and communications scholarship.

Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of television as historical transmitter, however. And yet, the particular characteristics of television make it necessary to consider it separately. This study addresses some of these neglected considerations, but does so within the scope of research that has been done in this area. References to this material will be made in the chapters that follow, but one particular work merits mentioning here in an introductory capacity.

In his introduction to *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History All Together," television scholar Gary Edgerton lays out seven assumptions that provide a foundation for the collected essays in the text.¹¹ Several of those assumptions are also at work in this study. Primary among these is the belief that

¹¹ Gary R. Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History All Together," *Television Histories: Shaping Collective History in the Media Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1-7.

Americans learn more history from television than from any other source.¹² Studies such as that conducted by Rosenzweig and Thelen have determined that the history learned in the classroom does not leave a lasting impact, so it follows that our historical understanding is going to be shaped by other forces. Television, as the principal media vehicle in our daily lives, is likely, then, to assert the strongest historical influence. This is true for the events that we experience as part of our own lives as well as the historical information and narratives that we see played out on the small screen. Another of the assumptions that Edgerton suggests that is at play here is that the specific “technical and stylistic features” of this medium influence the kind of interpretations that are presented.¹³ Television’s intimate and immediate nature has been well documented. As a result of these characteristics, television favors close-up shots and narrative story frames. These kinds of considerations, coupled with its existence as a part of our homes, give us a more intimate connection to the programs that we see on television. This influences not only the kinds of programs that are broadcast, but also the way they are received by the audience as well.

A third assumption that this study shares with Edgerton’s article is that, like with other types of popular history, people generally look for some way to “use” the past to help them understand or clarify the present and the future.¹⁴ This is true for those involved in both the production and reception of the programs. As a result, television programs, and many other popular historical forms as well, tend to use contemporary concerns as a frame for the history they present. This, of course, is a point of concern for many historians who pride themselves on keeping contemporary perspectives out of historical interpretation as much as possible. This tendency, known as presentism in academic circles, compromises the historical integrity, historians believe. This illustrates the essential conflict that exists between trained historians and the larger

¹² Ibid., 1.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

society. For professional historians there is a “purity” about historical research that allows for as accurate a recreation of the past as possible. This knowledge is valuable in and of itself as a glimpse into time gone by. For those outside the academy, however, the value of the past lies in its ability to help us deal with the future. It is seen as a remote entity that, in and of itself, has only limited value and for which there is little chance to understand it. By framing a consideration of the past in terms of contemporary concerns, however, it takes on a relevance that it would not otherwise have.

The final assumption suggested by Edgerton coincides with the most basic belief behind this study. That is that regardless of the conflicts that exist between professional and popular historians, “collective memory is the site of mediation” where the two must “share space.”¹⁵ Acknowledging the increased interest in memory studies and consideration through a number of channels of the nature of collective memory, Edgerton suggests that the full spectrum of historical interpretation be considered in its various forms. Such suggestions echo the underlying presumption of this study, that despite the inaccuracies or questionable interpretations that professional historians can and do find in popular historical productions, their mere existence necessitates their consideration if the popular American historical consciousness is to be understood, both inside and outside the academy.

With these assumptions in mind, a consideration of television programming in terms of historical content will be presented. Focusing primarily on prime time television programming, due to its preeminence in television broadcasting, regular television series, as well as miniseries and made for television movies, will be considered. A consideration of television channels offering a high degree of historical content will also be considered. To be sure, the popular American historical consciousness is not determined by television programming alone, but it does have a

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

significant impact on it, arguably the most significant impact, and provides an excellent starting point for a more complete investigation of this phenomenon.

CHAPTER THREE

History on Prime Time: A Survey of Historical Television Series

Prime time television series have always been the mainstay of television programming.

Broadcast during the peak viewing hours of the week, there are larger potential audiences for prime time programming than any other part of the now 24 hour programming schedule.¹ Every segment of the viewing audience watches the majority of their television during this daily three to four hour block each week.² Since the earliest television seasons in the late 1940s, serialized programs, most typically those on a weekly cycle, have always made up the majority of evening programming.

Television series have been the most watched and the most enjoyed kind of programs. A variety of genres have been presented on series television, including comedic and dramatic programs, game shows, informational programming, and, most recently, reality shows. Narrative programs, however, have dominated prime time television programming since the medium gained widespread popularity and acceptance. Drawing on common, recognized narrative patterns and techniques found in written narratives that have become so ingrained in our culture, television storytelling has always been familiar, even when the medium itself was new. The comfort of that familiarity, combined with the appeal of the stories themselves, have made narrative programs some of the

¹ Prime time is designated as 8-11 pm Monday through Saturday and 7-11 pm on Sunday.

² *2000 Report on Television: The First Fifty Years*, by John A. Dimling, president and chief executive officer, Nielsen Media Research (New York: Nielsen Media Research, 2000), 14.

most popular shows found on the medium since its earliest days.³ Whether comedic or dramatic, family oriented or adventure based, series devoted to telling stories and developing characters have always been the most captivating for audiences, and therefore, the most available to them.

Television, as a distinctly commercial, advertising dependent medium, has always been driven by a supply and demand mode of operation. Television producers create and air programming that they believe audiences will like, as that is what advertisers are likely to sponsor. The more popular a program, the more profitable it is, for producers and advertisers alike. A consideration of television programming, then, can reveal not only what the American public is viewing, but also what is most appealing to them. To understand the impact of television series on the popular American historical consciousness, it is first necessary to look at the scope of historically based television programs in this genre to understand what programs have captured the interest and attention of the viewing public.⁴

The Early Years

Although there have been a limited number of regular television series that have taken a distinctly historical approach, since the early 1970s they have been a regular part of the prime time television line up, and some have been among the highest rated shows in a given season, and even

³ An extended discussion of the television narrative can be found in Sarah Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen, 67-100 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

⁴ Basic information about television series, such as broadcast networks and schedules, run dates, cast and crew information, etc., can be found in a number of different sources. Online sites such as Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and TV.Com (formerly known as TV Tome and found online at www.tv.com), and encyclopedia type reference books like Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003) and Alex McNeil, *Total Television: The Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to the Present*, 4th ed., (New York: Penguin Books, 1996) all provide this information. For the sake of consistency, for this paper that information has been gathered from the Brooks and Marsh text, except where otherwise noted.

among the most successful series on television.⁵ Some have also found themselves garnering critical acclaim, though not always long standing popularity. The vast majority of these shows, nearly all of them, in fact, have been narrative series. And although most narrative series have been set in contemporary settings, some of the best loved television narratives have been set in the past. Prior to the early 1970s, American history on television could be found in a broader variety of programming, including quiz shows and historical reenactments. In the late 1940s, as part of the earliest television line ups, American history and culture found its way to the screen by way of programs like *Americana*, a half hour quiz show where panels of adult (and later high school age) contestants answered questions on American history and folklore that had been submitted by members of the television audience. The competition on the show was not limited to those battling for the correct answers, but to the question writers as well, who competed for a set of *Encyclopedia Americana* in a weekly quest for “the most interesting question of the week.”⁶ American heritage was also celebrated on *America Song* (later renamed *American Songs*). This fifteen to twenty minute show featured traditional American folk songs and dances performed by a cast of singers and dancers and hosted by singer-guitarist Paul Arnold.⁷ These two programs, both televised by NBC between 1947 and 1949, were typical of the kind of programming found on early television schedules, which favored game shows and variety programs. Not yet invested in the complex and high priced scripted dramas and comedies that have come to dominate television programming, television producers offered programs that were simpler to televise and control. Minimal investment in writer’s salaries and compensation for a cast of actors made these kinds of shows

⁵ A complete list of series deemed historical based on the criteria laid out in this study can be found in Appendix A at the end of this paper. Many of those series are mentioned here, but not all of them. Further discussion of several programs will be made by way of case studies that are offered in chapters four and five of this paper.

⁶ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

more economical for the new medium. There were also fewer set details to take care of, another consideration that not only saved money but manpower as television producers waited to see whether the American people would take to it. Quiz shows, music programs, sports and news broadcasts dominated television's early years. That *Americana* was a part of the earliest prime time schedule seems significant, as it signals a belief that American history would be a topic of interest for audiences. The quick addition of *America Song* further illustrates the appeal of traditional American fare as television offerings. Both these shows were fairly short-lived, however, off the air by the beginning of the 1950 season when programming had grown and begun to diversify. The short run of these programs could be explained in a number of ways. It could reflect a limited interest in historical content at that time, or in the genres of programming to which these programs belonged. It could also be reflective, however, of the changing landscape of television broadcasting that offered more viewing options and a wider variety of programming genres to choose from.

However, one of the earliest family situation comedies, a television genre that would eventually become the mainstay of prime time schedules, was historically based. *Mama*, first broadcast in 1949, was based on a book by Kathryn Forbes which recalled her life growing up as part of a Norwegian immigrant family in turn of the century San Francisco. Forbes' book served as the basis for a highly successful play and movie in the 1940s, and the series covered the same basic fare as its theatrical predecessors.⁸ This endearing show did not include the slapstick comedy and gags that characterized many of its successors, but instead created a warmhearted scene that related the family's struggles and triumphs as they worked together to make their lives better. From the opening of the show that featured the young Katrin leafing through the pages of the family album and reminiscing about her life, to the final scene of each episode which found the family sitting together around the family table, sharing coffee and words of wisdom gained from the experiences

⁸ Ibid., 727-28.

they had just shared, the show created “feel-good” feelings of family and virtue, just as many of the later historical dramas were to do. The series was among the most highly rated during its first five years. Nostalgic at its very essence, the program was so beloved by audience members that when it was cancelled in 1956, there was such a negative response that CBS brought it back for a short stint as a weekend afternoon program, featuring most of the original cast, but taped rather than broadcast live as the original series had been.⁹ The nostalgia, and “remember when” subject matter of the program was central, and certainly related to its tremendous popularity, and its origin in a personal memoir lent a sense of authenticity to the program as well. Early television audiences clearly responded to this kind of historically based subject matter. Yet this show exists as something of an anomaly for its time, when most other examples of this fast growing genre of family shows had a distinctly contemporary setting and flavor.

With the exception of these few shows and the occasional installment on dramatic anthology programs like *Studio One* and *Omnibus* which became a mainstay of prime time schedules in the 1950s, historical programming was not a significant presence on television line ups in the years that followed. An exception to this was the historical reenactment documentary show, *You Are There*, which debuted in February 1953. Hosted by a young Walter Cronkite and produced by CBS, this program, which was originally heard as a radio show, presented reenactments of historical occurrences from all over the world, but with the twist of having Cronkite serve as the anchorman for the events, covering them as though they were happening live. Cronkite, then a CBS news correspondent, coordinated reports and interviews on the events that came in from reporters on the historical scene. The subject events covered the span of time, but there was an emphasis on 20th century occurrences. At the close of each episode, audiences heard these words:

⁹ Ibid., 728.

“What sort of day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times...and you were there.”¹⁰

Though it was never a top rated program, the four year run that *You Are There* enjoyed does provide evidence of audience interest in the program. The format of the show that allowed viewers to feel as though they were witnessing the events as they happened made the events themselves more real for the audience. The format also made it easier for audiences to see the connection between significant events of the past and those that happened in their own lifetime. By seeing the historical events covered in a manner so similar to the nightly news broadcasts that had become a familiar part of daily life would have allowed viewers to understand history in a different way than they might have previously thought of it, as events experienced by people similar to themselves rather than merely names and dates on the pages of a school textbook. And the famous closing words of the show put viewers in the position to recognize that history was happening around them at all times, just as it had for people of the past.

By the early 1960s, when television had become a firmly established part of American culture and daily life, historically based programming similar to what we have become familiar with today had begun to appear, though not with the same frequency. In the fall of 1959, *The Untouchables* debuted on ABC, following a highly successful two part installment on *Desilu Playhouse* the previous spring. The *Playhouse* installment had been a semiautobiographical dramatization of famous treasury agent Eliot Ness' autobiography about his involvement in breaking up the Al Capone syndicate in Chicago during the early years of the Depression and Prohibition. Its success prompted the fall addition of the series. The series itself generated a great deal of controversy due to its explicit violence, something unheard of on television at that time.¹¹ Audiences responded to

¹⁰ Ibid., 1336.

¹¹ Ibid., 1256-57.

the show however, perhaps in part because of the attention the controversy created, and by its second season, *The Untouchables* was among the top ten rated programs of the season. Its basis in fact may also have contributed to its audience appeal. The fact that the show was based on the experience of Ness, a widely recognized historical figure at the time, may well have added to its success. The connection between show plots and Ness' actual experience was well known, as those involved with the show were quick to cite it. The show did not maintain the high level of popularity, however, suggesting that perhaps the controversy and/or novelty of the program was a likely contribution to its success, despite its connection to "reality."

As part of its defense against the accusations of needless violence, producers referenced the historical accuracy of the program, with its foundation in Ness' autobiography. However, the series picked up where the *Playhouse* installment had left off, with Al Capone in jail. The real Untouchables, Ness' band of agents, had been disbanded once Capone had been caught, so although episodes in the early seasons were drawn from actual FBI cases, the authenticity of the way in which they were presented was often drawn into question, and as the series continued, the historical accuracy of the series became more and more shaky, an affliction which has affected many historically based series since then as well. Protests from the FBI, Italian-American groups, and even a lawsuit by the estate of Al Capone plagued the show's producers, and eventually resulted in the addition of a disclaimer at the end of each episode stating that certain segments of the story had been fictionalized.¹²

The problem of authenticity is one encountered by many historical cultural forms. In the case of *The Untouchables*, the producers used it to justify the aspects of the program that were questionable to some of the audience. The questions that were raised had far more to do with the novelty of the violence that was being depicted in the program than with any concern about its

¹² Ibid., 1257.

historical significance. But claims of authenticity, even though they were questionable, were sufficient to allow the program to continue. The spike and subsequent decline in popularity of the show suggests that the degree of historical accuracy in the show had less to do with its success than its novelty. For the audience, then, the historical accuracy of the program was not necessarily a decisive factor, but for the producers it was an important consideration.

Interestingly, a successful 1987 film of the same name, directed by Brian De Palma and starring Kevin Costner and Sean Connery, sparked interest in Ness' story once again and a short lived syndicated series was produced and released in 1993. The new series drew inspiration from both the original television series and the film. Only forty-four episodes were produced, and the series disappeared fairly quickly after its original runs.¹³ The film, however, remains popular in VHS and DVD rentals.

During *The Untouchables* four year run, ABC also aired an hour long newspaper drama set in the 1920s where underworld crime was the focus. *The Roaring Twenties*, which ran two seasons from 1960-1962, incorporated newsreel footage into each program to lend a documentary style flavor to the program and boost its sense of authenticity.¹⁴ In this case, however, historical accuracy was not claimed, and storylines were not drawn from actual case files. In this case it seems that the success of *The Untouchables* encouraged an attempt for reality in the new program. Whether the more documentary-like style of the program was less appealing than *The Untouchables* more narrative style, or its lack of real-life connection made it less compelling, *The Roaring Twenties*, was a short lived program, however, never reaching the level of influence of the earlier program.

When the 1963 television season began, there was once again a lack of historically based programming, and the programs that did appear in successive years were generally very short-lived.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1002.

A 1964 documentary program titled *World War I*, which recalled and analyzed the causes, details and legacy of the war enjoyed a year long run, though its factual nature made it more akin to news programming than typical television series fare.¹⁵ It wasn't until the fall of 1965 that another program with historical capital appeared. *Hogan's Heroes*, set in a World War II Nazi POW camp, brought comedy to an unlikely setting when it debuted on CBS and for seven seasons after that.¹⁶ Allied soldiers worked together to try to outwit the dense Germans by sneaking people and objects in and out of the camp and otherwise disrupting the war effort of the Axis. Among the highest rated programs of the season in its first few years, this war comedy maintained an audience sufficient enough to warrant its seven season run, and a healthy life in syndication for many years after that. Broadcast two decades after the end of the war, the series was timed to allow for a suitable distance from the realities of Nazi atrocities to form and yet not so distant from the war that it was outside the memory of most viewers. Its irreverent nature served as more of a patriotic tribute to American ingenuity than a history lesson on American involvement in World War II, but its setting did keep the memory of the war alive in the minds of Americans as they watched it.

The following season a series that approached the past from a different angle appeared on television. *The Time Tunnel* was actually classified as a science fiction program, but much of its content was distinctly historical. The premise of the show centered on the ill fated creation of a time tunnel that would allow transportation to both past and future eras. Forced into the tunnel before it was complete, the scientists responsible found themselves trapped in the past, where they were able to move from one point in the past to another, but not able to return to the present. While their colleagues tried to get them back, the pair of time travelers found themselves living through historical events where they knew the outcome, often times a regrettable one, but were

¹⁵ Ibid., 1325.

¹⁶ Ibid., 538.

powerless to change it. Episodes dealt with events from all times and places, from the Battle of Jericho to the sinking *Titanic*.¹⁷ This combination of science fiction futurism and historical storytelling did not prove successful with viewers of this time, however, and ABC took the series off the air after only one season, despite its highly rated competition (*Hogan's Heroes* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*). Perhaps the waning popularity of science fiction tales which had been so captivating for audiences in the previous decade can account for this failure. Or perhaps the mixture of past and future was not appealing to audiences of the time.

On ABC's 1967 schedule, and gone by the beginning of the next, a new situation comedy used the past as a plot point in a contemporaneously set program called *The Second Hundred Years*. The premise of the show was that a turn of the century prospector, Luke Carpenter, had become frozen during a glacier slide in Alaska, and had miraculously thawed out, alive, sixty-seven years later, preserved in his thirty-three year old mind and body. The show traced his life in the modern world, comparing his conceptions and beliefs to that of his grandson, also thirty-three and identical in appearance, though not in temperament, to his grandfather, and played by the same actor in the show. Luke struggled to make sense of the wonders of the modern world and fit into its patterns of life, but remained good natured and optimistic, compared to his straight-laced and conservative grandson.¹⁸ This show was an interesting twist on historically based program, as the show was contemporary for the audience, yet used the past to comment on the present. More a commentary on life at the time than instructive on the past, this show nevertheless created significant historical capital, though indirectly.

Enjoying a slightly longer run was the ABC comedy/adventure series *Here Come the Brides*, which debuted in 1968, and ran for two seasons. This show dramatized the antics of members of a

¹⁷ Ibid., 1205.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1046.

logging camp and the Eastern born women who had been brought to tame and marry them on the western coast frontier of the 1870s.¹⁹ Capitalizing on the popularity of the frontier theme found in the many television Westerns of the 1960s, this show created a twist and used a romantic and comedic framework for its storylines.

Other short lived programs, lasting less than one season, that featured historically based plot lines, included 1970's *The Young Rebels*, produced by NBC, which was aimed at the young people of the late sixties and early seventies who were so focused on enacting social change. The series told the story of four young American Revolution era rebels, helping to defeat the British system in 1777. The regular characters interacted with actual historical figures and participated in the events of the actual war for independence.²⁰ While producers hoped that contemporary youth would be able to relate to the American historical parallel that was being drawn, its very short run would suggest that they were unsuccessful in their endeavor. Two other historical programming failures appeared in 1971, CBS's situation comedy *The Chicago Teddy Bears* about speakeasy owners in the 1920s and its adventure series *Bearcats*, set in the southwest of 1914. Little discussion of these short lived programs exists to suggest exactly why they did not appeal to television audiences. Like any other category of television programming, however, series with historical settings and flavor were both poorly and brilliantly written, acted and produced, and certainly the degree of these skills represented in any one of these programs could go a long way toward explaining their success or failure with audiences.

¹⁹ Ibid., 525.

²⁰ Ibid., 1341.

A More Historical Television Era

Beginning the following season however, historically based series became a consistent and significant presence on the television scene. Revolving around more character driven plot lines, the “new” wave of “old” shows drew on the successful family and character driven situation comedies and dramas that had developed as television grew as a medium. This new wave of programming told individual and family stories set against a historical background, allowing for storylines that related events and emotions that audiences could personally relate to while still engaging the romance and excitement of the past. In this way, the new programs were much more like the highly successful *Mama*, arguably the most successful program with historical capital up to this point. Historical accuracy was not the priority in these shows, and, in fact, can be called into question in numerous cases, but the past was a significant aspect of each of these shows, ranging from a significant setting to taking on almost a character like role depending on the show in question.

That this format should find success during this particular era is not surprising, given the tremendous turmoil that American society was in during these years. Just as in other venues where collective memory is negotiated in American culture, such as museum displays and memorial building, in the wake of tumultuous civil rights battles and the assassinations of popular political figures, and weary from fighting a losing and unpopular war in Vietnam, Americans were in a prime position to succumb to the appeal of stories that allowed them to escape into the past with its familiar and romantic characteristics. The identity politics of the preceding decade has also developed a new appreciation for the role of the individual in the past, present, and future, giving new credence to the importance of the “little people” and the “average Joe.” Television programming that combined stories of “average” folks living in the past was a perfect match for the aching sensibilities of the American public at this time.

The 1972 season included two shows that would prove to be some of the best loved programs of all time, and both enjoyed great success, though not necessarily from their earliest showings. *The Waltons*, broadcast on CBS, based on the fictionalized memoirs of author Earl Hamner, Jr. and similar in tone and content to the 1963 movie *Spencer's Mountain*, became enormously popular from its premier season to the surprise of critics who thought its very wholesome plot lines and moralistic message would doom the series in the increasingly edgy line up of shows, such as the controversial yet popular *All in the Family*, that were being aired at this time. Up against one of the most popular series of the time, *The Flip Wilson Show*, the new family drama eventually forced its competition off the air and remained near the top of the rating for most of its nine-year run, and remains one of the most watched programs in television history.²¹ Set in Depression era rural Virginia and continuing through the World War II era, the program followed the lives of the community living on Walton's Mountain, and centered on the large and closely-knit Walton family who, despite their poverty and struggles in a difficult era, were primarily happy and healthy living together in their ancestral home. Author Hamner narrated the opening and closing of the episodes, setting the memoir like tone to the series which was maintained by the character John Boy Walton, eldest of the Walton children and an aspiring author who wrote of his life and family in an ongoing narrative that lasted through the majority of the series run. The show was violence and sex free during a period when both were becoming much more accepted as television fare, yet it did not compromise its popularity. In addition to the episodes themselves, *The Waltons* also included four made-for-television movies, including the show's pilot episode and three movies aired over the course of the season that followed the regular series' end.

²¹ Ibid., 1279-80.

Also premiering in 1972, and striking a very different tone, was the CBS situation comedy *M*A*S*H*, an irreverent comedy set against the tragic background of the Korean War.²² The characters were the medical and military staff that inhabited the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital 4077 behind enemy lines. Decidedly antiwar in its humor and its storylines, *M*A*S*H* was able to create high comedy from very bleak settings and situations. The show often incorporated very serious commentary into its episodes as well, at times placing comedy and tragedy in disturbingly close proximity to one another. The show debuted during the last years of the highly controversial Vietnam War, and though it was set in an earlier time and conflict, many of the situations depicted in the series were strikingly similar to the contemporary war. The talented writers were able to make the political commentary that the show was trying to suggest fit with the historical setting, thereby making additional commentary on the similarity between the two conflicts. Despite the very serious message that episodes often sent, the show was highly successful in its comedy as well, and grew to become one of the most popular television programs of all time. Its special two and a half hour finale remained the most viewed program of all for time for years after its initial 1983 airing, and after its poorly rated premier season, *M*A*S*H* remained at the very top of the ratings for the duration of its eleven season run.²³

Not all the historically based series that debuted during this time period were as successful as some. Also debuting on CBS in 1972 was the situation comedy *Anna and the King*, based on the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* and Margaret Landon's novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, which told the story of a widowed English schoolteacher charged as governess for the many children of the King of Siam.²⁴ Unlike the other television series with a historical flavor, this show was not offering American historical fare, which may have contributed to its short, three month

²² Ibid., 712.

²³ See Chapter Four for an extended discussion of this series.

²⁴ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 60.

run. Despite the fact that Yul Brenner, who made the role of the King of Siam famous in his earlier work on Broadway and in film, starred in the series, it did not succeed with audiences. Neither did another television adaptation of a successful film and novel two years later. ABC's *Paper Moon*, based on the film of the same name and the novel *Addie Pray* by Joe David Brown, was about a Depression era con artist posing as a Bible salesman in the dust blown American heartland. Tatum O'Neill, who starred in the film with her father Ryan O'Neill, recreated the role of Addie in the series, but once again that star power was not enough to ensure the show's popularity, and it was off the air by the of the middle of 1974 season.²⁵

Two other historical shows debuted that season, however, that attained a great deal of success. The 1950s nostalgia driven situation comedy *Happy Days* first aired on ABC in the winter of 1974. A tremendous wave of nostalgia for that period developed during the post war 1970s, with films like *American Graffiti* and *Grease*, and leading the way was this series. Centering on the antics of the solidly Midwestern, middle class Cunningham family of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the shows main characters included good kid Ritchie Cunningham and his high school friends, including the motorcycle hood with a heart of gold, Arthur Fonzerelli, better known as Fonzie. As the show continued, Fonzie became more and more of a central character, eventually driving the show when Ritchie left to join army in the later years of the series. The show grew out of a single segment on the network's popular anthology piece, *Love American Style*, which was, for the most part, a decidedly contemporary show.²⁶ *Happy Days* used 1950s nostalgia not only to generate storylines, but comedy as well. References to the popular culture of the time abounded in early seasons of the show, endearing it to those who remembered the earlier time and serving as instruction about the decade to those who had not. Many scenes took place at "Arnold's," the diner/malt shop where

²⁵ Ibid., 907.

²⁶ Ibid., 503-4.

the jukebox played familiar fifties tunes and the teenage patrons danced fifties style in between ordering and eating their hamburgers and malts. The cars, clothes and household décor all brought 1950's flavor to the series. As the show continued however, and its popularity was secured, the show drifted further and further away from its period driven plots and details, and by the close of the series, when the 1960s were the time frame, little but the clothing that was worn by the characters, and even some of those details were questionable, reflected the historical setting. The shows popularity also waned as the series aged. Among the top twenty rated shows by the end of its first full season, *Happy Days* was the top rated program for the 1976-77 season, and remained near the top for the next few years, along with the spin offs that it created, and then fell consistently in the ratings until it was finally cancelled at the end of the 1983 season.

On the dramatic end of the television spectrum of the 1974 season, debuted a television adaptation of the popular "Little House" children's book series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. *Little House on the Prairie* debuted on NBC in the fall after a successful made for television movie pilot aired the pervious spring. The pilot centered on material covered in Wilder's second book by the same name. Fairly true to the story, which was part of Wilder's own recollections of her childhood growing up on the American frontier, the movie told the story of the Ingalls family's brief tenure on the Kansas prairie as homestead farmers. At the end of the pilot, they are once again moving on to find a new home. The series picks up where the movie left off, with the family arriving in Minnesota and settling outside the town of Walnut Grove.²⁷ The first few seasons of the series used a combination of material drawn from Wilder's books and new material for episode plots, but as the series progressed it grew further and further away from Wilder's stories. The shows final season aired under the title *Little House: a New Beginning* when the shows star and executive producer Michael Landon, the well-known star of the popular series *Bonanza* who played Ingalls

²⁷ Ibid., 690-91.

family patriarch Charles, left the show and a now grown up Laura and her own family became the focal point of the show. By this time only a portion of the characters even resembled those found in the original books, and the storylines had become more and more contrived. The popularity that the show had enjoyed during most of its ten year run had also waned, and the reconfigured show only lasted one season before the series was cancelled. A separate final episode was done as a two hour television movie during the following season. Like *The Waltons*, this series was known as a wholesome family show that offered morality tales set against the background of a bygone era. Championing family values and celebrating American opportunity and progress, these historical programs gave Americans something to be proud of through some very difficult years. While both were the butt of jokes for some, their popularity speaks to the impact that this kind of programming had for audiences, and, subsequently on our collective historical memory.

The next historical series to debut was one of many sequels that these new historically based shows produced. *Happy Days'* spin off series, *Laverne and Shirley*, set in the same late fifties, Milwaukee locale as its parent series, featured main characters from a successful guest spot as dates of Ritchie and Fonzie the previous season. Never as tied to the history and popular culture of the era as *Happy Days*, *Laverne and Shirley's* strength was its slapstick comedy, and most of the historicity that the show created came from its connection to the series from which it was drawn, and which it followed in the prime time schedule for most of its early run. Exceeding the popularity of *Happy Days* for several years, the series took a much different turn in its last few series when the girls left Milwaukee for the glamour of California. This also marked the decline in the series' popularity, and ABC cancelled it one year prior to its parent series.²⁸

Not exactly a spin off of *Little House on the Prairie*, but bearing a resemblance to it in many ways, the drama *Father Murphy* joined the prime time schedule in the fall of 1981 on NBC. Starring

²⁸ Ibid., 665-66.

Merlin Olsen, who had played a regular character on *Little House* for much of its run, and produced and created by Michael Landon, the series focused on an orphanage run by a drifter posing as a priest in order to care for the parentless children created by a mining camp explosion on the Dakota frontier in the late nineteenth century.²⁹ Working with the same wholesome messages that were so popular with *Little House on the Prairie* audiences, Landon and Olsen guided this parallel series for two seasons.

Successful *M*A*S*H* also spawned a spin off sequel, but it was not a success either, though it too ran for two seasons, largely on the coat tails of its predecessor. *AfterMASH* was a situation comedy set in a stateside veteran's hospital in the years directly following the end of the Korean War. Debuting on CBS in the 1983 season, directly following the conclusion of the earlier series, *AfterMASH* featured three of the main characters from *M*A*S*H* and used storylines and details that had been created in the earlier series to build new stories that took place both at the hospital and in the homes of the main characters.³⁰ The 1950s setting of the series was never an integral part of the storyline, but was reflected modestly in some of the costuming and set details. Lacking the bite and commentary of its parent program, the series could not live up to its legacy, and never made much of a showing either with audiences or the critics.

Another series with a military flair that was set in the Cold War era of the early 1960s, debuted in the fall of 1984. ABC's *Call to Glory*, was about the family of a military pilot who found himself involved in some of the key political dramas of the time, including the Cuban missile crisis and early U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The series included the usual family drama plot points that were standard format for the genre, but also included news film and music from the era, and

²⁹ Ibid., 400.

³⁰ Ibid., 23.

pointed references to its daily lifestyle detail to enhance the historicity of the program.³¹ One of the earliest attempts to dramatize some of the contentious events of the 1960s, the series was unable to find an audience, however, and lasted only a few months before it was cancelled.

By the mid-1980s, a number of new series with historical connections were debuting each season. In the fall of 1986, *Crime Story*, a police/gangster drama set in the 1960s, premiered on NBC. The series developed a strong period flavor, and carried an added sense of authenticity in that its star, Dennis Farina, had himself been a New York City policeman before becoming an actor.³² Though it received a fair amount critical acclaim, the series lasted only two seasons. Several other series set in the 1960s debuted in the following seasons, though some were better received than others. A mid-season replacement in the 1986-1987 season was NBC's *Rags to Riches*. Unique among historical shows, to say nothing of television series in general, the series incorporated singing and dancing into its plot lines, giving it the feel of a B-movie musical. The storyline centered on five young orphan girls who were adopted by a wealthy businessman out to improve his public image. Left to their own devices most of the time, they experience the typical teenage and childhood angst found on television, only they dealt with it, in part, through song and dance. The songs themselves were often popular sixties tunes with alternate lyrics written to address the plot lines of the show.³³ But like other television series that have attempted to incorporate musical fare into the programming, such as the ill fated *Cop Rock*, *Rags to Riches* was not able to establish a sizeable enough audience to carry it through a season and a half run.

A more successful series set in the 1960s was the Vietnam drama *Tour of Duty*, first put forth by CBS as part of its fall lineup in the 1987-1988 season. The first series to limit its storylines to the Vietnam War front and the soldiers who populated it, the series was very frank in its

³¹ Ibid., 183.

³² Ibid., 257.

³³ Ibid., 977.

depictions, aiming for a realistic portrayal of the conflict.³⁴ This frank portrayal may help to explain why the series was limited to a three season run. Still a difficult and painful memory for many Americans, and for the country in general, the blunt battle centered storylines may well have proved too much for many Americans to accept as entertainment. Another Vietnam based series that debuted midway through that same season, however, was slightly more successful in an extended run. ABC's *China Beach* also worked to provide a realistic portrayal of the conflict, but was set a bit further away from the front lines. *China Beach* was a combination evacuation hospital and USO station, populated not only by soldiers but also by medical personnel and entertainers. Many of the series' main characters were women, unusual for a war drama, but preferable to advertisers who prefer to reach a female clientele.³⁵ With the exception of *M*A*S*H*, *China Beach* was the most successful Vietnam centered program aired to date, and the most successful strictly dramatic program, running three and a half seasons.³⁶ Because of its setting, the show was able to include some of the nostalgic period details along with the war realism, which the series also strove to provide. Like *M*A*S*H*, the series also maintained a distinctly anti-war point of view, another aspect that may have added to its popularity in a 1980s/1990s cultural environment.

Another 1960s era series that debuted mid-season in 1988 went on to become one of the most loved historical series ever to air on television. *The Wonder Years* made its debut following the 1988 Super Bowl to very high ratings, due in part, surely, to its enormously popular lead in. Still, a large audience stayed tuned to watch the highly nostalgic program, and when the series began its regular run on ABC in March of that year, many of the viewers tuned in to see the pilot again, and continued to watch, making it one of the top ten rated shows for the season, even with its late

³⁴ Ibid., 1222-23.

³⁵ Ibid., 217.

³⁶ In actuality, *M*A*S*H* was a dramatization of the Korean war, but it was widely understood that the war it was really commenting on was the Vietnam war which was in its waning years when the series debuted.

debut.³⁷ The series remained among the top rated shows for several seasons following, though it did lose some of its audience in its last few seasons. *The Wonder Years* centered around young Kevin Arnold, a junior high school student in 1968 when the series began, and his family and friends. A classic coming of age story, the nostalgic feel of the program was enhanced by a voice over of the adult Kevin who narrated each episode in a “remember when” tone.” Though completely fictional, the voice over lent a sense of authority to the show’s plot lines, making them seem as though they had actually happened to a specific person. This aspect of the show, combined with its popularity and general feel-good flavor gave the show a lot of historical capital for both members of the audience who had lived through the fairly recent history being depicted as well as for those who had not.³⁸

Among the programs of the 1988-1989 season was *This Is America, Charlie Brown*, an brief episodic series that was shown by CBS over several months during this and the following season. In it the familiar *Peanuts* characters traveled through time to witness and participate in some of the great moments of American history, among them the voyage of the *Mayflower*, the aviation triumph of the Wright brothers and the completion of the trans-continental railroad.³⁹ Though quite unique in its format among historical programming, these well loved and well known cartoon characters had already encountered American history as part of *What Have We Learned, Charlie Brown?*, a Memorial Day TV special⁴⁰ aired in 1983 and an epilogue to the 1980 feature film *Bon Voyage, Charlie Brown*. In this story the gang visited both Omaha Beach in Normandy, recalling D-Day, and a shipyard at Ypres, which was the site of a World War I battle, as part of their trip as exchange students to France. This holiday program received much critical acclaim, including a Peabody

³⁷ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 1321-22.

³⁸ See Chapter Four for an extended discussion of this series.

³⁹ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 1194.

⁴⁰ *Peanuts* specials honoring a variety of holidays, from Christmas to Arbor Day, had become a regular part of television programming by this time, having regularly appeared since 1965 when *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was first telecast.

Award, for its sensitive and poignant treatment of this difficult part of American history and of the personal memory of many Americans as well, thereby qualifying the *Peanuts* gang for this subsequent jaunt into the past. The beloved status of the characters, and the knowledgeable yet innocent flavor of all the *Peanuts* productions gave these animated characters a very trustworthy persona from which to interpret our national past. So despite its distinction as animation, the program provided a great deal of historical capital, especially for the children and their parents to whom the series was directed.

A mid-season replacement in the 1988-1989 season took another stab at dramatizing time travel when *Quantum Leap* debuted on NBC. Though the premise of the show bears many similarities to earlier time travel shows, the series took a different approach to the genre than other attempts had put forward. Scientist Sam Beckett, through a laboratory malfunction with his not yet completed time machine, gets caught in a series of “leaps” through time, but limited to the years of his own lifetime. The history explored, then, was relatively recent history, and the situations that he dealt with were typically more “ordinary” events in “regular” people’s lives rather than the well known historical events that other time travel shows had focused on. This approach may have contributed to this time travel series’ more successful, three and a half year run. The series was set ten years into the future, in 1999, giving it a slightly futuristic feel, but suggesting an immediacy that the earlier Cold War era attempts had lacked. The tremendous speed with which technology was growing at the time this series originally aired made this sort of extraordinary experience seem almost plausible and yet still adventurous and romantic. The show garnered a strong following during its modest run, and there was something of an outcry when the show was cancelled.

Rumors of a cable series picking up where the original left off have circulated in the years following its cancellation, and recent signs point to the development of such a series.⁴¹

Though the vast majority of historically based series were set in the 1950s and 1960s, in the 1991-1992 season, a World War II era show debuted on ABC. *Homefront* was set in the months and years directly following the end of the war, and dealt with the joys and difficulties of those returning from war and those of the ones who had been left behind.⁴² The show tackled important historic topics from this era, such as the displacement of women who had joined the workforce in the absence of the men, racism, the continuing growth of unions and anti-union violence, and growing concerns about communism. It also included a healthy dose of nostalgia, drawing on the traditional details of music, clothing and automobiles. This combination gave the show a lot of historical capital, especially with the interest in the war era that was experiencing something of resurgence around this time. The series was not able to maintain its respectable sized audience in its second season, however, and the series was cancelled at the end of its second year.

Also debuting that season was a nostalgic look at 1950s Brooklyn, CBS's *Brooklyn Bridge*. The creation of the producer of the hit series *Family Ties*, Gary David Goldberg, the series was a semiautobiographical labor of love for Goldberg who recounted some of his own childhood memories of growing up in 1950s Brooklyn.⁴³ The action centered around young Alan Silver and his family and friends. Similar in tone and feel to the popular *The Wonder Years*, *Brooklyn Bridge* too was a coming of age story told against a historical backdrop. In this case there was an added cultural dimension to the show as well, as the Silver family and many of Alan's friends were Jewish, and struggled to balance their heritage with their Americanness. But like most historical series, the series incorporated timeless storylines and lessons into episode plots. Issues of religious and

⁴¹ See Chapter Five for an extended discussion of this series.

⁴² Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 546-47.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 160.

cultural tolerance were often incorporated on the show as well, as Alan's girlfriend, Katie Monahan, a Catholic school girl from an Irish family, was often the source of concern and tension for his family, as he was for hers. The series was also something of a tribute to New York City and Brooklyn, with its celebration of the Dodgers and its nostalgic New York setting. *Brooklyn Bridge* was never able to attract the high ratings of *The Wonder Years* or *Family Ties*, however, and was cancelled at the end of its second season. Perhaps the distinctly New York setting failed to capture the emotions of those who grew up in a less distinct environment, or perhaps the earlier and more popular *The Wonder Years* satisfied the viewing audience's appetite for that particular brand of nostalgia. Nevertheless, its lack of a significant audience limited the historical capital of the show.

Trying to capitalize on the success of his highly successful Indiana Jones movies, successful movie director George Lucas brought *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* to television as a mid season replacement for ABC in the spring of 1992. The series consisted of unrelated and non-chronological excerpts from Indiana Jones life as a child and young man. The character was seen as either a child, a teenager or an old man recalling the events of his youth, and had a remarkable knack for encountering all measure of historical figures.⁴⁴ As eclectic as its episodes, the series was aired in a rather haphazard manner, never receiving a regular time slot for more than a few months at a time. Whether it was this scheduling irregularity or the series itself, which was opulently filmed on the scale of the blockbuster films with which it was associated, the series never caught on, and after two abbreviated seasons, was cancelled for good. In the tradition of many television series developed from successful cinematic inspirations, the change in medium was not successful. Other examples of this from the time frame include the 1988 CBS comedy/drama *Dirty Dancing*, which lasted only half a season, and that same network's April 1993 situation comedy *A League of Their Own*, which was cancelled after only three episodes, despite the inclusion of several original

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1340.

cast members from the popular film.⁴⁵ These shows, modeled after the hit movies of the same name, were unable to capture either the appeal of their feature film inspiration or the large audiences who paid to see those films in theaters. This illustrates that, despite the seeming similarity between many of the stories filmed for the large screen and those made for the small screen, the two mediums are not interchangeable. The distinct characteristics of the two mediums, from their production techniques to the nature of their audiences' viewing environment, make it necessary to consider each medium separately. And while the film version of these stories, particularly *A League of Their Own* which virtually introduced a whole component of American history to its audience, had a great deal of historical capital, because of their failure to reach audiences, the unsuccessful television shows did not.

In the 1991-1992 season, NBC offered a new dramatic series, set in the late 1950s American South which garnered much critical acclaim, but was not a very big hit with audiences. *I'll Fly Away* was a legal drama, but unlike many of the other contemporary legal dramas on television at the time, it devoted as much time to exploring the home and family life of the main character, district attorney Forest Bedford, as it did his cases. The show's principal thematic focus was with race relations. The Bedford's African-American maid, Lilly Harper, provided a strong counterpoint to Bedford, and the series confronted the difficult issues of the time period in a sensitive and straightforward manner. Though it garnered a small yet vocal fan base, and the acclaim of the critics, *I'll Fly Away* lasted less than two seasons. The outcry that arose from fans did not entirely fall on deaf ears, however, as PBS picked up the series and produced a two hour movie that wrapped up many of the storylines.⁴⁶ Reruns of the series were also run on PBS stations. This unusual programming move reflects the power of television fans. Though they

⁴⁵ Five episodes were filmed before the network pulled the plug on the series. The two unaired episodes were broadcast together in the late summer of that year.

⁴⁶ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 570-71.

weren't able to save the series, they did prevent it from fading into obscurity. The attention that the series received, largely from the reaction of fans to its cancellation, increased the historical capital of the series, which was, in fact, sensitive in its portrayal of this time in history.

Another series that won a similarly devoted fan base was a mid-season replacement for CBS in the 1992-1993 season, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Though it lasted for six seasons, a fairly lengthy run, its fans made a similar outcry when the show was cancelled, which eventually resulted in the production of two made for television movies that advanced the storylines originated in the series. Focusing on the experiences of Dr. Michaela Quinn, a rare female physician in the mid-nineteenth century, on the Colorado frontier, the series addressed a variety of topics, from medical issues to the plight of Native Americans to more familiar family situations. Part adventure story, part romance, the series offered a variety of storylines as Dr. Quinn adopted children, got involved in politics and eventually married. Among the highest rated programs in its first two seasons despite its Saturday evening time slot, the series gradually lost viewers, and was cancelled after its sixth season.⁴⁷ The program's nineteenth century setting makes it one of the few television series to interpret pre-twentieth century American history. This fact alone gives the series enhanced historical capital, but the unusual portrayal of the details of both nineteenth century medical practices and the experience of Native Americans make it one of the most influential series on the popular American historical consciousness.⁴⁸

By the late 1990s, a vast array of cable networks were well established, and many of them had begun to produce their own original series programming. Among the first to produce shows with a historical flavor was the American Movie Classics network (AMC). Previously devoted solely to the broadcast of "old movies," the network was a prime candidate to offer a historically

⁴⁷ Ibid., 319-20.

⁴⁸ See Chapter Five for an extended discussion of this series.

based series. The network eventually put forth two series, the first more successful than the second, but both relatively short lived. *Remember WENN*, set in a Pittsburgh radio station in 1939, explored the world of serial radio dramas. A nostalgic comedy/drama, the series turned on the interaction of stereotypical characters and sometimes off-the-wall plots. Two complete seasons were filmed and aired, and the show continued through reruns after the original programming concluded.⁴⁹ The network's second series, *The Lot*, which spoofed 1930s Hollywood, was less successful.⁵⁰ One short season was filmed and aired, but unlike its predecessor, once the original episodes aired the series disappeared. AMC's venture into series production ended after these two series, and it returned to its all movie based format.

Other cable forays into historically based series include Lifetime's *Any Day Now* and Fox Family Channel's *State of Grace*. Both family based series addressed issues of cultural tolerance, *Any Day Now* through issues of racism, past and present, that the two main characters, one black and one white, confronted amongst themselves and in the society at large, and through differences in religion in *State of Grace*, as the two main characters, one Jewish and one Catholic, work to build a friendship despite the differences in their upbringing. There are many similarities between the two series, including vehicles that allow for contemporary commentary and reflection on the events of the past. *State of Grace* used the by then familiar format of an adult narrator commenting on the on-screen action that depicts her childhood memories.⁵¹ The use of flashbacks is more developed in *Any Day Now*, as each episode, set in contemporary Birmingham, Alabama where long time friends Renee and M.E. are adult women with careers and families of their own, included a series of sepia-toned segments that recalled experiences from their youth that commented on or colored the contemporary action. This allowed the series to comment on the past in terms of its connection to

⁴⁹ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 988.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 701-2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1127.

the present, a particularly useful tool for its exploration of race relations.⁵² The use of these vehicles, voice over and sepia-toned flashbacks, enhanced the historical capital of these programs because of their ability to lend an air of reality to the stories, as though the characters and their experiences had actually happened. The colorized flashbacks in particular took a familiar image associated with the past, old photographs, and used it to tell new stories that still somehow felt old.

By the late 1990s, the number of historically based series on the regular networks had begun to dwindle. Successful series continue to run however. One of the most successful series from this time period was the FOX channel's situation comedy *That 70s Show*. Pure irreverent nostalgia, the show draws on every stereotype of the era, from the gaudy décor of the characters' homes to the popular culture obsessed discussion of the teenaged main character's dialogue.⁵³ Currently in its seventh season, the series has been able to maintain the nostalgia-fest for the era for almost as long as the decade itself lasted. The success of the series prompted something of a spin off, *That 80s Show*, which debuted mid-season during the original series' fourth season.⁵⁴ The second series failed to catch on, however, running only half a season, despite strategic programming. Whether this failure reflects a lack of interest in 80's nostalgia as compared to the nostalgia for the 70s, or a limit on the part of the viewing public for such gratuitous nostalgia, or simply the fact that the spin off was not as well produced as the original series is unclear. But the continued success of *That 70s Show*, verifies the American public's continued appetite for nostalgia. The irreverence of the show limits its historical capital, as it makes it clear that no attempt at true historical representation is being made, but its continued presence both on the prime time television lineup and in reruns coupled with its popularity makes its interpretation of the decade significant, for those without any memories of their own to temper it with and for those who did

⁵² Ibid., 61-62.

⁵³ Ibid., 1183-84.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1183.

live through it whose own memories may well be shaped by the details they see replayed each week on television.

Another recent historical series on network television is NBC's *American Dreams* which was recently cancelled after a three season run. Executive produced by television icon Dick Clark, the series used the long running teen sensation *American Bandstand* as part of its backbone. Despite this highly nostalgic flavor, however, this family drama explored both the lighthearted and the turbulent aspects of the post-Kennedy 1960s.⁵⁵ Centered on the experiences of the Pryor family, middle class, Catholic, Philadelphians, the series took the audience from the *Bandstand* dance floor, to the 1964 Philadelphia race riots to the jungles of Vietnam. Though highly nostalgic at its very core, the show did not hesitate to confront the complex reality of the times it was portraying. This biting nostalgia is reflective of a trend being seen in contemporary historical interpretations, where our love for nostalgia is being checked with reminders of the difficulties and disgraces of our past. Though its life span was cut short due to falling ratings, it presents an interesting example of current televisual historical interpretations, and the kind of historical capital that is being created today.⁵⁶

Conclusions

An overview of historically based television series during their sixty year history reveals diversity in both format and subject matter, but with certain favored treatments and historical eras. The vast majority of these series are narrative programs, recreating a particular time and place through largely fictional storylines and characters but with varying degrees of “reality” and “historicity” built in to them. Most of the series, though set in the past, are limited to twentieth

⁵⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁶ See Chapter Five for an extended discussion of this series.

century history as well, with a particular emphasis on the 1950s and 1960s, meaning that for at least a portion of the viewership, the eras being portrayed are within personal memory as well as collective memory and that the nostalgia being created is true and not false. This is important to remember when considering the impact of these programs on the larger historical consciousness. Equally important to remember is that for many of these programs there are two separate audiences to consider—those who “were there” and those who were not. While the larger cultural impact is most likely akin to one or the other rather than split, depending on the era that is being depicted, it is still important to remember that for at least a portion of the collective, the impact may differ to some degree.

This overview also makes clear that the programs with the greatest historical impact are not necessarily the program which are the most historically sound. A widely varying degree of historical research goes into the production of these programs, and while in some cases the extensiveness of that research is made clear to the audience, in more cases it is not. The impact, regardless of how well recognized the degree of historical accuracy of a program is, is determined more by the series’ ability to engage an audience than by the number of historians who were consulted in the creation of the details that are portrayed. And while this is indeed distressing to those who make their living researching and presenting history to the public, it is a reality that we need to understand if we are to understand the nature of popular conceptions of our national past.

Televisual images of the past come to us through a variety of sources, from irreverent situation comedies to earnest family dramas, and while their message, focus and specific subject matter may vary widely, each leaves behind an image of the past that stays with the audience, coloring their larger historical conceptions. To further explore this, however, it is necessary to consider in more detail the programs that are having an impact on our collective consciousness. Chapters four and five will offer case studies of some of the programs introduced here to further

illustrate the impact of television series programming on the popular American historical consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

History Through Laughter: TV Series Case Studies: Comedies

To fully understand the contribution of series television to the contemporary popular American historical consciousness, it is necessary to consider not only the scope of historical series but also the kinds of themes and subjects that these shows present. A detailed consideration of all the historical series broadcast on television is not practical, but in order to delve more deeply into the content of these televisual histories, five case studies are offered here. The series analyzed in these case studies represent a variety of genres and approaches. They also represent several different time periods of television broadcasts, though all belong to the post-1971 era of broadcasting mentioned earlier. The proliferation of historically based programs during this more contemporary period, and its more recent occurrence both make it well suited to consideration for this project.

Five series are considered here in two chapters, the first looking at television comedies and the second looking at dramatic series. The five series, *M*A*S*H*, *Quantum Leap*, *The Wonder Years*, *Dr. Quinn*, *Medicine Woman*, and *American Dreams* are presented chronologically within the genres to aid in consideration of the development of the historical series, and, consequently, their cumulative impact on our collective memory. At the time of the writing of this study, all five programs are available for viewing, in one form or another, though some are more easily and widely accessible than others. Considered individually, these series allow us to more completely understand the

nature and impact of the historical television series. Considered collectively, they allow us to understand the mix of historical content that comes to us across the small screen.

Arguably the most watched and most popular of all television programming, comedies have been a regular part of prime time broadcasting since the earliest days of the medium. Though commonly referred to as situation comedies or sitcoms today, there have actually been a variety of comedic narrative forms on television over the years. The term situation comedy applies most appropriately to shows which revolve around the absurdity of a particular situation in which the characters find themselves. The situation is the source of the comedy and the focus of the story. Other comedic narratives are more character driven, and the behavior of the characters and their interactions with each other provide the central focus for the show. These kinds of comedies are often set in a domestic or work place setting where the familiar patterns and routines of such venues serve as the comedic material.¹ This latter category of comedies includes stories that generate warmth and moral lessons as well as hearty laughs. Most of the historically based comedy series that have been broadcast on television over the course of its history have belong to this second category. Though shows like *Hogan's Heroes* with its weekly escape attempt might rightfully be labeled as a situation comedy, the vast majority of historical comedies have revolved around the development of characters and their relationships to one another and to their environment. The two series considered in this chapter, *M*A*S*H* and *The Wonder Years*, definitely belong in the character driven comedy category. It is through the characters and their experiences that the

¹ In his book *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), Horace Newcomb offers an extensive discussion of the different types of television comedies. Other scholars have expanded on Newcomb's foundational work, such as Gerard Jones in *Honey, I'm Home!: Sitcoms, Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), and David Marc in *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1989).

history comes alive on the screen, becoming a character itself from time to time as it acts upon the characters as they go about their daily lives.

***M*A*S*H*: Comedy, Politics and War**

Of all the historical programming on television, only a small portion of it is done through comedy. The exact reasons for this are not entirely clear. Perhaps it is comedy's typically lighter nature that makes it seem less compatible with exploring historical material. But regardless of the reasons for it, comedic histories are more unusual on television than dramatic ones. Still, some of the most successful historical programs have been comedies, *M*A*S*H* chiefly among them.

And yet it was a very atypical television comedy, especially in its earliest years. A very dark comedic approach was used, not surprising for a series set against the backdrop of war, but distinct from the comedy usually dispensed through television. Poking fun at American government and politics and joking about death and war itself were common sources of comedy for the show, a far cry from the warmhearted family situations that dominated television comedy at the time. This darker, more irreverent brand of comedy was not completely without comparison at this time, however, with controversial shows like *All in the Family* that satirized contemporary American life and attitudes sharing the air waves in the early 1970s.

Though the show was set in the 1950s, it was used as a vehicle for contemporary social commentary. By 1972 when the series premiered, the United States military involvement in Vietnam had lost a great deal of its public support, and *M*A*S*H* capitalized on that with its dark humor and anti-military stance, poking fun at those who took the army seriously and continually referencing the absurdities of war. It was the Korean War that was being dramatized, but it was the Vietnam War, or perhaps even war in general, that was being commented upon.

The combination of comedy and war was not new in 1972. Humorous portrayals of the military and of war have had a place on television from the beginning. World War II based comedies like *Operation Petticoat*, *Hogan's Heroes*, and *The Phil Silvers Show* had been popular with viewers for at least a decade before *M*A*S*H* debuted. But never before had a war based comedy aired simultaneously with contemporary military involvement on a similar scale, especially one that was unpopular with many Americans. The fact that its humor drew largely from the social commentary it was generating made it even more unique in this way. Its style was popular, however. After its first season, *M*A*S*H* remained among the top ten rated series for its entire eleven year run.

The series not only attracted large numbers of viewers, but it also generated a great deal of critical acclaim. Indeed, even though its first run life has been over for more than twenty years now, *M*A*S*H* continues to attract scholarly attention as a show reflective of its time. Scholar James H. Wittebols has suggested that the program can be read more as a contemporary commentary on 1970s and 1980s America than as a historical drama about the Korean War.² Particularly as the show aged, Wittebols sees the topics the program tackled and the particular slant it used to do so as a key to understanding the decade in which the series was produced. This interpretation of the show suggests that *M*A*S*H* will provide even more historic value in the years ahead as it comes to be seen as an artifact of the late twentieth century that reflects the attitudes of its contemporary audience.

² See James H. Wittebols, *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998).

From Book to Film to Television

The story behind the television show begins with the penning of a book by an actual MASH doctor in the Korean War. *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors* was written by Richard Hooker and based on his own experiences in the war. It introduced the characters that would come to be so well known to American audiences and set the tone that would be adopted by the screen versions of the story that followed it. More a series of vignettes than a novel, the book lent itself well to the eventual adaptation to a television series. Shortly after the book was published in 1968 the rights to it were secured for a film adaptation, which was released in 1970. The screenplay was written by author Ring Lardner, Jr., whose credentials for working on such an irreverent story included his distinction as a blacklisted artist during the McCarthy hearings. The movie followed the stories in the book fairly faithfully. The characters were essentially the same, and many of the scenes in the movie come directly from anecdotes in the book. The film was extremely popular, placing second at the box office for the year and winning a number of prestigious awards and nominations.³

The success of the movie prompted the creation of the television show. Spearheaded by Twentieth Century Fox and picked up by CBS, the creative team behind the series had a great deal to do with the direction it took, and the success it had. The anti-Vietnam sentiments of writer-producer Larry Gelbart influenced both the plots and the tone of the show.⁴ The historical setting of the show was never forgotten, and efforts were made to portray it accurately, but the messages behind it were distinctly contemporary.

³ An extended discussion of the book and film and their relationship to the film can be found in the second chapter of James H. Wittebols, *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), 11-21.

⁴ Wittebols, 16.

Welcome to the 4077th

*M*A*S*H* first aired in the fall of 1972 as part of the CBS 1972-1973 season. Like the book and the movie, the series explored the life of members of the MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) 4077, a medical facility on the front lines, during the Korean War. It was told primarily through the experiences of Captain Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce (Alan Alda), a young doctor from Maine drafted into military service against his will. Along with his friend and roommate, Captain “Trapper” John McIntyre (Wayne Rogers), Hawkeye engages in pranks and schemes in between sessions of “meatball surgery” in the operating room where wounded soldiers are patched up to return to the battlefield. The camp leader, Lt. Colonel Henry Blake (McLean Stevenson), also a drafted doctor, is a dismal administrator with a penchant for drinking and women, just like his irreverent surgeons. Other medical personnel include Major Frank Burns (Larry Linville), a draftee, but, unlike his bunkmates Hawkeye and Trapper, a proud and eager soldier who prefers to live “by the book,” to the chagrin of his fellow doctors whom he is always reporting for one military infraction or another. His partner in these endeavors, and in a torrid extramarital affair as well, is Major Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan (Loretta Swit), head nurse and the only “regular army” member of the original cast. The earnest and naïve company clerk, Walter “Radar” O’Reilly (Gary Burghoff) keeps the dysfunctional 4077th running, idolizing the errant doctors and helping them to avoid the wrath of Burns and Houlihan whenever possible, even as he makes sure the “Army red tape” is dealt with and the camp is prepared to handle its very serious and important mission. Also on hand is Father Francis Mulcahy (William Christopher), a kind, well meaning clergyman who turns his head to the rampant debauchery in the camp while he does his best to bring some religion into the lives of its members, and Corporal Maxwell Q. Klinger (Jamie Farr), a drafted orderly who spends more time trying to get himself discharged from the Army under section 8 (an insanity discharge) through various scams (the longest running of which is his

appearance in women's clothes) than he does attending to patients in the hospital. As the series continued, some of the original characters left Korea. Trapper is discharged when he receives enough "points" to be "rotated" home, Frank Burns has a nervous breakdown once his beloved Margaret marries another man, and Col. Blake is killed in an accident on his way home after getting discharged. Radar, too, leaves the 4077th, though reluctantly, when his beloved uncle dies and he is needed at home. As these characters left, new ones came to replace them. Capt. B.J. Hunnicutt (Mike Farrell) replaces Trapper, as both a surgeon and Hawkeye's "partner in crime," Colonel Sherman T. Potter (Harry Morgan), a regular army doctor, becomes the new camp commanding officer, and Major Charles Emerson Winchester III (David Ogden Stiers) is brought in to replace Frank.

The business of the 4077 is deadly serious. They are faced with countless injuries that they cannot always fix and sometimes devastating effects even when they can. The sometimes unmanageable pace of their surgical responsibilities, coupled with the mind-numbing boredom that faces them in between, makes each member of the unit a little crazy from time to time. To help them deal with the death and devastation that constantly surrounds them, they drink (from their own still, the Officer's Club or at the local hangout, Rosie's Bar), "date heavily," and they play elaborate pranks on one another. They also do what they can to minimize the terrible impact that the war is having on the local citizens, and work together to help solve the personal crises that the camp members experience from time to time. When they can they get passes to Seoul or Tokyo for "R&R," and the rest of the time they try to catch up on missed sleep and generally survive the difficult situation they are living in.

Through the series we get to know not only the members of the 4077, but also the visiting military dignitaries that come to inspect and critique them and the many patients that pass through the hospital. Each has a story of their own. The main characters are highly developed, each with a

back story and their own personality quirks. Their relationships with each other are complex and often conflicted. Though some of the characters are generally “good guys” and some regularly “bad guys,” each has some elements of both. For the audience, these are people that we get to know, people who we sometimes like and sometimes don’t, people whose actions and thoughts, though they are in a situation that is completely foreign to most of us, we can relate to. The characters are like us and the people we know, and it is easy to get caught up in their stories as they unfold on the screen.

The political tone of the show is decidedly liberal, as all but a few of the characters openly condemn US involvement in the Korean conflict and defy military convention wherever possible. And yet because of the humor that is generated by the series’ ability to highlight the absurdities of war the program is not as offensive to conservative viewers as it might be. Regardless of a viewer’s opinion about American military involvement, in Korea, Vietnam or any other conflict for that matter, there is humor to be found in the often nonsensical realities and routines of daily life at the 4077th and the interactions of the characters that inhabit it.

Teaching History

Set against what has come to be known as the “forgotten war,” the fact that the Korean War is something that most Americans have little knowledge of contributed to the success of the contemporary social commentary that the show offered. The two conflicts shared enough in common--the enemy communism, the setting in an unfamiliar Asian country and the look of the military in that setting--that it is easy to forget which war was being portrayed. After all, for Americans at this time, the Vietnam conflict was a constant presence on their television screens, making them familiar with the look, if not the meaning, of the war, especially through the televisual filter. At the same time, however, that same lack of knowledge made everything that was depicted

instantly historical, populating the sparse collective memory of the Korean War. The essential conflating of the two wars further complicates the historical messages, though, as a lack of historical knowledge through which to filter the information provided by the series may result in a lack of understanding the two wars as distinct events with their own specific details, despite the similarities that might rightfully be drawn between the two conflicts.

Though the setting of the show was very real, the characters themselves were fictional. This combination of fact and fiction is common in historical narratives, and allows for greater freedom within historical interpretation. While a certain attention to detail has to exist to pull off the historical setting, without the constraints of biography to attend to, the characters themselves can be developed as the series progresses. The members of the 4077th were whole characters, not replicas of people about whom everything could not be known. And because the characters were so developed the show captured the audience in an emotional way, thereby strengthening the messages of the show and the history that is portrayed.

Care was taken to ensure that the details of the Korean War setting generally and the medical facility setting more specifically were true to the time. The camp itself was modeled after an actual MASH unit, the 8055. This model was used to construct the landscape of the series, though sets and the number of personnel present were scaled back for practical reasons, and some of the particulars of the daily life of the camp that were included in the show were altered as well. The use of helicopters in transporting the wounded, and the occasional “bug outs” that the camp had to go through as the fighting “line” shifted were based on the experiences of actual MASH units in Korea in the 1950s. On the other hand, details such as the racial make up of such units during this time and the ages of most of the personnel were not always accurate. Popular magazines of the era were used in the writing of specific storylines, and some of the production staff even visited Korea for part of their research. Though the specific events of the Korean War rarely entered into

the *M*A*S*H* world, the details of the setting were meticulously researched.⁵ Place names and the names of actual political and military leaders are routinely used in the show, but specific battles and actual people are not recreated on the show. Their use as references does, however, contribute to the historical picture of the Korean War that is painted by the series.

Unlike most historical narrative on television, especially the comedic ones, *M*A*S*H* became more historical as the series progressed. In most cases, once a historical series has found and secured its audience its adherence to its original premise and its commitment to historical detail have a tendency to waver to some degree. This was not the case for *M*A*S*H*. As the series developed, its dark comedic core tended to soften, and it was replaced with a gentler brand of comedy and increased attention to the dramatic storylines it was becoming known for. This, of course, made more opportunities to deal with the actualities of the war.

The vast majority of the show's episodes dealt with small situations that occurred as part of the day to day experiences of the doctors and support staff at the hospital. Many of those situations didn't even involve the hospital or the operating room at all. The securing of a new pair of boots for Hawkeye in the face of army red tape ("For Want of a Boot"), or a collective effort to complete the *New York Times* crossword puzzle ("Across") might provide the impetus for an entire episode. Most installments included some reference to medicine or surgery, however, as the program educated the audience in the status of medical technology during the era and under the conditions of war. In one highly acclaimed episode, the action takes place in "real time," as the doctors struggle to save a patient from paralysis in a time sensitive procedure ("Life Time"). The series occasionally pointed to the medical advances that result from the intensity of surgical procedures

⁵ A number of books on the series have been written that provide these kinds of details. See, for example, Michael Harris, Carl H. Steele and Elsa M. Burton, *M*A*S*H: Binding Up the Wounds* (New York: George Fenmore, 1983); Susy Kalter, *The Complete Book of M*A*S*H* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1988); and David S. Reiss, *M*A*S*H: The Exclusive, Inside Story of TV's Most Popular Show* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980).

during war, such as the development of new medical instruments ("Patent 4077"). This kind of period information could easily be missing from the historical knowledge of even the most avid history buff. A narrative setting such as this allows for the casual transmittance of detailed historical information that even the most complete history class would most likely overlook. And while this is certainly not the kind of knowledge that is necessary to have to understand the era, it does contribute to the larger body of historical knowledge for the audience, even if it is given with very little real context.

The ins and outs of military life also provided material for many episodes. USO troupes visit ("Showtime" and "That's Show Biz"), "friendly fire" casualties are treated at the hospital ("For the Good of the Outfit"), and delays and mistakes in the distribution of mail and supplies complicate matters on a regular basis ("The Long John Flap," "The Light That Failed," "Communication Breakdown"). In one episode, Hawkeye must fight to prove that he is actually alive once a clerical error has listed him as dead in military records ("The Late Captain Pierce"). These episodes provide an education for those who have never served in the military and serve as humorous reminders to those who have, supplying some of the few potentially nostalgic moments for at least a portion of the audience. They are also examples of some of the continuities of certain aspects of life over time, not a distinctly historical lesson but one that contributes to our understanding of the passage of time.

The specific details of military life during the Korean War are dealt with occasionally. The practice of buying locals to serve as servants, and the distaste for the practice that is felt by other soldiers, is dramatized in the first season's "Moose." The practice of American soldiers "marrying" Korean women to get them into the United States where they become prostitutes is revealed in "Love and Marriage," while the presence of the black market and the need of military personnel to deal with it in order to perform their jobs is addressed in "Out of Gas." When an Army public

relations stunt attempts to “recruit” an enemy pilot to defect to the United States against his will, Hawkeye and B.J. take advantage of the situation to send an eager defector in his place (“Foreign Affairs”). These comments on military life are much more specific to the time and therefore more significant historically, though they are infrequent over the course of the series run. Though some of these situations were not exclusive to the Korean War, they are tied to the era.

While the action in the series is generally limited to the confines of the camp, the characters occasionally find themselves outside those boundaries, sometimes by choice and other time by circumstance, where they encounter local residents (“Hawkeye,” “In Love and War,” “B.J. Papa San,” “The Best of Enemies”). Korean culture and traditions are occasionally dealt with as well (“Exorcism”). In addition to grounding the series in the Korean War and some of its distinct characteristics, these episodes also serve as cultural lessons for the audience, humanizing the often overlooked natives of American military involvement overseas.

The social culture of the time is addressed through storylines that address racism and other forms of discrimination. The desegregation of the troops that happened shortly before the outbreak of war in Korea comes into play in “Dear Dad” and “The Tooth Shall Set You Free.” The mistreatment of homosexuals in the army is addressed in “George,” and in “Post Op,” an American soldier of Chinese descent struggles with the guilt he feels from having to kill an enemy that looks more like himself and his family than his fellow soldiers. In these cases, the program simultaneously points to the discrimination in America that has been alleviated over time while reminding the audience that these problems have not yet been completely addressed.

The popular culture, something often used in historical television programs to provide a period feel, of the 1950s is less apparent in this series because of its detached, militarily dominated location. Still, there are regular references made to it. In an episode that combines mainstream popular culture and military recreation of the era, the camp members join for the showing of a

classic western and entertain themselves when the film continually breaks down by singing songs and giving impersonations of famous celebrities ("Movie Tonight"). The letters from their family back home provide some cultural details when the gang at the 4077th organizes a big party in New York so that their relatives can meet each other ("The Party"). One episode chronicles an entire year, 1951, in the life of the 4077th, starting and ending with a New Years Eve celebration. As part of this episode the exciting baseball season that culminated in a dramatic race for the pennant is referenced as the characters react to the developments ("A War for All Seasons"). These kinds of period details, so prevalent in most other historical television programs, are relatively rare in *M*A*S*H*, making their appearance that much more noticeable.

A few episodes were designed as "interview programs" ("The Interview," "Our Finest Hour") The premise of these shows was that a film was being made to show to the "folks back home" about the soldiers fighting the war overseas, and the characters were being interviewed for the film. Presented as scratchy, old fashioned black and white films, these episodes allowed the characters to not only talk about their experiences in Korea but also reflect on what they missed at home, thereby bringing in some of the cultural references of the time. In the second of these episodes, period film clips were interspersed with the interviews, creating an even stronger period image. These shows that make a point of referencing the period details bring a touch of nostalgia to the series that is often missing from the program as a whole. It is hard to "miss" a time and place that is continually derided and made the butt of jokes. While not exactly anti-nostalgic, the show did not depend on the power of nostalgia to drive it as so many other historical shows have.

One important characteristic of *M*A*S*H* as a historical program is that the passage of time has no real bearing on the series. This was an eleven season interpretation of a three year war. And while the seasons change repeatedly (shown through details like weather changes and the celebration of holidays), the years never seem to pass. The show opens in 1950 (acknowledged by

a date label in the pilot episode), but when the aforementioned episode that chronicled the year 1951 aired, it was the series' ninth season. Period references were general, not tying them to a specific date. Of course this extended dramatization of a relatively short war leant to the endless feel of the characters' military service, a regular theme of the series. But it also contributed to the groundless sense of history that is characteristic of mediated historical portrayals.

Life after Prime Time

*M*A*S*H* is the most successful historical television narrative of all time, to say nothing of its stature among television shows in general. It was nominated for and won numerous industry awards, consistently ranked among the top rated shows on television and ran for eleven seasons, nearly four times as long as the Korean War itself. Its final episode was the most watched television episode of its time, attracting over fifty million viewers and more than sixty percent of television viewers for its time slot⁶, and it retained that distinction for more than a decade before it was dethroned by the final episode of *Seinfeld*, another enormously popular program.

It has remained a favorite with television viewers in its syndicated life. Since the end of its time on prime time, *M*A*S*H* has been in constant syndication, keeping it alive in the public consciousness and bringing it to new generations of audiences. Twentieth Century Fox started releasing two seasons per year on DVD in 2001, making it one of the first shows available through the new medium. It has also been one of the first series chosen to be digitally remastered for High Definition Television (HDTV) systems.⁷

In its current incarnation, *M*A*S*H* contributes a double historical message to the popular consciousness. Widely known as a 1970s social commentary in addition to a 1950s set program,

⁶ 2000 *Report on Television: The First Fifty Years*, by John A. Dimling, president and chief executive officer, Nielsen Media Research (New York: Nielsen Media Research, 2000), 20.

⁷ Joe Schlosser, "Making the Digital Cut," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 31 January 2001, 35.

viewing it today allows us to learn something of the 1970s attitudes toward war and the military. Though this second level of understanding requires a more critical mode of viewing than most audiences bring to their television watching hours, for those willing to do so it provides an additional level of historical understanding. The continued availability and therefore the continued influence of *M*A*S*H* seems assured. In its subtle yet effective way, the series will continue to exert its influence on the historical understanding of the American public

The Wonder Years: History Through Nostalgia

Following the 1988 Super Bowl, a special broadcast of a new TV series was aired by ABC. Planned as a mid-season replacement, *The Wonder Years* received the benefit of this popular lead in when it debuted in its regular prime time slot the following March. Though no one was sure that this show would make it, it became a top rated program by the end of its first abbreviated season, and retained that distinction for several more seasons as well. A nostalgic family drama set in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the series presented a less idyllic view of family life than many of the family programs that came before it. It had a distinctly bittersweet tone to it, consistent with the coming-of-age storylines that drove it.

When we remember our childhood, regardless of how old we are when we are recalling it, the events that spring to mind are those of personal achievement and family milestones. We remember the first time we rode a bike without help, or the medal we won in a swim meet. We remember years in terms of the things that happened to us or to those we love. That was the year my sister got married, or the year I won the school spelling bee. When we think of the historical events that have transpired during our lifetime, they become a curious mix of those events that make up a personal history and the events that later wind up in the history books. *The Wonder Years*

allowed us to remember just that way as the weekly series replayed those universal events that we all go through with a background of historical events that no one can forget.

While many have referred to the aesthetics of this show as pure nostalgia, the added dimension of historical references takes the show a step beyond and creates a whole world we can truly become involved in, and vicariously experience the history with the characters. This is particularly true because the Arnolds, the family of adolescent Kevin that *The Wonder Years* centers around, and their neighbors inhabit a place where the turmoil of the world around them stays primarily in the background. The writers do not attempt to throw their characters into artificial situations just to exploit the many news stories of the era. Instead the news stays where it existed for most Americans in the late sixties and early seventies, on television, making only the occasional face to face appearance in their own lives. History is used in a subtle way. The show does not claim to be about the Vietnam era, it is merely set there. And in making this distinction, the creators have produced a program with as honest a portrayal of history as television can produce. By leaving the history primarily in the background, it takes on a character-like status in the show, and, as a result, the history actually becomes more palpable.

Creating the Series

The primary goal of the show's creators was to develop the stories that are universal and timeless. As they thought both about the shows that reflected the effects the Vietnam era had had on its youth and their own experiences of the time, they "began to realize what a strange time it was to be a kid."⁸ The project became both the exploration of an intriguing idea and a personal statement. The setting of the tumultuous sixties provided a poetic parallel to the events occurring in their young character's life. The upheaval of adolescence in a young boy's life mirrors the

⁸ Kathryn Baker, "Wonder Years Looks at '60s Through Eyes of a Pre-teen," *The Associated Press*, 30 January 1988, 7C.

upheaval in the country. This magnification makes the feel of the era that is being portrayed very palpable for the audience, whether they lived through those times or not.

Although both the producers grew up in the suburbs during the late sixties and early seventies, they insist the show is not autobiographical, though they do admit to drawing a great deal on their own experiences when creating the show. “Actually, most people think the show is about *their* life,” producer Carol Black has said,⁹ and that is where the true beauty of the show begins and ends. The inclusion of personal remembrances amid predominantly fictional writing produced the show’s targeted effect. There was enough real humanity in the writing to allow viewers to feel that at times they were watching their own lives unfold on the television screen, but not so much sentimentality to ruin the effect and reduce the story to sappy schmaltz. Because the audience is so able to connect with the characters and the plot lines, to become absorbed in the world that is being created for them on screen, they are drawn into the historical setting in a very meaningful way. Though the history itself is not central to most of the series’ episodes, the degree of historical capital is high.

The originally targeted audience for *The Wonder Years* was adults, primarily of the baby boom era, those for whom there was true nostalgia, who were remembering their childhood as they watched the series unfold. Because of the timeless nature of many of the experiences documented on the show, however, the series soon gained a strong following among teenagers and preteens who related to the experiences of the characters as they were happening in their own lives.¹⁰ The highly nostalgic flavor of the series makes it an excellent example of how a single program can create both true and false nostalgia simultaneously. Though one segment of the audience had lived through the times being portrayed on screen and another segment had not, the

⁹ David Blum. “Where were you in ‘68?” *New York*, 27 February 1989, 118.

¹⁰ Hal Boedeker, “Show Tries to Recapture Lost Wonder,” *Miami Herald*, 29 July 1992, 7E.

collective image of the time and glimpse into what it was like to live during that time is the same for both. And because the program resonated personally with so many viewers, the image and feel of the time that the show created leaves a lasting impact. This is magnified further when members of the two segments viewed the program together, as with many families.

The series was commonly labeled as a “dramedy,” a new term that came into use to describe shows that mixed comedy and drama in their story lines. Most programs that were designated as part of that category had short and unremarkable lives on television, but *The Wonder Years* was the exception. As a result of the largely unsuccessful runs of its members, however, the label has taken on a distinctly jesting connotation. It also fails to encompass the very heart of *The Wonder Years*’ message. The series is perhaps best termed a “coming of age” program. Considered as such, it is expected that both touches of comedy and drama will be incorporated, and that the two will often become so intertwined that it is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. That is what growing up is like, after all, and it is particularly true of how we remember it. *The Wonder Years* combines writing with an underlying sense of personal investment, dramatic techniques seldom used on television, and period settings and references to create an overall effect whose final product is unlike that of any other television program to date.

A significant characteristic of the show that enhanced both its nostalgic feel and its sense of historical authority was its use of narrative voice over by an adult version of the series’ main character. As an opening to each episode, and offering commentary throughout the on screen action, the narrator provides context for what is happening as well as insight into the characters’ thoughts and reactions. The use of narration as a plot advancing device was not a completely new idea. Hit movies such as *Stand By Me* and *A Christmas Story* made good use of narration, and even coupled it with the nostalgia of a historical setting just as *The Wonder Years* did. But this was a new idea in television and a device that worked even better on the small screen. The intimacy of the TV

screen added the extra dimension of close up character shots where facial expressions and body language could work with the narrator's words to provide a more complete effect. We were able to feel that we were getting into the characters' heads, and we grew close to them. The fact that they came into our homes once a week made the relationship even closer.¹¹ This aesthetic enhances the nostalgia, of course, but it also gives the audience the feeling that what they are seeing is a recreation of the lived experience of someone they know, a "real" person with "real" experiences. Because it feels "real," its authority to relate history is enhanced as well.

The use of period music was artfully employed both in setting the scene and in sparking memories in *The Wonder Years* as well. Producers Neal Marlens and Carol Black made a point of including not only the hits of the sixties and seventies that can still be heard on the radio from time to time, but also those songs that didn't make the top ten, or even the top forty for that matter, the songs that make you realize just how long it's been since you've heard them as they play. These lesser known songs were able to recall the era even better.¹² Because they tend to remain frozen in the time we originally knew them, their notes bring the place along with them as they play in the background.

The Wonder Years was shot on film instead of videotape, unusual for a half-hour series. This meant the audience could follow Kevin and his friends as they played outside or traveled the neighborhood on their bikes. When Kevin and his friends got their driver's licenses, viewers rode along with them. The scripts did not have to be tied to the interior scenes and traditional entrance and exit techniques that limit the possibilities of other half-hour shows. The choice of film as the series' medium was crucial to the success of the show. The characters had to be free to move

¹¹ See Horace Newcomb's article "Toward a Television Aesthetic," which further develops these elements in a definition of TV aesthetics, in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974).

¹² Diane Haithman, "Wonder Years Captures 1968 in a Child's Eyes - But are the Experiences Universal?" *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1988, 8G.

through the different areas of their world in order to trigger the personal response on the part of the audience that the producers were going for. The character's world had to resemble our own world as closely as possible, and to do that it had to encompass a variety of locales. The larger sense of history would also have been incomplete without the occasional appearance of period markers such as cars and clothing and people participating in the trends of the day. *The Wonder Years'* creators intended to recreate a time of life within a time in history, and to do that they needed to use vehicles such as these to produce the desired effect.

Meet the Arnolds

The central characters in *The Wonder Years* live in an undisclosed suburb, the anonymity of which is presumably to aid in the feeling that the action that is unfolding could and did happen to anyone in any place. The Arnolds, while being a fairly normal middle-class suburban family, are not the stereotypical group we usually encounter on family sitcoms. Father Jack is a perennially grumpy middle manager who doesn't particularly relate to his kids. We get occasional glimpses into his kinder, gentler side, but it's the exception not the rule. Mother Norma, on the other hand, is very involved in her children's lives, but is not always able to solve their problems with milk and cookies and a kiss on the forehead. She is not immaculately dressed, her family is not always overjoyed with the meals she prepares, and she suffers occasional bouts of disillusionment with her wife-and-mother life. Sister Karen is a budding hippie who finds fault with everything and everyone. She takes birth control pills, skips school to hang out with her flower children friends, and later in the series moves in with her boyfriend without benefit of marriage. Brother Wayne couldn't be more obnoxious. He taunts Kevin and his friends at every opportunity, mouths off to his parents, and has no apparent ambitions at all.

Kevin himself is a wide-eyed everykid. He does well in school, but still struggles with math and junior high school superficiality. He loves playing football with his buddies, trading baseball cards with his best friend, the quintessential geek Paul Pfeiffer, and cruising around the neighborhood on his bike. He is in and out of love with the girl next door, Winnie Cooper, throughout the course of the show, but has his share of dates with other girls along the way. He gets into trouble at school and at home, but is a good kid at heart. It's hard not to like Kevin, and even harder not to relate to him, at least some of the time.

These kids are part of the television generation, and we are reminded of how central television was to the era constantly. The television acts as a secondary character itself in many episodes. News footage playing in the background contrasts action in the foreground, or TV dialogue provides a commentary to the unfolding plot. Kevin and his friends pop in and out of popular sixties programs as Kevin imagines possible outcomes to whatever problem he is struggling with at the moment. When the Arnolds gather around the television, the shows they watch provide another bit of nostalgia and another historical reference.

From the opening credits of the pilot episode, the historical/nostalgic flavor of the series shines through. The opening of each show consists of home-movie style film showing the Arnold family involved in typical leisure activities. We catch a glimpse of the main characters at play while Joe Cocker's version of "I'll Get By With a Little Help From My Friends" plays in the background. The nostalgia of the home movies sets the warm mood of family while the music as well as the clothes the characters are wearing and cars in the driveways set the scene in time. Following the credits in the pilot episode, we see a montage of news footage circa 1968, a technique used many times over the run of the show. As clips of Robert Kennedy and race riots, peace demonstrations and crowds of displaced Vietnamese civilians, Martin Luther King and then his family mourning him at his funeral flash by, we hear the voice of the adult Kevin as narrator:

1968. I was 12 years old. A lot happened that year. Denny McLain won 31 games, the *Mod Squad* hit the air and I graduated from Hillcrest Elementary and entered junior high school.¹³

The use of juxtaposition of major news events and well known figures and the seemingly trivial facts so important to junior high aged kids is another well used hallmark of the series. In the background plays the Birds "Turn, Turn, Turn," the first example of the series' key use of period music to set the scene and the mood. This artful combination of media and writing brings the audience into the moment and starts the memories, and the history, rolling. We relate to both the history and the nostalgia, so much so that the two become inseparable and the result is an overall sense of inclusion. As the show progresses, we learn that Kevin's school is being renamed "Robert F. Kennedy Junior High School" just "like about half the other schools in the country that year."¹⁴ We see Paul, Kevin and Winnie experiment with fashion styles of the era, and by the end of the show learn of the death in Vietnam of Winnie's brother Brian, the neighborhood hero. The closing words of the narrator provide one of the most comprehensive summaries of the meaning behind the show. Kevin, having run into Winnie who is trying to come to grips with her brother's death, comforts his friend and they share a kiss. These words are spoken in voice over as the action unfolds:

It was the first kiss for both of us. We never really talked about it afterward, but I think about the events of that day again and again, and somehow I know that Winnie does too, whenever some blowhard starts talking about the anonymity of the suburbs or the mindlessness of the TV generation. Because we know that inside each one of those identical boxes with its Dodge parked out front and its

¹³ "Pilot," *The Wonder Years*, American Broadcasting Company, January 31, 1988.

¹⁴ Ibid.

white bread on the table and its TV set glowing blue in the falling dusk, there were people with stories, there were families bound together in the pain and the struggle of love. There were moments that made us cry with laughter. And there were moments, like that one, of sorrow and wonder.¹⁵

Dialogue such as this simultaneously describes the time and sets it in context, and reminds (or teaches, as the case may be) the audience of the details of what it was to live there in that time and place. Most of the episodes follow suit with the pilot. The late sixties or early seventies setting makes itself known with references to the events happening outside the Arnold's suburban world, but stays primarily in the background. The stories stay fairly focused on the day to day events that occur in young Kevin's life, often inspired by a remembrance in the mind of the episode's writer.

Using History

A good example of the occasional appearance of the tumultuous decade in the life of young Kevin is found in the episode entitled "Walk Out." The show opens like many episodes do, with Vietnam War news footage playing on a scratchy black and white TV in the Arnold's kitchen. All we see is the news footage, but in the background we hear the family going about their normal breakfast routine. Mom is complaining about the cost of groceries (a little added piece of history is thrown in as we note the prices she is finding so high), Dad can't find his socks and Kevin is complaining about his eggs being too runny. The narrator sets up the issues we're about to encounter: "In 1969 we had the Vietnam War for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I guess it was inevitable that we stopped paying attention." When the news footage changes to show Vietnamese

¹⁵ Ibid.

refugee children, Kevin's attention is caught briefly as he finishes his breakfast. "You had to stop paying attention," the narrator adds.¹⁶

At school that day the first order of business in home room is to elect a class representative to the student council. No one is particularly interested. While he is in the bathroom trying to avoid the election, Kevin is nominated and elected to fill the post. (It seems he was the only class member to be nominated. The election results show that Mr. Ed got one vote, Ringo Starr got four and Kevin got the rest.) He is not happy about it, but goes to the first council meeting where he encounters Paul, who has eagerly volunteered for the job. The issues the council deals with are hardly earth shattering (ice-cream machine choices, juke boxes in the cafeteria). They are about to adjourn when one hippie-like kid suggests they honor the upcoming Vietnam moratorium and organize a student walkout. The idea is not well received, until he points out they will be walking out during class time. Upon verification from their faculty advisor, who just happens to be the "cool teacher" of the school, that they are entitled to actually consider this sort of action, the head of the council agrees to have it considered in a committee. As the meeting ends, Paul and Kevin must sign up for committees. In a humorous nod to junior high school politics, Paul summarizes, "There's school spirit, social, ice cream, juke box, or walk out." They are going to sign up for juke box, but the line is too long. Paul doesn't like the people on the social committee, so that's out. Kevin suggests "walk out" because the "cool teacher" is advising that one. And so they become involved.

Their first committee meeting begins with card games and popular music sing-a-longs, and continues in this vein until someone suggests they actually discuss the walk out. They figure out how to mobilize the students, and then decided to notify the media and involve other schools. Just as they are on a roll, the vice principal, who has gotten wind of the possible protest, shows up. He

¹⁶ "Walk Out," *The Wonder Years*, American Broadcasting Company, March 7, 1989.

tells them that anyone who participates will be suspended and that it will go on their permanent record. The committee is angered by this ultimatum. The advisor, in an attempt to refocus the group, presses them about why they think the walk out is important. They have trouble expressing it at first, but as they try their true feelings come out. The narrator recalls young Kevin's thoughts:

Mr. Tyler was right. What did I really know about the Vietnam War? I didn't even know if Vietnam was one word or two . . . As we all talked we began to realize that maybe we knew more than we thought we did. Sure, we really didn't know Ho Chi Minh from Captain Kangaroo but we knew that a lot of people were getting hurt and we knew that it didn't seem to be doing anybody any good."¹⁷

They decide to circulate a petition to force the vice principal to take them seriously.

As the episode proceeds, we begin to see Kevin taking the daily news a little more seriously. He and the others commit wholeheartedly to their petition campaign and they get the signatures, but the vice principal won't give in. The committee is outraged and determined to go ahead anyway, but not without a lot of hesitation. Mr. Tyler doesn't show up on the day of the walk out, presumably buckling under the pressure of the administration to discourage the protest. The committee's resolve is dampened, and at the moment of truth, Kevin begins to back down. Once again he goes to the bathroom to hide out, but his classmates, taking his leaving the room as the signal to walk out, follow suit and the protest happens anyway. The whole school participates. They gather outside the school and sing "Give Peace a Chance." The narrator gives a final comment on his "memory:"

I'm not sure we really changed anything that day. I suppose the war would have gone pretty much the same if we had stayed in home room. But one thing would

¹⁷ Ibid.

be different. We wouldn't have the memory to carry with us today . . . of 800 children . . . on a football field . . . singing. And it wouldn't all be on our permanent records.¹⁸

In this episode, Kevin not only confronts the world outside his own backyard, but must also struggle with standing up for his own convictions in the face of opposition. Even if the particular details of this particular situation don't apply to us, we can relate to Kevin's predicament one hundred percent. And for an audience whose primary associations for this time in history include such historic events as the Vietnam War, a story like this lends some perspective to the context of such events for those who experienced them first hand. While the war was an omnipresent factor in their lives, the routines of daily life and immediate personal concerns likely played as significant a role for most people of the time.

The frequency, or infrequency really, with which Kevin has to confront the realities of the cold world feels appropriate for the experiences of an adolescent growing up in the suburbs. As the series progresses, though, and Kevin grows older, its relationship to the history it is presenting changes. It becomes at once both more and less about the era it embodies. There are fewer film and news footage montages and more infiltration of the societal concerns and counter cultural movements into the lives of Kevin and his friends and family. Episodes devoted to subjects such as Wayne joining the army and facing deployment to Vietnam ("Private Butthead") and Karen's wedding to the boyfriend she has been living within a very non-traditional flower child ceremony ("The Wedding") became more and more common. Kevin and Winnie join the McGovern campaign of 1972, and Kevin thrives in the English class of a teacher who bucks the system and teaches "non-traditional literature" such as *Catcher in the Rye* and grades only on a pass/fail basis. He must deal with disappointment in both situations, when McGovern loses and the administration

¹⁸ Ibid.

forces the free-spirited teacher out of the classroom. Through the narrator's comments the audience learns a bit about how experiences such as these are internalized, how history becomes personal. And in learning this, the history of the textbooks becomes more alive.

As Kevin learns life's lessons there are fewer nostalgic home-movie clips to remind us of the good old days as well, and the narrator's insights are not as central to the plots anymore. Kevin's own words and actions and our own familiarity with his coming of age provides the contrast and starting place for each new situation in which he becomes involved. We begin to recognize the inevitable closing of Kevin's years of wonder, and his nearing induction into adulthood, and it is bittersweet. It is when the series began to take this turn that its popularity began to fall, losing its top-rated status in its last two seasons, and the series was cancelled at the end of the 1992-93 season. The simultaneous decrease in nostalgia and ratings drop speaks to the centrality of nostalgia in the show's storytelling, and consequently in its teaching of history as well. Though certainly coloring it, the nostalgia in this series made the history lessons possible and palatable, and was crucial to the high achievement of historical capital that the series attained.

Life After Cancellation

By the late 1990s, we saw *The Wonder Years* move into the next stage of its televisual life. In syndication for several years, the cable channel *Nick at Nite* added the show to its regular weekly line up of "classic TV." There it kept company with shows like *I Love Lucy*, *Happy Days*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Bewitched*. It was the youngest show in the lineup by several years, but somehow its content seemed to fit with the other programming. *The Wonder Years'* sense of history, its ability to draw the audience into its historical setting, had the ability to make viewers believe they were watching a show made in the era it was depicting, just as the other *Nick at Nite* shows

reflect the feeling of their eras. This is perhaps its greatest achievement as a purveyor of history, that it can so convincingly recreate an era that it takes on the authenticity of artifacts from that time.

In a way, *The Wonder Years* was a classic from its inception. Presented with the intention of returning us to a classic time of life in a classic point in time, the series almost instantly became a part of our own past. It is not surprising that comparisons are more often and more easily made between *The Wonder Years* and *Leave it to Beaver* and other television shows of the era it was portraying than any of its contemporaries like *Growing Pains* or *Roseanne*. We have always watched *The Wonder Years* the way we watch *Nick at Nite* now: with a sense of history, with a sense of nostalgia, with a smile to our own past. As the narrator closes the final episode of the series . . .

Growing up happens in a heartbeat. One day you're in diapers; the next day you're gone. But the memories of childhood stay with you for the long haul.

I remember a place . . . a town. A house, like a lot of other houses . . . a yard like a lot of other yards . . . on a street like a lot of other streets. And the thing is . . . after all these years, I still look back . . . with wonder.¹⁹

It is interesting to note, however, that in recent years *The Wonder Years* has virtually disappeared from television screens. Not currently broadcast on any of the major cable stations that regularly air these kinds of programs, it is not longer widely available to contemporary audiences. It has also not found a place in the growing body of television releases on DVD. Both of these things could change at any time, of course, but the disappearance of the series does call its future influence on collective memory into question.

¹⁹ "Independence Day (2)," *The Wonder Years*, American Broadcasting Company, May 12, 1993.

Funny History

Though they are less frequent than their dramatic counterparts, comedic televisual histories have definitely made their mark on our collective historical understanding. Like television programming in general, the history lessons that come across in comedies are generally done in a less heavy handed, more casual manner, and that approach often leaves a more lasting impression. It is important to note, however, that some of the most popular and memorable historic comedies have regularly incorporated dramatic themes and segments into episodes. The term “dramedy” is occasionally used to describe these kinds of programs, though the label has never really caught on. Though their approach and their content differ significantly, despite the proximity in time of their settings, both series considered here prioritized history alongside humor, and while the particular historical knowledge that was imparted through these shows may have been somewhat random and without context, the result was an entertaining half hour of television that broadened historical understanding of the times in which they were set.

CHAPTER FIVE

Seriously Historical: TV Series Case Studies: Dramas

The majority of history on television has always been presented through dramatic programming. Well suited to the presentation of history, the weekly hour long time slot of the dramatic series provides enough time to present a complete story and still have time to develop a significant historical treatment as well. The more serious nature of these programs also provides a suitably meaningful palate on which to paint a historical picture. A wide variety of programming has been presented through the dramatic series. From family dramas to time travel narratives to crime stories, the dramatic series provides the perfect environment for all of these tales from the past.

Familiar to American audiences even in the medium's earliest days, television dramas share some of the same characteristics as radio serials that depended on suspenseful and compelling storylines and "cliffhangers" to keep audiences returning to successive episodes. Especially on radio where viewers had to use their own imaginations to create a visual image of the storyline, dramatic plots and engaging characters were essential to the success of the narrative. When these stories came to television, the possibilities for engaging audiences grew with the ability to provide sometimes elaborate sets and props to enhance the storylines. Dramas became some of the most expensive television productions as networks and producers alike capitalized on the opportunities to create visually stimulating portrayals of titillating, dramatic stories. Nowhere was this more true

than in historical dramas. Dependent on the settings to create the proper atmosphere, the advent of television presented to opportunity to create opulent portraits of the dramatic events of the American past.

Quantum Leap: Righting the Wrongs of The Past

As a mid-season replacement in the 1988-1989 season, NBC aired a new time travel series that combined science fiction and history with an altruistic sense of social justice. Taking on moral dilemmas and calling on the past as a key to the future, *Quantum Leap* not only interpreted the past through the eyes of the present, it created a concept of an idealized present that could be created simply by righting the often small wrongs of the past.¹ Epitomizing the characteristics of televisual history, this series simultaneously drew upon and reinforced popular conceptions of history. The perception of history as the key to a brighter future, the notion that the past is best understood through a contemporary lens, and the belief in the “recreatability” of the past are all at play in this program, which may have contributed to its audience appeal.

Though other time travel narratives on television had failed to capture the attention of sufficient numbers of viewers to insure a substantial run, this particular incarnation of the genre managed to do just that. Its earnest message of ensuring a better future by attending to the details of daily life in the present brought a different dynamic to the program that previous shows of this type had not provided. Though it was the past and its effect on the present that was dramatized through the show, the logical extension of the similar relationship between the present and the future was suggested.

¹ A discussion of the ethical and moral issues addressed in *Quantum Leap* can be found in Kayla McKinney Wiggins, “Epic Heroes, Ethical Issues, and Time Paradoxes in *Quantum Leap*,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 21, no.3 (1993): 111-120.

Traveling in Time

Quantum Leap is part of a long tradition of time travel narratives that have been told in print and on film. Since H.G. Wells fascinated readers with his *The Time Machine* in 1895, the notion of traveling through time has captured the imaginations of Americans. The genre of science fiction has produced many fanciful tales of exploring both past and future in novels and pulp magazines. Popular films like the *Back to the Future* trilogy, the *Austin Powers* series, *Time and Again* and *Somewhere in Time* continue to draw audiences in through theatrical releases and DVD sales. There have even been a number of other television shows that have taken on this theme. The 1960's series *The Time Tunnel* and more recent programs like *Timecop* and *Sliders* have all dealt with the concept of time travel. None of these other series, however, achieved the acclaim or longevity that *Quantum Leap* attained. Though *The Time Tunnel* has gained something of a "cult classic" status in recent years, its original run was only one season, and it is still relatively unknown and unavailable to audiences today.²

There is a wide degree of variance in the parameters and procedures in time travel narratives. In some cases, for example, great care is taken to avoid any change in the past with the assumption that any change in the past will alter everything that comes after and therefore change the present. An example of this is found in the first *Back to the Future* movie, where young Marty's appearance in the 1950s past of his parents' lives sets off a string of events that threatens his own very existence. He must contrive situations to ensure that the key events in his parents' early relationship occur as they originally did, or his own birth and that of his siblings would never have occurred and his life would end. In still other cases, the purpose of the time travel is to change the past in some way. Seen as a way to improve the future by using the lessons of hindsight to alter the

² At present it is shown periodically on the Encore Action movie network and has a moderate fan presence on the internet.

mistakes of the past, time travel is seen as a tool for creating a modern day utopia. In *Quantum Leap*, the past is something that requires alteration in order to improve things, and while the goal is not utopia, there is the assumption that by improving the lives of individuals in the past in one way or another, the society as a whole will improve along with it. This is a very literal interpretation of the commonly held belief that history is valuable primarily in its influence on the conditions of the present.

In the show, Dr. Sam Beckett, the creator of Project Quantum Leap, has his own theory of time travel, the “string theory.” Likening individual lives to a piece of string where birth exists at one end and death exists at the other, each day in a life exists chronologically along the rest of the string. By altering the string so that the two ends meet a loop can be formed and if the string is formed into a ball, then days at different points in the life would touch each other and travel between them would become possible.³ Basing his Quantum Leap Accelerator on that theory, Beckett sets out to put his theory into action. The inclusion of this theory in the show’s profile provides a more scientific rationale than many other time travel narratives offer, and this explanation makes the premise of the show and time travel itself even more believable.

In all time travel narratives, however, there is the suggestion of a finite past, one that exists as some sort of parallel universe that can be visited just as another country can be visited within the present day. This, of course, grows out of the popular perception of history as something knowable and unchanging, and ultimately reinforces that perception at the same time. This is a very romantic notion, is also a much more comforting concept than an ever changing past would be. As the past is often relied upon as a known quantity from which we can move forward, it is often used as a comforting retreat when the realities of the present day become too overwhelming.

³ This theory is explained in the episode entitled “Future Boy,” which aired as part of the third season on March 13, 1991.

If the past becomes something that cannot be counted on, then the comfort zone disappears. This alone may explain the popularity of time travel stories and their continuing reemergence over time. And yet, the very notion of time travel as it is presented in *Quantum Leap* suggests that changing the past based on contemporary wisdom is preferable to leaving the past as it was. This is inherently contradictory, of course, and reflective of the complex nature of the popular American historical consciousness.⁴

The Quantum Leap Project and How It Went Wrong

Theorizing that one could time travel within his one lifetime, Dr. Sam Beckett stepped into the Quantum Leap Accelerator, and vanished.... He awoke to find himself trapped in the past, facing mirror images that were not his own and driven by an unknown force to change history for the better. His only guide on this journey is Al, an observer from his own time, who appears in the form of a hologram that only Sam can see and hear. And so Dr. Beckett finds himself leaping from life to life, striving to put right what once went wrong, and hoping each time that his next leap will be the leap home.⁵

As each episode of *Quantum Leap* begins, these words are spoken by a narrator, encapsulating the fantastical situation that has placed the series' main character in the position in which we see him. Dr. Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) is a genius with multiple degrees and multiple talents who gets caught in his own scientific project before it is ready and finds himself doomed to "leap" through history, temporarily inhabiting the bodies of citizens of the past just long enough to change history

⁴ The treatment of history on television from a postmodern perspective, particularly in light of the issue of time travel and *Quantum Leap* is discussed in Robert Hanke, "Quantum Leap: the Postmodern Challenge of Television as History," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, 59-78 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

⁵ Opening credits, *Quantum Leap*, National Broadcasting Company, 1988-1993.

in such a way that will improve the lives of his “hosts” and the people they care about. With few exceptions, the people that Sam “becomes” are fictional “regular folk,” not important, well-known historical figures or people involved in the kind of events that will shape the lives of nations and end up in the history books. The only link to the present that he has is through Al Calavizzi (Dean Stockwell), a friend who appears to him as a hologram tuned into his brainwaves so that only he (again, with a few exceptions) can see. Al, in turn, is connected to Ziggy, the computer with its own personality that Dr. Beckett himself created to run Project Quantum Leap. Through a computer-like hand-held device connected to Ziggy, Al is able to determine the details of each situation Sam finds himself in, and, at some point, the reason, or likely reason, that Sam has been brought there in the first place. And it is lucky for him that Al is there, for, despite his tremendously powerful brain, the “leaping experience” leaves Sam with a “swiss cheese” memory, usually only temporarily, so he often needs Al’s help not only in deciphering the scenes he finds himself in but also his own true identity. The leaps take him into the bodies of many different people of all races, classes and sexes. Sam never knows who he will have to impersonate until he catches an image of himself in some sort of reflection. Since he has to act and dress like his “host” in order to complete his mission, Sam finds himself in some awkward positions and these situations provide comedy for the audience who sees not the host’s body acting out the scene as those he interacts with do, but Sam’s.

Because the notion of time travel in this show is limited to the lifespan of the time traveler himself, the history depicted in the show is limited to fairly recent events. Beckett was born on August 8, 1953 (the date on which he lands for the final episode of the series), so all of his leaps (with one exception) occur between that date and 1999, when the series is set. The show, which aired between 1989 and 1993, does limit itself to the pre-series history, never venturing into exploring what would actually be the future for the audience, even though the futuristic setting of

the series would technically allow for that possibility. This means that for a large portion of the audience, all the eras that are being depicted are within personal memory. For another segment of the audience, however, it is not, setting up yet another series that simultaneously creates both true and false nostalgia.

Though the typical episode involves fictional storylines and often small, ordinary problems, there are some exceptions to the rule. Sam leaps into the bodies of a number of people for whom racism and race relations are a significant issue. He plays the part of African American men and Ku Klux Klansmen, and of white men acting in support of civil rights. Sometimes he finds himself involved with well known events associated with the fight against racism, such as the Watts riots of 1965, but in most cases he finds himself acting out situations involving everyday encounters with race relations through the eyes of people whose lives were touched by it but who were never noticed by history. Other well known historical events that Beckett finds himself involved in include situations as varied as the Vietnam War and the death of actress Marilyn Monroe.

Occasionally Sam finds himself inhabiting the bodies of well known figures, such as Lee Harvey Oswald and Elvis Presley. Other times he merely encounters familiar personages, such as Chubby Checker or Stephen King. In one highly atypical episode, Sam leaps into the body of his great grandfather and finds himself fighting the Civil War and saving a slave who Al later tells him is an ancestor of Martin Luther King Jr.

These atypical shows are much more contrived than the average episode because they require the manipulation of events about which much has been documented and, because of the relatively recent historical settings that the show uses, some of which would be familiar to the audience. In most cases this kind of manipulation is not necessary because the characters and situations are fictional. They exist within a certain time and place in history, and that is always

important to the situation at hand, but because they are fictional the only thing that has to be recreated in the period atmosphere, not specific events that must be reenacted to be used.

Using History

There are some interesting comparisons to be made between *Quantum Leap* and the other moderately successful time travel series *The Time Tunnel*. In both cases the survival of the time travelers depends on the monitoring and/or intervention of a team of experts who remain in the future and have the benefit of the latest technology to assist them in their tasks. In the narrative, these experts provide the audience with the information and context they need to understand the situation that the time travelers are in, though not always with the proper historical context needed to understanding the setting. The similarities really end there, however. The travelers in *The Time Tunnel* travel as themselves, though they are often forced to adopt aliases for their own protection, and they travel to both the future and the past. They are not bound by their own lifetime and they find themselves in all manner of time and place. They are also free to share their status as citizens of “the future” if that truth will aid them in some way. In these ways the show is very different from *Quantum Leap* in how the destinations are dealt with. Another difference is how the past is negotiated in the two shows. In *Quantum Leap*, the clear goal is to change the past to improve the future. In *The Time Tunnel*, certain details of history can’t be changed but others can. The history that has been recorded, the history that is in the history books, cannot be changed, but what happens to the historical nonentities can be. This reinforces the popular conceptions of the past, and suggests that it is the actions of important people and the consequences of important events that shape the future and not the actions of the many unknown people who populate the past. This conception of history is problematic in any number of ways, and is simply convoluted even without

in depth consideration. *Quantum Leap* is much more straight forward in its notion of the past, and while it is still questionable by professional history standards, it is much clearer to consider.

The history in *Quantum Leap* is completely without order or context. Going beyond the usual lack of context that is characteristic of all historical television programming, Sam's leaps take away any notion of linear history and the conception of history as a series of related events. Each episode takes the characters and the audience into a completely new and unrelated situation in a completely different time and place. There is absolutely no continuity other than the premise of the show itself. Like Sam when he arrives in a new locale after a leap, the audience is temporarily displaced with nothing from their body of prior knowledge that they can draw upon to help situate themselves. The only clue that they have beyond Al's assistance is the date that flashes across the screen as the episode starts that identifies the time they are visiting.

To be sure, the period settings used in the series are well done, with much attention paid to detail. Each individual historical portrayal presented in each episode is convincingly drawn, and for an hour the audience is transported to the time and place as Sam himself is transported there. The engagement in the past that the audience gets in *Quantum Leap* is different than that created by most other historical series, because it is not sustained from week to week. Each time viewers tune into the program they are treated to an interpretation of a different historical scene. Though it would seem that this would detract from the historical capital of the series, because of the time travel frame of the show, it actually enhances it. The show's historical random temporality creates the feeling that viewers are themselves traveling in time in a manner similar to that of Sam himself. This sympathetic experience that the audience has with the program's main character reinforces the plausibility of time travel and magnifies the impact of each small piece of history that is presented. As a result, both the details of the past and larger conceptions of history in general are conveyed through the series.

Life After Cancellation

Never a top rated program, *Quantum Leap* did attain a regular faithful audience during its five season run. Even some of its greatest fans, however, acknowledged the inferiority of the final season. As is the case with many beloved shows, an outcry arose from the audience when the series was cancelled, and efforts are still underway to resurrect the series. Most of the faithful call for the Sci-Fi Channel, the original series new syndication home on cable, to take on the production of new episodes, or at the very least a new TV movie that would follow Sam on his continued travels. The failure of the series to return Sam home to the present makes the continuation of the story particularly appealing for fans.

Though it does not have a regular time slot on the Sci Fi Channel (not an unusual circumstance for this network that has unorthodox scheduling methods), it is regularly aired in marathons and occasionally finds a regular spot on the late night programming schedule. The fairly wide availability of the network (available in 75% of US homes by 2003⁶), makes the series accessible to today's audiences, though its sporadic broadcast schedule makes that access more difficult. Its affiliation with this science fiction oriented niche channel, however, does perhaps make it difficult to find for the historically minded viewer. The Sci Fi Channel does seem committed to the series, despite what its broadcast schedule may suggest. Discussions have been in the works for the production of a new *Quantum Leap* TV movie and the possibility of a sequel series, and press releases on the progress of these discussions posted on the channels web site suggest the likelihood of its eventual broadcast.⁷ Caught between the generally incompatible genres of science fiction and historical narrative, *Quantum Leap* does not have the natural niche that many other

⁶ Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 1040.

⁷ For information on the possible sequels, and scheduling variations for the show in syndication, see the Sci Fi Channel's web site at <http://www.scifi.com>.

historical series do. The release of the series on DVD, which began in the summer of 2004 and to date includes the first three seasons, makes the series somewhat easier to find for both science fiction aficionados and history buffs.

Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman: A New Look at the Old West

Called “‘Little House on the Prairie’ meets ‘Dances With Wolves’” with “a 19th century frontier family drama with late 20th-century, politically correct ideas,”⁸ *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* was a family drama broadcast in a traditionally family-oriented time slot (Saturday at 8:00 pm), that mixed traditional family themes with politically liberal messages and a steamy, romance novel like love story. The result was an untraditional, conventional historical family drama. At once familiar and unusual, this series used a well-known and well-loved format to present lesser known and sometimes challenging historical interpretations. In the tradition of *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons*, shows that had been off the air for a decade when this series debuted, it was the lead off program in a family focused line up created by CBS. Despite its old fashioned feel, it appealed to 1990s audiences and found a regular place on the Saturday evening schedule for six years.

Unfamiliar Stories in a Familiar Frame

Never expecting to win a regular series run, the producers filmed a two hour TV movie as a pilot episode for the series which CBS aired on New Years Day, 1993. It fared well, which is not surprising for a family centered movie during the holiday season, and continued as a mid-season replacement through the end of the season. It continued to score well in the ratings, breaking into the top-rated programs of the season, even with its abbreviated run. It was brought back for a full

⁸ Thomas H. Stahel, “Of New Programs and Other matters, Like... Well, You know,” *America*, 20 February 1993, 25.

season the following year, and ran a total of six seasons before it was abruptly cancelled to the dismay of its large collection of loyal viewers.

Classified as a western by some, the program is actually better termed an anti-western. Complicating the clear cut division between the “good guys” and the “bad guys” that westerns function upon, the show’s treatment of traditional western themes such as the relationships between white settlers and Native Americans, and man and nature were often presented without clear answers being provided. There is good and evil on both sides of these familiar conflicts as they are treated on this show, and that turns out to be one of the program’s central messages in the end. The female protagonist and her position as an educated professional also differ from the typical western hero who is usually male and usually prevails against all obstacles by pure instinct and grit.⁹ Many of the familiar generic images are there, though—horses, cattle, log cabins, general stores, saloons—and that, along with the family drama frame of the story, certainly helped to secure an audience for the show in its early days.

The main characters themselves appear to be fairly atypical, especially for a western, though as the series progresses they are revealed to be much more stereotypical and familiar than they first appear to be. Despite her extensive education and public bravado, the heroine, Dr. Mike, is revealed to be a naïve and somewhat sheltered woman from Eastern society, who is guided by many traditional notions of womanhood and femininity even as she strives to break down the strong gender barriers of her nineteenth century world. And though his rough exterior makes hero and love interest Sully appear fearless and alienated from society, he possesses a distinct vulnerability and commitment to community that he is careful not to show to the outside world but that is

⁹ A discussion of gender roles in this program can be found in Mimi White, “Masculinity and Femininity in Television’s Historical Fictions: *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, 59-78 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

regularly revealed to the audience. The secondary characters, on the other hand, are drawn largely from stereotypical character types that represent not only the mythic conceptions of the Old West, but the timeless personality types that seem to inhabit every era. As the series develops, however, the characters round out enough that they take on a more complete and complex nature. Each still fulfills his or her niche in the telling of the tale, but the more complete portrayal of the characters enhances both the interest level and the believability of the storylines, and, by extension, the history that is being portrayed.

Welcome to Colorado Springs

Michaela Quinn (Jane Seymour) is the youngest daughter of a prominent, wealthy Boston family. She received her unusual name when her father became sure that after four daughters, his fifth child would be a son, and decided on the name Michael for that child. But he did not get his son, and so an "a" was added to his chosen name and bestowed upon his fifth daughter. That same father, a doctor, became very close with his youngest child despite her gender, and passed his profession on to her, as she bucked the mid-nineteenth century odds to become one of the very few female doctors of the time. Her unusual name coupled with her unusual choice of career plagues her in her continual quest for acceptance. She joined her father in his practice after she completed medical school, and although her father was encouraging and supportive, she was never able to gain any measurable level of respect from the medical community in Boston. In 1867, Michaela's father dies, and she is both personally and professionally devastated. Unable to maintain any sort of practice, she answers a newspaper advertisement from a frontier town looking for a doctor. Her reply is immediately accepted, and she leaves everything she has ever known and heads off to Colorado Springs, a small frontier town that is neighbor to Indian reservations and untamed wilderness. Her arrival in town is not the welcoming experience she was hoping for, however, as

the local telegraph operator mistakenly assumes that the final "a" in Michaela's name is a middle initial, and has lead everyone to believe that Dr. Michael Quinn, a man, will be their new doctor. Though they try to send her home, Michaela refuses to go, determined to establish a practice and gain acceptance in this town. Her only friend is Charlotte Cooper (Diane Ladd), an abandoned wife and mother who runs the local boarding house and serves as the local midwife. Charlotte gives Michaela a place to stay, tries to introduce her to the community and give her the basic skills she needs to survive (household chores, horse riding, etc.) that she lacks due to her upbringing in a privileged home with servants. In her first days in Colorado Springs Michaela also meets Byron Sully (Joe Lando), an enigmatic man who dresses like an Indian and seems to spend most of his time with the local Cheyenne tribe. He answers her ad looking for a place to live and set up her practice, and rents his abandoned homestead just outside of town to her for one dollar a month.

While Michaela is still struggling for acceptance, Charlotte is bitten by a rattlesnake, and Michaela is not able to save her. On her deathbed, she asks Michaela to take in and raise her three children-- sixteen year old Matthew (Chad Allen), thirteen year old Colleen (Erika Flores/Jessica Bowman) and seven year old Brian (Shawn Toovey). Though hesitant to do so as she has no experience with children, Michaela agrees and inherits an instant family shortly after her arrival. Though the children are reluctant to accept this near stranger, they eventually become a family. Sully also plays an increasingly important role in the family, and in Michaela's life, as a friendship builds between them that quickly develops into love, though neither of them is willing to acknowledge it for some time. Through her relationship with Sully, Michaela becomes increasingly involved with the Cheyenne, as a doctor and later as a friend and advocate. She becomes especially close to Sully's Cheyenne "brother" Cloud Dancing (Larry Sellers) and his wife Snowbird (Tantoo Cardinal). Though it is a constant battle, Michaela eventually gains the trust and respect of the

town, as both a doctor and a citizen. They christen her “Dr. Mike,” and eventually rely on her education and compassionate nature to guide the town in its growth.

Other townspeople that Dr. Mike becomes involved with on a regular basis include local business owners Loren Bray (Orson Bean), owner of the general store, Jake Slicker (Jim Knobeloch), the barber, Hank Lawson (William Shockley), the saloon owner, and one of his prostitutes, Myra (Helene Udy), telegraph operator Horace Bing (Frank Collison), blacksmith Robert E (Henry G. Sanders) and café owner Grace (Jonelle Allen). Later arrivals that become a part of Michaela’s life include Dorothy Jennings (Barbara Babcock), a battered wife who, after her husband’s death (of which she is accused and later acquitted) starts her own newspaper, and Preston Lodge III (Jason Leland Adams), another Boston import who opens the town’s first bank. Some of these characters are her loyal friends, and others are consistently rivals, though nearly every relationship she has alternates between these two designations from time to time. Michaela is strong willed, opinionated and very liberal in both her beliefs and actions, especially for a nineteenth century woman, and often finds herself at odds with the majority of her neighbors. But she is a tireless physician and advocate for what she believes in and usually succeeds in changing the opinions of those who disagree with her.

History New and Old

Unlike many of the other programs considered here, the nostalgia of Dr. Quinn is false nostalgia for its entire viewership. Though they are fewer in number, shows such as this one that are set in the distant, unremembered past tend to garner fiercely loyal audiences who get caught up in the adventure and romance of the time, and who find the sense of community and family unity that is portrayed mesmerizing. The frontier, pioneer setting that is often portrayed in false nostalgic programming also captures the American imagination as it is seen as illustrative of our

true national spirit. Perhaps our strongest national myth, the experience and legacy of the American frontier represents the image that Americans have of themselves and their country. Taming the wilderness and surviving against tremendous odds, our pioneer ancestors set the precedent for all who came after. Shows like *Little House on the Prairie* had provided material to fuel this myth before, and *Dr. Quinn* continued that tradition while simultaneously challenging some of the tenets of the myth. Inherently patriotic in its celebration of American progress and ingenuity, it also reinforces the contemporary vogue of family values. Both of these characteristics provide a comforting environment from which to receive the past.

Like many other historical series, *Dr. Quinn* mixed fictional characters with real historical figures. Though all the regular characters were fictional, they interacted with military leaders and Native Americans that actually existed. This mix of fact and fiction is ideal for a historical drama. By using fictional characters for the majority of the action, the writers were not tied to documented profiles of actual people that would limit possible storylines. However, the inclusion of actual historical figures from time to time brought a sense of authenticity to the stories and made it easier for the audience to get caught up and believe in the historical world that was being created. Notorious soldier and Indian fighter General George Armstrong Custer is a regular adversary for Michaela and Sully in their quest to protect and support the local Native Americans, as are other real and fictional military figures. The chief of the local Cheyenne tribe that they become so involved with is named after and based on an actual Cheyenne chief from the area, Black Kettle. Some of the real Black Kettle's experiences are incorporated into the character and plot development of this component of the show, though it is presented out of historical context and sequence and the characterization of the man himself is largely fictional, as is that of Custer and other historical figures that appear in various episodes.

Not only was there a mixture of real and fictional characters on the show there was also a mixture of actual and made up events that were used. This was particularly true of the many Native American storylines that the show put forth. Actual battles that were fought between the Indians and the army were referenced and in some cases dramatized. For example, a number of episodes included segments that dramatized the relationship between the Cheyenne Indians and the US Army and white settlers in the area. Negotiation sessions between the two groups are portrayed, and the fulfillment of treaties, or failure to fulfill them, is dramatized. For one segment of the series Sully becomes an Indian Agent for the government, a post which he takes very seriously due to his commitment to the Indians, but which forces him to confront the hypocrisy and corruption of governmental and military policy toward Native Americans. Through this storyline, the audience is exposed to the atrocities that were committed against the Indians by the United States government and white settlers who felt entitled to the land that had always been home to the Indians before their arrival. The aftermath of massacres where entire tribal villages had been destroyed and the treachery of American treatment of the Indians are regularly dramatized on the show. In one episode ("The Offering"), for example, a typhus epidemic strikes the village of Michaela and Sully's Cheyenne friends when blankets provided by the army as part of a treaty fulfillment turn out to be infested with the disease. Their lack of resistance for this "white man's disease" results in an enormous death toll among the tribe, despite Dr. Mike's efforts to treat them. Though the incident portrayed here is not a recreation of a specific event, it is in keeping with actual situations that occurred in the relationship between the warring parties of the American West. Similar facsimiles were dramatized to illustrate the equally barbaric behavior of angry Native American warriors who lashed out at their oppressors by wreaking havoc on local communities. Part of the blurred line between good and evil that the series suggested, the good and the bad behavior of both sides of this conflict were consistently portrayed throughout the series' run.

In still other episodes, however, specific historical events were used to advance the story of the Native American experience. In one of the most moving segments of the series, the events surrounding the massacre at Washita are dramatized with a compelling frankness. While attempting to work with the Army and the American government to avoid further conflict and bloodshed, Black Kettle and his tribe, with the exception of some of its warriors, leave the land they have been living on to go to a new reservation that has been established for them. When they arrive at the new camp, they are turned away by the local Indian Agent who claims to have no authority to negotiate with them. While they are camped for the evening on their way back to their original home, they are attacked by Custer and his troops, and the entire village, consisting primarily of women, children, and the elderly, but including Black Kettle himself, is slaughtered. This incident actually happened in the place, though not precisely the time, that it is said to have occurred in the show. To draw it into the flow of the series, certain aspects of the event are fictionalized. Sully's and Michaela's friend Cloud Dancing is one of the warriors who stay behind when the tribe attempts to move to the new reservation, and it is the three of them who discover the aftermath of the massacre when they go in search of the displaced tribe. Cloud Dancing's wife Snowbird is among those killed, and the devastation felt by the series' characters at this tremendous loss is dramatized with great emotional depth. The status of this particular incident as an actual historical event makes its impact even more profound, but the melding of fact and fiction in the episode is what truly provides the power behind the dramatization.

The actual history of Colorado Springs was used to determine the kind of customs and activities that went on there during this time period. The history and origin of the town, the name of the local newspaper, and the relative growth of the town, for example, were based on actual

Colorado Springs' history.¹⁰ But some of the scenes that were dramatized in this area were fictional, meant to fill in the gaps of the known historical information or advance the ongoing stories of the series' characters. Though it is much mythologized, there is a lot about this period of history that is unknown, especially the experiences of the Native American tribes in the area. Some of the lifestyle detail that is portrayed had to be inferred or imagined based on what is known.

One area that was not fictionalized was the portrayal of medicine that was given on the show. Jane Seymour insisted that the details of the history be accurately played. The daughter of a physician herself, Seymour required the assistance of both a doctor and a historian during filming to insure the accurate portrayal of medicine during the period. The assistance of the Smithsonian Institute was also enlisted to make sure that all of the instruments and medicines that Dr. Quinn used on the show were historically accurate.¹¹

Similarly, the services of a "Native American consultant" was engaged for the series in order to ensure that the depiction of Cheyenne customs and the realities of the Native American experience was as accurately presented as possible. Once the series developed, it was the same man who played the part of Sully's Cheyenne brother, Cloud Dancing, actor and Native American activist Larry Sellers, who served as the Cheyenne consultant.

Beginning in the series' fifth season, the use of postscript "footnotes" was employed for some episodes. Commenting upon the subject matter depicted in the episode, a brief contextual statement was flashed across the screen just as the action closed and before the credits rolled. Both printed on the screen and narrated via voice over by Seymour, these historical sound bites used facts and dates to inform the audience of progress in the area since the time depicted in the episode or further illustrate the significance of the subject to the historical setting. The addition of this

¹⁰ Extensive online fan sites for the show provide remarkable detail on the background of the show, including details such as these. For the best example see the show's "official site" at <http://www.drquinnmd.com>.

¹¹ "TV Doctors," *People Weekly*, 17 July 1995, 8.

contextual information in the series' later years reflects an unusual increased commitment to historical accuracy.

Though the plots and subjects dramatized on the show were developed with the historical setting in mind, however, many of the issues that are addressed through the program are distinctly contemporary. Environmental issues and questions of cultural diversity and tolerance are frequently addressed. For example, once he is fired from his position as Indian Agent due to his insistence on calling attention to the corruption within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Sully turns his efforts to protecting the dwindling undeveloped land of the Colorado territory. He uses a mixture of lawful and unlawful methods to circumvent attempts by corporate and government interests to develop the land, highlighting the conflict between man and nature that has always been a part of American culture. While these were certainly issues that were encountered on the nineteenth century frontier, the people of that time were most likely not as self aware about them as we tend to be today. Though it is presented in a traditionally conservative format, the family drama, the series regularly takes a politically liberal stance on the issues it addresses as well. This is characteristic of both historical portrayals on television and of public perceptions of history in general which are generally filtered through a contemporary lens. While some would say that it taints the history that is presented, others would say it provides a gateway through which historical material can be brought to the public.

The distant historical setting of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* makes the history it presents less familiar and therefore its influence is greater. Without lived experience to frame the interpretations that are offered, or temper the nostalgia that is created, audiences are more likely to take in what they see on the screen in a less critical manner than it might for a more recently set program. This distance, coupled with the exciting adventure, warm family feeling and appealing love story that the show offers draws the audience into the story and the lives of the characters, and

makes the historicity of the setting and the situations come alive. Our cultural infatuation with the myth of the American West also contributes to the ability of this type of setting to capture the hearts and minds of the audience. Even though it strove to reinterpret the story of the American West, its engagement of one of the most revered and well-known aspects of American mythology also increases its historical power. *Dr. Quinn*, for all its sentimental and moralistic message making characteristics, has a great deal of historical capital. Along with other favorite historical programs like *Little House on the Prairie*, this series provides a visual image and emotional connection to a beloved aspect of American history.

Life After Cancellation

The rather abrupt cancellation of *Dr. Quinn* saddened fans across the country and across the world. Petitions and protests were lodged against the network, begging them to reinstate their beloved program. The public outcry did prompt the network's support for the production of two made for TV movies that continued the story where the series left off. Neither was a resounding ratings or critical success, but it did appease the fans somewhat.

Now seven years since the cancellation of the series, an effort continues to bring the show back to television. A strong fan presence is actively maintained on the internet where fan fiction flourishes and *Dr. Quinn* communities thrive. Though it has run in syndication on a variety of cable channels since its removal from prime time, it has never been widely available as reruns. Now airing on The Hallmark Channel as part of their family friendly, and distinctly historical, daytime fare, the series has also recently been released on DVD under the auspices of the cable network A&E. It seems to be finding a new audience as well as continuing to engage the old one. Though many derided the series for its overly wholesome and sometimes preachy tone, this show clearly

captured the attention of a sizeable portion of the viewing public and has made an imprint on the collective memory of the American West.

American Dreams: Biting Nostalgia with a Beat

Though there are far more theatrical films that fall into the category of biting nostalgia, television programming is not entirely exempt from it. Traditional nostalgia blends so well with the comfortable medium that is television that it is hard to imagine history on TV that is not touched by it to at least some degree. *American Dreams* most definitely fits into this expectation. Nostalgic at its very core, this series clearly intends to stir fond memories of the 1960s for that portion of the audience that experienced it themselves, and provide an appealing image of the era for those who did not. A family drama, there are also those timeless situations that happen between parents and children, and coming of age experiences that everyone goes through no matter when they grow up that are dramatized on the program. The series was written to attract a broad range of viewers and to provide a program that families could watch together in its 8:00 Sunday evening time slot. This broad appeal means that both true and false nostalgia occur in each episode

But that nostalgia is tempered somewhat by the treatment of some of the difficult realities of the decade. Specifically, the events of the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam have a continuous presence in the lives of the Pryor and Walker families whose experiences we see dramatized on the screen. Beyond these tumultuous events, there is also the suggestion that the social attitudes and expectations of the time were limiting and even repressive for many segments of the population. In addition to reminding the audience that the era included both positive and negative aspects, just as our own does, the inclusion of these sometimes harsh realities also helps the audience appreciate some of the social advances we have made in the intervening years.

Creating the Series

American Dreams debuted during the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Though a full year had passed since the attacks had occurred, the country was still coming to terms with what had happened and with the aftermath of fear and uncertainty that was left in its wake.

Critics spoke of a trend that was occurring in the new programming for the 2002-2003 season:

If programmers are correct, the state of the American psyche is such that suicide attacks and anthrax anxiety have made the cold war seem cozy....The networks are looking to capitalize on this trend with new comedies and dramas that look back to the Kennedy and Reagan eras¹²

Referring to the plethora of nostalgic themed series and cold war era remakes that were included in the fall line up, critics marveled at how an era that was once considered fraught with genuine danger could be recycled to provide comfort to a troubled nation. And yet their analysis seems well founded. During the extended anniversary coverage of the 2001 attacks that aired in the weeks prior to the debut of the new series, NBC actively advertised its new 1960s era series. But series creator Jonathan Prince scoffed at the critics comments saying "In the shadow of 9/11, are people looking back for comfort? Well, yes. Shouldn't they be? That's what [TV] is supposed to do."¹³ Commenting on the power of television to comfort the nation during difficult times, it seemed logical to him that the past would be a useful venue to gain a hold on an uncertain present. Prince was also quoted as saying "There might be some sense of reassurance in the fact that those were hard times, and we made it through them."¹⁴ A reminder of the survival of and transcendence above the difficulties of one of America's toughest decades in modern memory could prove to be valuable to a country wondering what to do next. And although *American Dreams* was actually

¹² James Poniewozik, "Look Back in Angst," *Time*, 23 September 2002, 73.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alan James Frutkin, "A Walk Down Memory Lane," *Mediaweek*, 27 May 2002, 12.

developed before the events of September 11, 2001,¹⁵ its style was well suited to the culture that developed after that fateful day.

Meet the Pryors and the Walkers

When the series opens, the setting is Philadelphia in the fall of 1963. Sixteen year old Meg Pryor (Brittany Snow) lives in a middle-class neighborhood with her family, which includes father Jack (Tom Verica), a traditional, paternalistic businessman with his own television store, mother Helen (Gail O'Grady), a stay at home mom who is growing restless with the confines of her domestic life, older brother J.J. (Will Estes), a good looking, popular high school football star with dreams of being an astronaut one day, younger sister Patty (Sarah Ramos), an intelligent, precocious and often mean schemer who struggles at making friends and fitting in, and little brother Will (Ethan Dampf), afflicted with a crippled leg due to a bout with polio, but determined and sweet. The Pryors are a white, middle-class Catholic family who attend church regularly and whose children attend local Catholic schools. Meg's best friend, Roxanne Bojarski (Vanessa Lengies), is a regular fixture in the Pryor home as her divorced mother is forced to work long hours, leaving Roxanne without much of a family life of her own. Other regular characters include J.J.'s girlfriend, Beth Mason (Rachel Boston), a girl from a wealthy protestant family, Luke Foley (Jamie Elman), a schoolmate of the Pryor children who is first Meg's and later Roxanne's boyfriend, and Uncle Pete Pryor (Matthew John Armstrong), an aimless policeman and younger brother to Jack. In the third season, the Pryors get new neighbors, and single mother Shelly Pierce (Daphne Zuniga), a "Bunny Supervisor" at the local Playboy Club, and her troubled teenage son Chris (Milo Ventimiglia) become regular characters on the show as well

¹⁵ Ibid.

In something of a counterpoint to the Pryor's experiences, the show also follows the life of the Walkers, an African-American family whose patriarch, Henry (Jonathan Adams), works for Jack Pryor at the television store. Henry, his wife, Gwen (seen only occasionally on the series and played by Adina Porter), their two children, Sam (Arlen Escarpeta) and Angela (Aysia Polk), and, later, Henry's nephew Nathan (Keith Robinson) live in a small apartment in the black neighborhood of North Philadelphia. Though the storylines that narrate the experiences of the Walker family are not given equal time to those of the Pryor family, enough attention is paid to them, particularly the Walker men, to develop full plots and complete characters. There are also plenty of episodes where the two families interact, both at the TV store and at East Catholic High School where Sam receives a scholarship and becomes one of the few African-American classmates of Meg, J.J., and Roxanne.

A regular component of the show was Meg's and Roxanne's appearances as regulars on the Philadelphia based teenage music phenomenon *American Bandstand*. Executive produced by *Bandstand* icon Dick Clark, the series used a mixture of old footage from the original show and newly shot segments where well known current music performers sang, danced and acted the roles of musicians from the 1960s who performed on *American Bandstand*.

Nearly all the major events and movements of the tumultuous 1960s touch the Pryor and Walker families, and they are participants in a number of them. The pilot episode takes place on the eve of the Kennedy assassination, and concludes with the now familiar news coverage of the fateful shooting in Dallas. The second episode focuses largely on the reaction of the characters to the president's death and what it means for themselves and the country. Beginning the interpretation of this decade with its most pivotal event, the series is set up to explore the changes that occurred in society as a result of the Kennedy assassination, and the rest of the series stands in comparison to the lifestyle that is portrayed in the pilot episode.

Changing expectations and roles for women, for example, are dealt with consistently through the series run. Helen Pryor, dissatisfied with her sole role as wife and mother, is inspired by a liberal thinking friend to take college classes to broaden her mind and open up new possibilities for herself. She goes against her strong religious beliefs and begins taking birth control pills when she decides she doesn't want any more children, and when she supports a young friend who has recently undergone an abortion. She eventually takes on a job, working in a travel agency, where her conservative views are once again challenged when she befriends a co-worker who is gay.

The growing conflict in Vietnam becomes very immediate for the Pryor family when J.J. enlists in the marines when a knee injury affects his football scholarship to college. He is deployed to Vietnam upon completion of basic training, where he is injured while on patrol, and later becomes involved in the secret invasion of Cambodia, where he is captured and sustains further injuries. Initially reported as MIA, he is eventually rescued and discharged. He returns home to finish out his tour of duty as a recruiter and must struggle with his ambivalence about the war and his own experiences with it. Meg, on the other hand, and later Helen to a lesser degree, becomes very involved in the anti-war movement, facing disciplinary action at school for her efforts to mobilize her fellow students against the war, and even police arrest for participating in a sit in. Despite her father's accusations that she is being disrespectful to her brother who is fighting the war she is denouncing, Meg persists despite the many obstacles she faces. In the series' finale, she leaves to go to Berkeley, California to participate more fully in the growing anti-war movement. Nathan Walker also makes a stand against the war, though for different reasons, when he refuses to respond to his draft notice and is jailed for his defiance.

The racial conflicts of the sixties are also prominently addressed in the show, primarily through the experiences of the Walker family, but not exclusively. The growing tension in the African-American neighborhoods between residents and police and the entrenched racism of the

community in general are brought to light. The first season ends, for example, with the 1964 Philadelphia race riots, where Jack's and Henry's newest endeavor, a branch store of Pryor TV in predominantly black North Philadelphia, is destroyed and Meg and Sam are caught in the angry mob scene that fills the streets. During the second season, Nathan Walker becomes a follower of Malcolm X, encouraging Sam to embrace the ideas of racial separatism as well, just on the eve of the leader's assassination. The growing socio-economic stratification of the African-American community is also addressed when Sam becomes involved with a young woman from a prominent, wealthy African-American family and their lifestyles and outlooks clash. Inter-racial relationships are considered when long time friends Meg and Sam begin to pursue a romantic relationship that ultimately does not develop because neither is prepared to face the disapproval of their friends and family or their own uncertainty of the concept.

Using History

Perhaps the most notable component of *American Dreams* is the *American Bandstand* storyline. In the first episode, Meg and Roxanne get the opportunity to be on the show, a long held dream for them both, and shortly after become "regulars" on the show. In every episode, the musical offerings of the period show are featured, as are the dance steps, musicians and studio filming environment. This is the key to the consistent nostalgia of the show, even in the face of some serious consideration of the difficulties of the era. The *Bandstand* segments are filmed using a combination of new and old footage. The performance is recreated by actors made up to look like the original artists on recreated sets. But as the camera moves around the studio, it passes by monitors that are playing the original bandstand footage. This combination of old and new draws the audience in, making them feel as though they are sitting in the bandstand with Meg and Roxanne, and lending an air of authenticity to the segment which extends to include the whole

episode. The involvement of *American Bandstand* icon Dick Clark in the production of the series is also important to its impact. Though some critics have seen his involvement as an act of shameless self promotion, it does lend an additional air of genuineness to the program, especially the *Bandstand* and music components of it.

The actual music used on the show is also a mix of old and new. In most episodes a current popular musician is cast in the role of a pop artist from the past. In addition to acting out the singing and dancing of the artist, the contemporary singers record a cover version of the song which is used in the soundtrack for the episode. The performances of the contemporary artists are compiled into CDs that are then marketed by NBC as well. Not all of the musical performances are portrayed this way. In other *Bandstand* segments the original recordings are used and actors play the roles of the artists. Thus, in each episode there is a mix of original and recreated versions of period songs. Additional period music is used as background for non-*Bandstand* scenes as well. The music, combined with the period clothing, furnishings and cars, contribute to the period feel of the show. As they become involved with the characters as the plot unfolds on the screen, viewers temporarily inhabit the 1960s through an odd mixture of old and new footage that blurs the line between past and present.

Even with the involvement of Dick Clark and use of original *American Bandstand* footage, these segments of the program are not always accurately presented. The timing of the musical performances is not in keeping with the timeline of the series. For example, songs that weren't even recorded until 1965 are shown as part of *Bandstand* episodes set in 1963. This kind of inaccurate use of the period music is common in the production of the series. Of course, this goes unnoticed by all but the most avid music fan, but the inconsistencies are there. Even more glaring mistakes regarding the "show within the show" are made as well. Though *American Bandstand* was originally filmed in Philadelphia where the show is set, it moved to California in 1964. When the

series ends it is already 1966, and yet *Bandstand* is still being broadcast from its original home. It is surprising that with all the attention to detail that seemingly goes in to the creation of the *Bandstand* scenes such historical inaccuracies would abound. This is reflective of the inconsistent application of historical accuracy that is used in television production. For the audience in general, however, these details go unnoticed, and the illusion of the past that is created is not disturbed.

Despite these musical errors, however, the show does maintain a mostly truthful depiction of the events of the decade overall. The show sets itself up to depict the post-Kennedy 1960s. The first episode, set in November 1963, dramatizes the days and weeks prior to the assassination. Depicted to act as a contrast to what will follow, the plot of the pilot episode is relatively free from strife, except for the timeless parent-child conflicts that are a part of every era. The episode ends with the announcement of the shooting of the President. The second episode opens with the depiction of the national mourning that followed the President's death and continues with the characters coming to terms with what has happened and what it means. No one is sure what to tell young Will Pryor as he continually asks why the president was shot. And while everyone expects that things will eventually get "back to normal," no one is sure exactly what that will mean in the future. The program effectively captures and portrays the tremendous sadness and uncertainty felt by the nation after the assassination. It also effectively dramatizes the changes that occurred in that part of the 1960s that came after November 23, 1963.

The events related to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War encroach upon the characters' lives slowly but surely, just as they did for many Americans of the time. The underlying racism that exists in 1960s America is always there. This is especially apparent in the portrayal of the Walker family, and is magnified further by the comparison to the Pryors. Sam Walker's attendance at the predominantly white East Catholic High School and his growing friendship with Meg present numerous opportunities to show how even the reasonably tolerant Pryors are not

immune to the segregationist tendencies of the era. When J.J. finds himself in competition with Sam for a position on the track team, he has to fight falling into the racist pranks inflicted upon Sam by his teammates. In another episode, Sam politely tries to escort Meg home from the movie theater where he works when she is left alone at night, but it is not only the police, but the fathers of both teenagers who chastise them for their behavior. When the Walker's cousin Nathan comes to join them, and gets involved with the local youth who are becoming more and more angry with their second class citizenship, racial matters on the show escalate. Helen Pryor becomes involved in efforts to register African Americans to vote and encounters Nathan and his friends in a hostile confrontation when the effort of the white group to help are received with resentment by the neighborhood youth. The Pryor children, who have clearly been taught not to dislike anyone based on their race, encounter the subtle yet clearly racist views of their father, and have to negotiate their own way of dealing with the racial realities of their world.

In the second two seasons, the intrusion of racism into the lives of both families grows. Meg becomes more politically aware about the state of race relations and more outspoken when she witnesses acts of racism herself. When she participates in social protest activities at local Penn State at the invitation of her brother's girlfriend, Beth, she meets friends who help her broaden her perspective. She begins to challenge the expectations of her own world, writing book reports on "controversial" books, and attending protest rallies and sit ins that address first civil rights issues and then involvement in Vietnam. Nathan Walker becomes involved with the followers of Malcolm X, and encourages Sam to join them in their separatist agenda. When Malcolm X is murdered, Sam is shaken back into his familiar modes of behavior, but Nathan continues to rail against society's oppression.

References to the war in Vietnam gradually increase as the first season progresses. When J.J. Pryor joins the Marines at the beginning of the second season, the attention paid to the war

escalates quickly. As J.J. prepares for deployment to Vietnam, Meg becomes more and more mobilized against the war. When J.J. is first injured in combat and is later listed as missing after participating in secret missions in Cambodia, Meg's commitment to ending the war intensifies and she actively recruits supporters for her cause. Their father, a World War II veteran committed to supporting the military actions, condemns his daughter for her actions, failing to realize that her protests are actually in support of her brother and not disrespectful of him. For the Walkers, the war is brought home when Nathan receives a draft notice but refuses to respond to it, believing that he has no obligation to serve a country that he believes is not serving him. He willingly goes to jail to maintain his beliefs. Though his actions up to this time have been the bane of his uncle's existence, his response to his call to service is supported.

Though the historical period being portrayed in this series is well within the personal memory of many viewers who have tools at their disposal to filter the interpretations of the era that are being presented, the well crafted nostalgia coupled with the frank inclusion of the era's most difficult issues gives the program a sense of honesty that draws audiences into the historical world unfolding on the screen. For those who experienced the events themselves, as well as for those who did not, the biting nostalgic flavor of the show creates a sense of authenticity in the show that gives it a high degree of historical capital. Because the good and the bad of the era are presented side by side, the portrayal seems real. And because the nostalgia is so well crafted and the characters so well developed, the storylines draw us in and engage us emotionally.

Life After Cancellation

In the spring of 2005, NBC announced that it would not be renewing *American Dreams* for a fourth season. Failing in the ratings in its original Sunday night time slot, the network gave the series one more chance by switching it to Wednesday night, but it did not fare any better there, and

so the struggling network removed the series from its prime time line up. Threatened with the possibility of cancellation earlier in the season, Prince wrote the season finale to offer some closure, but also left possibilities for future plot development. Despite the low ratings that were the cause of its demise, *American Dreams* had a loyal fan base who mourn the show's loss and have begun to petition for its resurrection. At only three seasons, the show was not on the air long enough to develop the afterlife that some of the other programs discussed here have acquired. It also did not produce the hundred episode mark normally expected for syndication possibilities. It is possible that the series might be picked up by one of the rerun specialty networks on cable that occasionally repeat series with shorter runs, such as TV Land that awarded the series its "future classic" designation at its first annual TV Land Awards ceremony. Its 1960s setting makes it a complementary series to some of the older programs aired on such networks, in a similar fashion as *The Wonder Years* did.

In the fall of 2004, NBC released the first season on DVD, with bonus material that included clips from original *American Bandstand* episodes that complemented each of the series' episodes, and a short documentary hosted by NBC news anchor Brian Williams that used NBC news footage from the years covered in the first season. Produced specifically for the DVD release, Williams' narration included discussion of the fictional Pryor family in its discussion of the actual events that transpired. No release dates have been announced for the DVD release of the second or third season, and with the first-run episodes no longer in production the future of *American Dreams* on DVD seems uncertain. The outcry by fans at its cancellation, however, does suggest a potential audience for the product.

The Impact of Historical Dramatic Television

Because of their ability to touch the imaginations and emotions of audiences through the adventurous, romantic and family situations that typically populate their installments, historical dramas on television carry a great deal of historical capital. The longer episode length that dramas usually use (as opposed to the shorter comedy programs) allows for more character and plot development, providing more complex fictional worlds in which audiences can become involved. It should not be surprising, then, that shows such as those profiled here gain such loyal audiences. The historical component of these shows contributes to the romance of the storyline, even as those storylines portray and reinforce that history. So central to the programs is the history that it cannot help but leave a lasting impression on viewers. And as previous scholarship on popular reception of history has shown, it is the emotionally appealing and personally engaging portrayals of history that have the greatest impact on our historical consciousness.

CHAPTER SIX

Big History in Small Packages: The Historical Television Miniseries

Of all the programming found on television, the widely viewed, highly promoted miniseries has perhaps the most powerful effect on our historical consciousness. First, it has come to be closely associated with historical content, creating a familiar expectation for the audience. Indeed, the genre is well suited for historical tales. The extended format allows for the development of storylines that span many decades without having to encapsulate or rush the details of the story. It also makes it possible to consider the individual stories that the programs generally center around completely while still including depictions of the historical events that are associated with that story. It is possible to portray extended battle scenes, for example, without it monopolizing the series.

Since the first generally recognized miniseries, ABC's *Rich Man, Poor Man*, was broadcast in 1976, "miniseries have constituted some of the most popular programs in television history."¹ According to the Encyclopedia of Television,

...the miniseries, at its best offers a unique televisual experience, often dealing with harrowing and difficult material structured into an often transformatory narrative. The time lapse between episodes allows occasion for the audience to assimilate, discuss and come to terms with the difficulties of the narrative. The extended narrative time offered by the serialization makes possible the in-depth exploration of characters, their motivations

¹ "Miniseries," *The Encyclopedia of Television*, 1st ed., online, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/miniseries/miniseries.htm>.

and development, the analysis of situations and events. But the conclusive narrative resolution of the series, also allows for evaluation and reflection.²

In addition, the extended format combined with the concentrated presentation of these programs is significant. The amount of time we “spend” with the characters and their stories over the period of time that the series airs (which is much longer than in a movie, but without the time gaps of a regular television series) gives us the opportunity to form more of a relationship with them than we can in the limited scope of movies. The characters and their experiences become important to us because we spend time with them, get to know them, and therefore to care about what happens to them. As we begin to care about them, we also begin to care about the world they inhabit. Through this lens, the history that is portrayed takes on an immediate, emotional and personal quality that makes it stay with the audience, giving these miniseries a high degree of historical capital. No matter what we might know objectively about a period or event in history, the connections to the story we have come to be invested in changes our perceptions of it. The history enters our memory in a similar way to how our own experiences do, as we experience the past along with the characters we have come to know and care about.

Television miniseries have come to be almost synonymous with history itself in the public eye in the last 35 years. Since the phenomenal success and impact of *Roots* in the late 1970s, television audiences have become comfortable with the genre’s ability to tell the epic stories of the past. As a result, the television miniseries has taken on an air of historical authenticity for the viewing public. Many Americans experienced their first personal encounter with American slavery, and perhaps even American history, through the characters in *Roots*. Certainly they were aware that this was a part of the American past, but as far as seeing it played out in front of them, *Roots* provided a unique experience for Americans of all races. Many will comment on the impact

² Ibid.

that this program had on them and their thinking about this part of the American story. The emotional tenor of the show, the portraiture of the characters and their struggle, touched not only the minds of the audience but their hearts as well, thereby securing it in their memory in a distinctly strong way. The emotional dimension of these programs, their membership in a genre connected with history, and their widely viewed status all contribute to the high degree of historical capital that miniseries have.

Alex Haley's *Roots*: Where It All Began

Though it was not the first miniseries on television, *Roots* made a public impact like no other miniseries ever had before or has since. Based on the bestselling novel by Alex Haley that chronicled the story of his family from the capture of his ancestor in Africa by slave catchers to the eventual emancipation of his descendants after the Civil War, it reached a record number of viewers, drawing an audience of eighty million for its final episode.³ Almost cancelled before it was even aired, ABC network executives at the time had little confidence that it would appeal to viewers enough that they would make the time commitment necessary for it to succeed. In addition, its focus on an African American family and the cruelty they suffered continually at the hands of white Americans scared the network, who feared a cultural backlash. They were convinced to give it a chance, however, and the miniseries was originally broadcast in January 1977. Hoping to minimize their risk if the format and/or subject matter failed to capture the audience's attention, ABC made the decision to air the program on eight consecutive nights, figuring if it was a failure they would only lose a single week's ratings and revenues.⁴ The decision to broadcast the program in this compressed period of time ended up contributing to its ultimate

³ Ibid.

⁴ For an extended discussion of the story behind *Roots* see producer David Wolper's *The Inside Story of TV's Roots* (New York: Warner Books, 1978).

success and impact, as viewers were drawn into the story in an intense, concentrated manner.

Concerned about the tenor of the subject of the program, the network aired it in the later prime time hours, between 9:00 and 11:00 in the evening. Episodes were presented in one or two hour blocks, allowing for shorter, and later evening presentations when the subject matter was particularly tense or difficult to watch. Though many of the decisions made about the show's presentation were done out of fear and a lack of confidence, they packaged the program in such a way as to maximize its historical capital by capturing the attention of the American public in a way no other program ever had before or, arguably, since.

The miniseries told the story of Kunta Kinte (LeVar Burton), a young Mandinka man from a village in Africa who is captured by slave traders while he is out searching for a log to make his younger brother a drum. He has just successfully mastered his tribal "manhood training," and is just starting his life as an adult when he is sold into slavery. Along with many other young Africans, including a young girl he has just met, Kunta is chained in the hold of a ship headed for the American colonies. The time leading up to his capture and the voyage to America are both chronicled in early episodes of the series; in fact, it isn't until halfway through the second episode that the story comes to America. In addition to meeting the Kinte family and witnessing the coming of age traditions of their tribe, the story profiles some of the men who were involved with the slave trade, including the callous first mate (Ralph Waite) with experience handling captured slaves and the conflicted ship's captain (Edward Asner) on his first slave trading expedition, who is haunted by his involvement in the triangle trade.

Once he arrives in the colonies, Kunta is auctioned off along with the rest of the captured Africans. He is purchased by the Reynolds family, given the name Toby, and taken back to their plantation to be trained as a field hand. Speaking no English and with no knowledge of the land or culture he finds himself in, he is put in the care of an old slave named Fiddler (Louis Gossett, Jr.),

who is charged with teaching him the language and the proper way to act. A bond forms between the two, but Kunta Kinte is set on returning to his home, and despite his affection for Fiddler and Fiddler's attempts to train him, Kunta attempts to escape. He is caught, and beaten as the other slaves watch. The issue of his name becomes a focal point of the struggle. Refusing to give up his African name, and with it, his sense of identity, he is repeatedly whipped until he acknowledges his slave name. In one of the most painful and poignant scenes ever seen on television, Kunta finally accepts his new name.

The story flashes forward, and Toby (John Amos) has resigned himself, to some degree, to his situation, though he is still not completely trusted. Still maintaining his hope of getting back to his home, he attempts to escape a second time. He gets farther this time, but is eventually captured again. This time part of one of his feet is cut off as a punishment and deterrent to continued escape attempts. When he wakes up, he finds that he has been sold to his master's brother (Robert Reed), along with several other slaves from the plantation, including Fiddler, as part of a debt settlement. Though he nearly gives up when he learns of his maimed foot, he is eventually convinced to go on by one of the other slaves, Belle (Madge Sinclair). They fall in love and eventually marry ("jump the broom"), and have a daughter. Having lost her previous children to slave trading, Belle is worried that this child will be taken from her too. In an attempt to both hold on to his African heritage and comfort his wife, he names their daughter Kizzy, a Mandinka word that means "stay put." In a seminal moment for the character, while carrying out a naming ceremony from his African tradition, Toby hears the call of a drum from a fellow slave who is planning an escape and has invited him to join him. Belle hears it too, and, knowing of the invitation, worries that she is about to lose her husband and daughter. But his new responsibility to his family keeps Toby from running this time, and the family stays together.

The story skips ahead a number of years, and Kizzy (Leslie Uggams) has grown into a young woman. She has been taught about her father's heritage and learned some Mandinka words, though she must keep this knowledge a secret from the master. Another secret she must keep is her ability to read and write, something she learned by playing with the master's niece when they were children. She has also begun to form a romantic relationship with another slave on the plantation, Noah (Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs), a young man with an itch to escape and run north to freedom. He eventually runs away, using a traveling pass that Kizzy has forged for him. Though he is gone for some time, he is eventually captured. While being beaten, he is forced to admit that it was Kizzy who provided him with the pass. Having broken the trust that the master has put in her, she is sold to another plantation, despite the pleas of her loyal parents to spare her. On her first night on the Moore plantation, Kizzy is raped by her new master (Chuck Connors). She gives birth to his son sometime after.

The scene shifts forward in time again, and Kizzy's son has grown into a young man. He is called "Chicken George" Moore (Ben Vereen) due to his involvement in the cockfights that his master is deeply involved in. Not possessed of the drive for freedom that his mother and grandfather had, George seems content with his life and his job working with the chickens. Cocky and proud, George is at once the apple of his mother's eye and her greatest frustration. She has passed on the knowledge of their African heritage that her father gave to her, but he does not seem to appreciate its significance. He believes that his master is his friend and colleague in the cock fighting business. When he learns that his master is his father, and gets a truer understanding of their unequal relationship, his attitude begins to change.

He marries another slave on the plantation, Matilda (Olivia Cole), and has several children. Despite the more strained relationship with his master, he continues to fight his chickens and earns a good reputation for his skills. In a high stakes competition, Master Moore offers him his freedom

as an incentive to win the match, but when the master loses and he cannot pay his debt, he is forced to sell George to his rival. His new master takes him to England and promises him his freedom after a set number of years. As George prepares to leave his family behind, he tells his children again the story of their heritage as originally told by their great grandfather. He leaves with a promise to return a free man as soon as possible.

When the story resumes, time has advanced again, and George's children have grown and have families of their own. The family has been sold to another master, but George is able to track them down upon his return from England. It is the eve of the Civil War when George is reunited with Matilda, his son Tom (Georg Stanford Brown), and the rest of his children. He is welcomed by all and given the offer to stay on at the Harvey plantation as a free man if he is willing to work. When he interacts with some of the townspeople, though, he is made aware of a law that would revoke his freedom if he remained in the county more than a certain amount of time. Forced to move on again, George leaves his family, but not before hearing Tom recite the story of Kunta Kinte one more time.

The Civil War breaks out, but the effect on the Kinte descendants is minimal. Once the war is over, however, and they learn of their freedom, there is celebration followed by consideration of what they will do next. Though some want to go off on their own, Tom convinces them that their best option is to stay where they are and farm on their own. They get caught up in the sharecropping trap, and when their former master is forced to sell his farm to some unscrupulous neighbors, things get even worse for them. They are terrorized by the "night riders" that are the precursor to the Ku Klux Klan, and are punished severely when they attempt to stand up for themselves by going to the law for help with their attackers. Eventually George returns to his family, fresh from the war and in possession of land in Tennessee for his family to settle on, and helps them formulate a plan to escape their situation. The plan is successful, and as the series

comes to its conclusion, the family arrives at their new home where they come together to give thanks for their deliverance into freedom and “speak” to their African ancestor, reciting the story of their heritage and letting him know that the family has finally returned to freedom. George says:

The first slave in this family was my granddaddy, Kunta Kinte. But he weren't always a slave. Before he was a slave he was a free man in another country, a country called Africa. But then the slavers, they catch him when he went to find some wood to make a drum. And they brung him to America, a place called Annapolis. But Kunta Kinte, he never forget where he come from. He never forget Africa.

Tom continues:

He never forget the words he spoke as a child, of ko, mean a fiddle and Cambe bolongo, mean a river. He never stop fighting against his chains trying to be free once more. Not even after they cut off half his foot to keep him from running away.

George concludes:

Before he died, he give that dream of freedom to his daughter, Kizzy, my mama. And 'fore she died, she give that dream to me. And I've tried to keep that dream alive in all you children, 'til that day come. Hear me, oh African, the flesh of your flesh has come to freedom. You is free at last. We is free.

It is a moving moment, as the characters we have come to know and watched struggle for so long finally achieve the dream of their ancestor. As the program ends, Alex Haley himself provides an epilogue where he tells of the generations that followed, knowledge he gained by hearing the same stories from his grandmother from the time he was a child, and his eventual discovery of the more complete story through his genealogical research.

Unlike the many other historical miniseries that followed it, *Roots* did not attempt to accurately recreate specific historic events through its story. The history being presented is unmistakable, and certainly a central aspect of the story, but there are no Revolutionary war battles recreated, or narration detailing the course of historical events that underscores the story. Through the story of one African-American family, the history is told; references to the larger events of national history are made as applicable to that story rather than the other way around. As a

genealogy, the story not only chronicles the story of successive generations but also shows how, against enormous odds, the family kept the story of their heritage alive long enough for the seventh generation descendant of Kunta Kinte to find him again. Interest in genealogy blossomed after the miniseries aired, and has continued to grow ever since. Not only did the miniseries make an impression on the popular understanding of slavery in early American history, it further influenced the popular American historical consciousness by encouraging Americans to look into their own family histories.

Roots was a story about slavery, but primarily it was the story of one man's family. This is, of course, what made it appeal to the less historically minded segment of the audience. Everyone has a family story, whether or not they think of it as part of history. Through his story, both in print and on television, Alex Haley allowed the audience to see that connection, that our own histories are a part of the larger history, making him, in essence, one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century. Haley was no historian, however. He was a journalist telling the story of his personal research against the backdrop of American history, of which it was a small part. In *Roots* the events of the past, significant though they may be, are secondary to the story of Kunta Kinte and his family. And while it would be impossible to tell that story without references to the past, the story is not about the events but about the family. *Roots* made us comfortable with the melding of history and storytelling that many miniseries which have followed it have capitalized upon.

Two years later, in February 1979, a sequel miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generations*, was produced and aired. Slightly longer than the original series at fourteen hours (the original series was twelve), and broadcast again in a concentrated seven night presentation, it followed the successive generations of Kunta Kinte's ancestors, right down to Haley himself. It opens in 1882, twelve years after the original series ends. The Harvey family is living in Henning, Tennessee, and

Tom is a leading member of the African American community. He struggles with the changes that are occurring in the country, the backlash by white Americans who are trying to deny the black community their recently acquired rights. He also fights the racism that lies within himself that comes to the surface when his daughter wants to marry a mulatto man and when the community's school teacher falls in love with and marries the son of the leading white citizen in town.

His daughter Cynthia (Bever-Leigh Banfield) eventually marries a man named Will Palmer (Stan Shaw), an up and coming local business man who eventually takes control of the local lumber mill. They live a comfortable life due to his success, and are able to send their daughter, Bertha (Irene Cara) to Lane College. There she meets Simon Alexander Haley (Dorian Harewood), a struggling, intellectual student from a poor family with big dreams. They fall in love, and after he completes a higher degree in agriculture and his military service overseas during World War I, they marry. They have several children, including their oldest son, Alex (Christoff St. John/Damon Evans/James Earl Jones). Bertha dies young, and a strained relationship exists between Alex and his father.

Somewhat aimless and unsure of what he wants to do, Alex enlists in the Coast Guard, eventually serving in World War II. During his service he discovers a talent for writing, and after leaving the military he finds work as a journalist. His own marriage fails when he becomes consumed with his work. The program follows his rise as a writer, including an interview he did for *Playboy Magazine* with a Ku Klux Klan leader and his work on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Remembering the stories from his childhood, he becomes interested in learning more about his family's history and undertakes an arduous journey of research to uncover its details. He eventually finds enough information to take him all the way to Africa where he is eventually able to find the village from which Kunta Kinte came. "You old African! I found you!" he exclaims. This is where the program ends, with the inspirational dramatization of Haley's tremendous success.

The Kinte descendants encounter racism in many forms as the sequel series unfolds. There is also the suggestion that racism was not limited to black and white relations. Racism within the African American community and anti-Semitism are also addressed. The unfulfilled promise of a better life given to African American soldiers in both World Wars I and II is acknowledged, as is their continued lack of equal access to rights. The family's many successes despite the odds are also shown, including the achievements of college educations and advanced degrees for Alex Haley's parents and an improved standard of living for each successive generation. Though the sequel series did not create the national phenomenon that its predecessor did, and was not nearly as successful in the ratings and the number of viewers that it reached, it did extend the influence of Haley's story and his experience, and, as a result, Americans' understanding of the African-American experience.

In 1993, a shorter miniseries was broadcast that told a story from the other side of Haley's family. *Queen* was the story of Haley's paternal grandmother, Queen (Halle Berry), a mulatto born on the Jackson plantation shortly before the Civil War. Her fair complexion gives her the ability to "pass" and is a novelty to the family that owns her who takes her in and makes her their daughter's companion. She is treated almost like family (which of course she is), and when the war turns bad for the South and the family begins to fall apart, Queen does her best to keep them going. When she is ultimately rejected by the family after the war ends, she leaves, devastated. The story follows her difficult journey as she searches for a new home. She eventually finds one with Alec Haley (Danny Glover), and raises a family that eventually includes Alex Haley's father, Simon.

The Legacy of *Roots*

Historical miniseries have certainly proliferated in *Roots* wake. These miniseries, however, do not use history in the same way. First of all, they are primarily fictional tales told in a historical time and place, not the story of actual people and their tangential connections to the events of the

past that have come to be known through the history books. The characters in these stories, such as *North and South*'s Orry Main and *The Winds of War*'s Pug Henry, participate in those noted events of the past, but they were not actual participants. Second, the events of the past are pivotal to the telling of the stories. The battles of wars and the passing of laws are not simply happening simultaneously as the events of the characters lives; the characters are fighting the battles and helping to draft the laws. They interact with "real" historical figures in influential ways, and we aren't simply told or reminded that the events are happening, we watch them unfold on the screen. War is very often the historical backdrop against which the fictional story is told. The adventure associated with war provides a compelling vehicle through which to tell a "juicy story," full of the emotion that can capture the imagination and complete attention of the audience.

In addition to offering interpretations of the specific wars in question, miniseries such as *The Blue and the Gray* or *War and Remembrance* also have an impact on our conceptions of war itself. One of the values of historical consideration is the opportunity it allows us to better understand the present and influence the future. The history of war that is disseminated through programs like these, however, does little to contribute to our abilities there. The sentimentalization of the past that these stories provides, while effective, mask the complexities of the conflict, significantly reducing our ability to consider them objectively for an understanding of what went wrong, what could have been different, and how we can avoid similar conflicts in the future. It is the romance of war, not the harsh reality of war, that these wars of romance reinforce.

There is also an underlying sense of patriotism to these programs which, while not entirely a negative thing, does skew the history that is presented. It is not surprising that the wars that serve as the backdrop for the story are the wars we have come to terms with and where we can clearly identify the right and the wrong. There is an almost post-Vietnam return to the "good war" mentality displayed in these shows. The history is safe, in that there is no question about whether

these wars should have been fought or what the outcome was supposed to be. For example, there is a distinct absence of a miniseries set against the backdrop of the Vietnam conflict. The interest in this era is certainly adequate to support historical programming, but it is not yet sufficiently reconciled in our collective consciousness to allow this sort of interpretation.

If the historical understanding of war that Americans have comes from the popularized history that is presented through sources such as the television miniseries, however, what does that mean for their ability to understand the conflicts that present themselves now and in the future? Is it possible that something as seemingly innocuous as a six hour television presentation could influence contemporary US military involvement? Perhaps.

Many of these miniseries are also romances. They tell the story of relationships set against the backdrop of history. The connection of romance and history is a familiar one as we often see it used, not only on the screen but also in print. And yet, as a genre, Romance is really antithetical to historical storytelling. It is, by definition, a fantasy, where love can conquer all. According to John Cawelti, "The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties."⁵ To set a romance against the backdrop of history, then, and to try to actually portray the historical accuracy of that time and place as the romance itself is played out is inherently problematic. If the romance is to succeed, the history must fit the story. As a result, the storytellers must be selective in their history.

And yet, the historicity of these programs is essential to how they are promoted and "sold" to potential audiences, and is, for many viewers, at least part of the reason that they tune in in the first place. Promises of authenticity by directors and promoters create a false sense of accuracy for the audience. But these promises are not entirely inaccurate either. Most involved in the

⁵ John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 42.

production of these programs will readily admit that the show is about the story, the fantasy, and not about history per se. And when they make claims of authenticity they are referring to attempts that are made to make sure that details like costuming, props, set design and even time lines are as accurate as possible for the history that actually is presented. However, this distinction is rarely made for the audience, who then takes the historical content as accurate, and most likely, complete. The promises of authenticity that often accompany these kinds of productions by way of the marketing that networks, and later VHS and DVD distributors, use to promote them, are not exactly lies, in other words, those making them just don't consider the larger scope of history when they are made. For the audience, then, the events on the screen become recreations of the events as they happened.

The primacy of the romance story over the history also focuses the attention and sympathy of the audience with the characters, allowing them to "see" the history through the characters' eyes. This point of view inherently skews the history that is presented in one direction or another. There is little if any objectivity in the presentation of the history, a consideration that is crucial for professional historians, but of little consequence to the typical television viewer.

There is, of course, value to seeing history as a struggle of individuals rather than a detached series of events, but it takes many stories of this kind to tell the whole saga. These historical romances give but a very few of these stories and most often represent the experience of a select few rather than the average many, focusing on either the privileged classes or the most vulnerable in a society. Their stories, after all, tend to make the "juiciest stories," replete with the obstacles that are necessary to move the romance forward or the circumstances to create the romantic mood of nostalgia that draws the audience into the story.

As a genre based on the supremacy of love, romance, as many generic forms do, relies on emotional connections with the audience. Piquing the proper emotional response from the

audience is key to the success of the story. The historical setting of many romance stories helps to create the proper emotional environment for the audience because they make such heavy use of nostalgia.

The Civil War Through the Lens of the Miniseries

Two miniseries, originally broadcast in the 1980s, but still seen as reruns and on VHS and DVD, provide interesting examples from which to consider the impact of the genre on the popular American historical consciousness and the kind of history that is being disseminated through them. Both are romances set against the drama of the Civil War. The first of these to air was *The Blue and the Gray*, broadcast on three nights in November 1982 on CBS. As the title suggests, the story considers the experiences of both the North and the South in the conflict, though the thrust of the series has a distinctly northern perspective. Though there are a number of different plot lines that run through the series, it is primarily the story of John Geyer (John Hammond), the middle son of a Virginia farmer with an artistic talent and a desire to leave the farm for other pursuits. When the story opens it is 1859, and John Brown (Sterling Hayden) has just been captured following the raid on Harper's Ferry. When Geyser receives the reluctant blessing from his family to travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to secure a job as an artist for his uncle's newspaper, it is Brown's trial that gives him his first break and allows him to make enough of a name for himself to secure a decent living in his chosen field. During the trial he meets Jonas Steele (Stacy Keach), a man who seems to be hiding a secret but who, nevertheless, befriends him. Their relationship continues for many years to come.

When the war breaks out, Geyser's family expects him to return to fight for the Confederacy, but, being morally opposed to slavery, he refuses to do so. He cannot take up arms against his homeland either, however, so he resolves to cover the war as a journalist, sketching the

scenes of war for newspapers and magazines. His decision is met with varying degrees of disappointment from his family, from outright refusal to acknowledge his membership in the family to simple disagreement with his decision. His brothers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all enlist to fight for the South while his northern cousins, Malachy, Jake and James Hale, join the Union troops.

Steele is eventually revealed to be a Pinkerton agent, a friend of incoming president Abraham Lincoln (Gregory Peck) and one of his bodyguards, who receives a commission as a captain once the war begins. He helps Geyser find some of the battles early on, including the first battle of Bull Run, where, in addition to the fighting, he witnesses the full scale panic of the northern spectators who get caught up in the Union retreat when the battle turns against them. During the commotion he meets Kathy Reynolds (Kathleen Beller), the daughter of a senator, with whom he eventually falls in love. Steele marries Geyser's cousin, Mary Hale, but his own romantic intentions are thwarted by Kathy's father, who doesn't believe that Geyser is of the proper social standing to court and marry his daughter. Kathy has her own ideas, however, and eventually enlists as a nurse for battlefield hospitals and sees John as often as she can.

A number of battlefield scenes are included in the series, and they move much slower, with much less musical accompaniment and special effects than are often used to heighten the drama of such portrayals. Life as a soldier during the war is portrayed as well. The youngest Hale boy dies of disease before the fighting actually begins, and his brother, Malachy, is plagued by paralyzing fear on the battlefield, which puts himself and others in danger. In a humorous thread that runs through one episode, Malachy actually receives a commendation and promotion for capturing and bringing in several Confederate soldiers, when in reality he had been hiding from the battle with one of them and had made a pact with him that depending on whose side won, the member of the victorious side would get to take the other as a prisoner. The others surrender to him voluntarily

in order to escape the war as well. Once he receives his promotion, however, Malachy seems to gain the confidence necessary to overcome his fear and is able to face the battlefield after that.

The Geyser brothers are all injured in combat, and two of them are eventually killed, one in John's presence. He encounters one of his brothers while traveling with a Union battalion at the battle of Vicksburg. Worried about their sister who is living in the city with her husband, when he recognizes the troops his battalion is fighting as the ones his brother belongs to, he takes advantage of one of the mutually agreed to cease fire breaks to make contact with him to inquire about their sister's safety. Both sides stop their fighting while the two brothers make their way to the center of the battlefield to have their conversation. Once both have returned to their respective bunkers, the fighting resumes.

Though the Civil War is often acknowledged as a war that saw "brother fight brother," rarely is such a literal example of this seen in portrayals of the war. A more common treatment of this, found in the miniseries *North and South*, for example, is to have related members of the opposing sides recognize each other across the battlefield while fighting is occurring. That technique is also used here, but this other scene, where the battle stops to accommodate their contact, makes a much greater impact. Other rarely dramatized aspects of the war are addressed as well. The issues of cowardice among the troops during the war is addressed through the storyline involving Malachy Hale, but also through a dramatization of another soldier being branded as a coward with the letter C imprinted on his face with a branding iron while the rest of the troops look on. This reluctance to fight and the steps taken to counteract it are rarely acknowledged when considering the war. It has become more well-known in recent years through films like *Cold Mountain*, but was rarely acknowledged during the period in which this series was broadcast. Another rarely addressed aspect of portrayals of this or any other war is the accidental casualties that occur. In *The Blue and The Gray*, Mary Hale Steele is killed when a stray bullet strikes her while

she is at her home just outside Gettysburg on the eve of the battle there. Her death, because it was accidental but also because she was a woman, makes a striking effect.

Geyser is eventually drawn into the fighting of the war when, on a visit to his family's farm, he is put in the position of having to defend his family's land and his family as well. Though he has resisted in many times throughout the long years of the war, he picks up his rifle and joins his father and brother in defense of their land. Once it has been successfully defended, however, he returns to his non combative position.

The program ends with the occasion of John and Kathy's wedding. All differences have been reconciled, and it appears that the surviving members of both families from both sides of the conflict are positioned to succeed. New relationships are forming, and the hopeful occasion of the wedding brings the story to a hopeful, optimistic close. Though there is some false nostalgia for this part of our past that is utilized in the dramatization of this story, it is not until this closing scene that it becomes a focal point. Its use in the closing scene, however, casts that nostalgic glow to the larger story, tinting the way it is likely to be remembered.

The Blue and The Gray, though it does consider both sides of the conflict, is presented with a distinctly northern slant to it. The audience is asked to relate to the Union cause, and while the southern characters are not portrayed as villains, for the most part, they are portrayed as loyal but misguided. This, of course, is the way we have come to understand the Civil War in contemporary interpretations of it, so perhaps this interpretation should not be surprising. The history of war, so it is said, is written by the winners, and that is certainly true in the case of the Civil War. But as a civil war, it is also necessary to find a way to draw the losers back into the larger community, and so the "misguided" label is used as a sort of excuse for the offending behavior. This popular understanding of the war has been prevalent in American culture since the turn of the twentieth century when 50th anniversary celebrations of the war's end celebrated the valor and commitment

of both sides and reinforced the eventual reconciliation and strengthening of the American union.⁶

Its use in this case is simply extending the tradition that was started decades earlier.

What is surprising, however, is how this story is told with virtually no portrayal, and hardly any mention, of slavery. The Geyser farm is small and does not function with slave labor. The land is worked by the family alone. There is a free black man, John Henry (Paul Winfield), who rents work and living space from the family and a house servant who also appears to be free, but those are the only real African American characters in the story. This, of course, helps contribute to the sympathetic portrayal of the Geysers. When local law enforcement suspects that John Henry is sheltering some runaway slaves, however, the family allows his cabin to be searched and him to be killed once the runaways are discovered. This happens very early in the story, and African Americans are not even seen again until a brief scene later in the program where John Geyser runs into a community of displaced slaves in the South and tells them of the Emancipation Proclamation and its meaning for them.

Though the inclusion of some of the oft neglected aspects of the war that his miniseries deals with is admirable, this blatant exclusion is almost inconceivable. Though there are those who believe that slavery is too often thought of as the sole cause of the war, to essentially ignore its existence and its significance goes too far in the other direction. Certainly it was not the only issue at hand during this time, but it was an important reality of the time and of the war.

Another Civil War centered miniseries from this same decade has a decidedly different take on the subject, and makes slavery a central, if not the central, issue of the war. *The North and South* trilogy, based on John Jakes' novels *North and South*, *Love and War*, and *Heaven and Hell*, follows the struggles of two families in the years before, during and after the American Civil War. This steamy

⁶ For more discussion on this see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (New York: Belknap Press, 2001).

romance relies on false nostalgia for a time that is not in the memory of the viewing public, but which exerts an enormous hold on our collective national memory and imagination.

The *North and South* trilogy, broadcast as three separate series, *North and South Book One* in 1985, *North and South Book Two* in 1986, and *Heaven and Hell: North and South Book Three* in 1994, has been called by some “the *Gone with the Wind* of television.”⁷ It tells the story of two families, a plantation owning South Carolina family, the Mains, and a wealthy factory owning Pennsylvania family, the Hazards. The two families become linked when their sons, Orry (Patrick Swayze) and George (James Read), meet on their respective ways to West Point. Orry is harassed by some street thugs, and George comes to his aid when Orry is forced to fight them off. Their friendship begins on their train ride to the campus, and is solidified during their trying tenure as cadets. The other thing that begins on that train ride is the recognition that their upbringing and ways of life are in conflict on a number of crucial matters. Unlike *The Blue and the Gray*, the issue of slavery is pivotal in this story, and the positions of each friend and his family are eternally in conflict over it, despite their many common traits and beliefs. Before the issue comes between them on any significant level, however, they become fast, steadfast friends. They bond over their common hatred for their evil drill instructor, Elkanah Bent (Philip Casnoff), who takes a particular disliking to them as well and does everything he can make their lives difficult until the two friends along with several of their colleagues conspire to have him expelled from the academy. This is not the end of their association, however, and Bent reappears throughout the story, always trying to enact revenge for the dismissal.

During their years at West Point, the two friends have the chance to visit each other's homes and meet their families. Orry visits the Hazards in Lehigh Station, Pennsylvania during a

⁷ Quoted on the case of volume one of the VHS set of *North and South Book One*. It is attributed to Rodi Alexander of the *North Jersey Herald News*.

mid-term break two years after beginning their military training. Orry is anxious to see and learn about the Hazard family iron works, as he is eager to bring new industry to his family's plantation, Mont Royal, in South Carolina. While touring the foundry, he is shown the workers' quarters where the largely immigrant work force lives in dilapidated and filthy shacks. When Orry describes the conditions as worse than those in the slave quarters at home, George becomes defensive and points out that at least their workers have the choice of where they work. When Orry points out that their lack of opportunity and resources gives them no other choice, the two are forced to recognize the similarity of the situations (as is the audience on a point that is often overlooked when considering the issue of slavery), and make the first of several agreements to agree to disagree on the subject. Also on this trip, Orry meets George's brothers Stanley and Billy and his sister, abolitionist Virgilia, all of whom will play roles in the development of the friends' relationship in the coming years.

Upon their graduation from West Point, the two friends travel to South Carolina to visit Orry's family before heading off to fight in the Mexican American War. Orry is injured in battle, due to the interference of Bent, who has reappeared, and sinks into deep depression when his injury leaves him with a severe limp that is permanent. George, on the other hand, meets the love of his life, the daughter of Orry's doctor, Constance Flynn (Wendy Kilbourne), and proposes to her. Orry returns home but withdraws into himself. He is brought out of his depression somewhat when George visits and asks him to be the best man at his wedding.

Orry's own love life is complicated as he is in love with a woman, Madeline Fabray LaMotte (Lesley-Anne Down), who is married to his neighbor Justin LaMotte (David Carradine). The two had met earlier when Orry rescued her from a carriage accident while on his way to West Point, and had instantly fallen in love. They write to one another, but their relationship is foiled when her father intercepts the letters so that she will consent to marry LaMotte whom he believes

is a more suitable choice for her. By the time the two realize what has happened, it is too late as she is already married. They pine for one another, and confess their feelings whenever they have the opportunity to be alone, but it is nothing but painful for them both. It is especially difficult because Madeline's husband is cruel to her. Though Orry worries that his injury will make him less desirable to her, his concern is unfounded and shortly after his return from the war the two begin a clandestine affair.

During George's visit, one of the Main's slaves runs away, and the two friends find themselves at odds with each other over the issue of slavery once again. At George's request, Orry lets the slave go when they encounter him, but warns George that their friendship will be at risk if he continues to interfere with the way of life on the plantation. The issue of slavery will not go away, however, and when Orry is invited to attend a speech given by George's fanatical abolitionist sister, Virgilia (Kirstie Alley), she humiliates him with her accusations and innuendoes about master-slave relations. Still the families are able to maintain their relationship, and make visits to one another's homes. George and Orry become partners in the textile mill that Orry establishes in South Carolina. Meanwhile, the families continue to practice their own beliefs. The Hazards' home becomes a stop on the Underground Railroad, while the Mains continue their practice as "good slave owners," treating their slaves relatively kindly. On the Hazards visit to Mt. Royal, however, Virgilia once again goes into action. She befriends a slave, Grady (Georg Stanford Brown), the servant of the fiancé of Orry's sister Ashton (Terri Garber), becomes romantically involved with him, and then helps him escape. The Hazards are forced to leave abruptly as Virgilia's actions are considered highly criminal in the South. When they return home, Virgilia marries Grady, and they become part of a radical abolitionist group.

The two families are brought together again at another West Point graduation when George's younger brother, Billy (played by John Stockwell in Book One and Parker Stevenson in

Book Two), and Orry's young cousin, Charles (played by Lewis Smith on Book One and Book Two and by Kyle Chandler in Book Three), graduate, having become the best of friends just as their older relatives had. Billy has also fallen for Orry's youngest sister, Brett (Genie Francis), and seeks to marry her, though Orry's refusal to give his permission (their father has passed away by this time) due to his concerns about possible impending war delays their union for some time.

When the start of the war seems imminent, Orry and Brett travel north so that Orry can give George his profits from the textile mill. Another confrontation with Virgilia ensues, and the Mains make an abrupt departure. They find themselves on a train that is detained by John Brown (Johnny Cash) and his followers on the eve of the Harper's Ferry incident, and encounter Virgilia and Grady, along with Priam (David Harris), the escaped slave that Orry had let go free. By the time the encounter is over, both Grady and Priam have been killed, and Virgilia, wild with grief, is taken away and locked up as mad. Though the Main-Hazard relationship is strained at this point, once Lincoln has been elected and the country is on the eve of war, Orry makes one last trip north so that the two partners can discuss the status of their involvement. When they part, though they know they are about to be on opposite sides of a war, they part as friends and wish each other well. This marks the conclusion of the first series, Book One.

As Book Two opens, the Civil War has divided the two families physically, but their emotional bond endures as Union officers George and Billy and Confederate officers Orry and Charles save each others' lives on several occasions. While Billy and Charles find themselves on the front lines of the war, Orry and George become advisors to their respective leaders. A number of battle scenes are staged, using Civil War reenactors to play the parts of the bulk of the soldiers, including the chaos at the first Bull Run when the spectators found themselves caught in the Union's retreat (George and Constance are among them). The battle scenes are portrayed in an epic style with all that special effects and musical cues can do to heighten the drama of the scene.

Meanwhile, Virgilia enlists in the nurses corps with the aid of a senator who is infatuated with her, though her radical views put her under near constant suspicion. Madeline, having finally endured too much at the hand of her evil husband, escapes to the safety of Mt. Royal with Orry's assistance. They eventually marry after Orry kills Justin in the process of defending Madeline. Their happiness is interrupted however when a deep secret that Madeline is hiding is held against her. On his deathbed, her father reveals that her mother was a quadroon (one-quarter African). Orry's sister Ashton, an evil woman in her own right who has joined forces with their old rival Bent to make Orry and George suffer, threatens to reveal Madeline's secret, unless she leaves. To protect her husband's honor, she disappears. Orry hires a private detective to find her, but it takes years before they are reunited.

George requests a transfer to a field command, and shortly after he receives it he is captured and sent to Libby Prison, a notoriously dangerous place especially for officers. He is near death from disease and mistreatment when Orry and Charles concoct a plan to free him and return him to the north. While he is home recuperating, he discovers that his older brother Stanley (Jonathan Frakes) and his wife Isabelle (Wendy Fulton) have used the family foundry to set up a dummy corporation to manufacture substandard cannons that will garner them more profit. The inferior weapons have exploded upon use, resulting in casualties. Because George's name is listed as the head of the company, however, it is he who faces the blame for the deception. In order to clear his name, he investigates the company and traces it back to Stanley and Isabelle, who are sent to prison.

Virgilia also finds herself in trouble when she is accused of assaulting her supervisor in the nurses' corps who accuses her of purposely killing a Confederate soldier under her care. She flees the scene, thinking the woman dead, and escapes to the home of her senator suitor, who agrees to hide her in return for her sexual favors. When she discovers that he had not informed her that she

had been cleared of the charges, she shoots and kills him in a rage. For this she is sentenced to be executed, and she resigns herself to her fate.

The rest of the characters are reunited at the end of Book Two, including Madeline and Orry and their new baby and Charles and the son he has fathered with a woman who died in childbirth. The Main home at Mt. Royal has been destroyed by fire, but George vows to help Orry rebuild with the profits from their textile mill, and as the program ends, the friends are seen walking away from the plantation as though they are preparing to start their lives over again.

As much like a soap opera as these first two miniseries are, they are nothing compared to the last installment in the trilogy. In the first hour of the program Orry and Constance are both killed by Bent, who is still bent on revenge against the two friends. In their grief, Madeline and George come together, eventually beginning a relationship of their own. Charles' son is kidnapped by Bent as well, and Charles sets out on a quest to get him back, where he is eventually joined by George. As Madeline struggles to hold on to Mont Royal and aid the displaced freed slaves, and Charles and George search the West for Charles' son, they encounter the Ku Klux Klan and angry Indian tribes and barely escape innumerable dangers that threaten their lives. In the end the group is reunited and Bent is finally gone.

This third miniseries is much less tied to specific historical events, and the story seems much less focused and much harder to follow. It was not the ratings success that the first two series were, perhaps because there was a delay of eight years between the broadcasts of parts two and three. It may also be that without the allure that the Civil War has for the American public the series did not have the same appeal for audiences. It could also be that the third part was simply not as well done as the earlier series. Though the first two miniseries have been routinely rerun on cable channels since their original broadcast and have been available in VHS for some time, it was not until the release of a new DVD set that included the entire trilogy that the third part has been

widely available for viewing since its original broadcast. So absent from the *North and South* presence has the third installment been that its existence is often completely discounted when reference is made to these miniseries.

There is a tremendous amount of history dramatized, and consequently interpreted in this series. The inclusion of both a northern and a southern family in the story allows the audience to see the era from both sides. George and Orry often disagree over the issues of slavery and states rights, which threatens to end their friendship on more than one occasion before the war even begins. We are shown the living conditions of both the Main family's slaves and the wage slaves who work for the Hazard family's iron works. We see the attempts to alleviate the suffering of the slaves by both northern abolitionists and sympathetic southerners. Both families have their evil members who attempt to corrupt the goodness of the time, but both also offer sympathetic and likeable characters that we root for and sympathize with.

Yet despite the seeming balance in the conflicting perspectives, the series takes on a distinct "lost cause" feel, mirroring *Gone with the Wind*, in more than just a similarity of settings. Though George, and to a lesser degree his family, acts as a sort of moral conscience for the story, it is the Mains that we are asked to most sympathize with. They are the ones whose sacrifices are the greatest and whose setbacks are most dramatized. The glorious civilization of the antebellum South is poignantly drawn throughout the series, with all the power that false nostalgia can muster. This sentimentality for the antebellum South and need to minimize the disparity between northern and southern interests following the end of the war can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century when efforts to conceal or downplay the source of conflict behind the war were made in an attempt to "heal" the country and reinforce the racial hierarchy that many felt an increased

mobilization of African Americans and an influx of immigrants threatened to undermine.⁸ This interpretation of that era, while perhaps good for the romance, does not necessarily provide the best environment from which to understand the history.

And then there is the romance. The relationships between the characters drive the storyline, with the historical setting making itself known in the details, such as the setting, costumes and references made to “current events” in the dialogue, and in the conflicts of the years surrounding the war, such as the many Civil War battles that are depicted and anti-slavery uprisings such as the incident at Harper’s Ferry. But it is impossible to separate the romance story from the history, as one depends on the other for not only context but detail. The history that is shown becomes real because we get caught up in the story. On the other hand, as it is necessary for us to get caught up in the history in order to truly connect with the characters, the history that is presented is simplified. For example, in Jakes’ original novel, the Main family had a rice plantation, something that many viewers would not expect in the American south. In the televisual adaptation, however, though it too was written by Jakes, the Mains are cotton planters, a much more familiar image for the audience. To keep the fictional storyline central in the program, the history is watered down so that it will not detract from the story being told. The tremendous complexities that surround the Civil War and the years that preceded and followed it are lost here, out of necessity when the success of the story is the primary goal.

And while it may be good to see the events of something as overwhelming as the Civil War played out in a venue that focuses on the impact of such a struggle on the individuals who were caught up in it, it once again minimizes the tremendous complexities of the era historically, thereby limiting, and perhaps even stifling, the ability to learn about and from it.

⁸ More on this can also be found in David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (New York: Belknap Press, 2001).

History and Romance in the World War II Miniseries

Running a close second to the Civil War in terms of capturing the American imagination is the World War II era. *The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*, based on the Herman Wouk novels of the same names, tell the story of one extended family amidst the conflict of the Second World War. This series is also reliant on nostalgia, but for some, this nostalgia may be true. Though it becomes less the case each year, there are still many who remember the years being depicted here and the impact of this war on their lives and their country, and even more who have heard first-hand memories recalled. This period also has a tremendous hold on the American psyche, representing what many see as the last clear example of American military might and a time when good and evil were easily discerned from one another.

Initially aired in 1983 and 1988 respectively, the two together tell the story of the Henry family and their friends and acquaintances from just before the outbreak of World War II in Europe in the late 1930s through the end of the war in 1945. Just as in Wouk's novel, the series interwove dramatizations of actual historical events from the war with the fictional storyline. While the central characters, and the ones with whom we become most involved, are all fictional, they interact with real historical figures, many of them powerful leaders. Nearly all of the military personnel that appear are actual people, with the exception of the Henrys and some of their friends.

The combination of "fact" and fiction that the series is built upon is apparent from the opening scenes of the first episode in *Winds of War*. The opening scene, set in March 1939, introduces the audience to the high ranking officials, by name and by rank/job, in the Nazi government. Narrated by a deep, authoritative voice, and punctuated by screen labels identifying time and place, we witness Hitler's command to his military leaders to prepare to invade Poland no later than September 1st of that year. This scene is followed by the extensive opening credits that grow longer with each successive episode, introducing an extensive sized cast that includes many

well-known veteran actors as well as some relative unknowns. The credits are followed by the first scene that introduces us to the fictional characters through whom we will experience the war years. Commander Victor “Pug” Henry (Robert Mitchum) and his wife Rhoda (Polly Bergen) are boarding a German ocean liner for their voyage to Berlin where Pug will take the position of Naval Attaché. They are accompanied by two of their children, Naval officer candidate Warren (played by Ben Murphy in *Winds of War* and Michael Woods in *War and Remembrance*) and college student Madeline (played by Lisa Eilbacher in *Winds of War* and Leslie Hope in *War and Remembrance*), who are there to see them off. References are made to their third child, drifter Byron (played by Jan-Michael Vincent in *Winds of War* and Hart Bochner in *War and Remembrance*), whom we meet in the following scene. Also introduced in this scene is Admiral Von Roon (Jeremy Kemp), a German officer who makes a point of getting to know the Commander and his wife.

We meet Byron Henry as he is being picked up in Sienna, Italy by Natalie Jastrow (played by Ali McGraw in *Winds of War* and Jane Seymour in *War and Remembrance*), the niece of author and academic Dr. Aaron Jastrow (played by John Houseman in *Winds of War* and John Gielgud in *War and Remembrance*), and her beau Leslie Slote (David Dukes), an under Secretary of State stationed in Warsaw. Byron has been brought to Sienna by a former professor of his as he is wandering around Europe after having dropped out of graduate school in Florence. He is invited by Dr. Jastrow to stay on as his research assistant, and accepts, as much on account of his attraction to Natalie as anything else. The scene then returns to the ship where Pug and Rhoda are dining at the Captain’s table with von Roon and others, including British journalist Alistair “Talkie” Tudsbury (played by Michael Logan in *Winds of War* and Robert Morley in *War and Remembrance*) and his daughter and assistant, Pamela (Victoria Tennant), with whom the various members of the Henry family will have interactions throughout the series. Later scenes in the first episode take place in rural Poland where Natalie meets her Uncle, Berol Jastrow (Topol), when she attends a cousin’s wedding. We

also meet Palmer Kirby (Peter Graves), a scientist in Berlin who engages Pug's assistance to meet with government officials on some top secret project. This completes the introductions of the main characters that will drive the storylines. By the close of the first episode, the Germans have invaded Poland, the Allies are preparing to respond, and the world stands on the very brink of war.

This opening episode presents the generally tranquil and comfortable atmosphere of pre-war Europe and the often opulent lifestyle of the German elite in particular. It stands starkly against the chaos that is displayed by the end of the episode and that continues throughout the remainder of the series. Battle scenes and depictions of the hardships of the many displaced people are well represented as the story progresses and the characters find them enmeshed in some of the most tense and dangerous aspects of the war. The relative normalcy that also existed in parts of the world not engrossed by battle is also depicted throughout the series, at times dramatizing the stark contrast that existed simultaneously throughout the long conflict. The early episodes also do a good job of depicting how all sides of the conflict underestimated the enormity of the conflict that was brewing, something that is easy to forget in the wake of the enormity that came to be.

Virtually no major aspect of the conflict goes without mention. The precarious situation of the Jews during this time is consistently addressed, primarily through the Jastrows, American Jews living in Europe who, despite their citizenship which often works in their favor, are not immune to the dangers of Hitler's Final Solution, but also through other plot points, such as the desperate situation of the man who rents his grand house to the Henrys while they are in Berlin for very little rent, as renting to a diplomat is his only protection against the loss of his property. The military affiliation of the Henry family provides ample opportunity to see both the inside perspective of those fighting the war and the toll that the conflict took on the families of those serving. There is also ample opportunity to see the war through the perspectives of various countries involved because of the placement and positions of a number of the characters.

As *Winds of War* continues, the Henry family becomes more and more involved in the war in Europe. Byron and Natalie get stuck in Poland after the Nazis have invaded. They do what they can to help the ravaged country until Slote is able to get them out with the rest of the American citizens stranded in the country. There they find themselves in the hands of the Germans and survive a near disaster when the Nazis begin to inquire about individuals' religious affiliations. They eventually meet up again in Sienna, and finally reveal their love for each other and become engaged. Pug is finally transferred out of Berlin. He spends some time in Washington with the president, consults with the British in regard to the lend-lease program, and serves as an observer in the Soviet Union for a time as well. He encounters Pamela Tudsbury a number of times during his travels, and, though she is quite a bit younger than he is, they form a relationship that stops just short of an affair.

Meanwhile Rhoda, who is stuck at home in Washington alone as Pug travels, begins an affair with Palmer Kirby. Warren is about to be married and stationed at Pearl Harbor. The family reunites for the wedding and then each member goes his or her separate way again. Byron and Natalie get separated again when he goes to enroll in a submarine training program and she returns to Sienna. On the brink of war, she and her uncle are unable to get out of Italy. Byron manages to get assigned to a submarine that is headed for Portugal, and he and Natalie meet for a makeshift wedding and quick honeymoon before he has to ship out. Slote, a witness at their wedding, struggles with what to do with news he has been given about the atrocities that are being inflicted on European Jews by the Nazis. His superiors refuse to believe the reports he has been given, but he cannot get the images out of his head.

As the series' end, Pearl Harbor is attacked. Pug, on his way to take control of a battleship in the Pacific, is devastated to learn that his ship has been destroyed. He receives a letter from Rhoda telling him of her affair with Palmer and asking for a divorce. Upon news of the attack, she

sends a telegram asking him to ignore her letter, and Pug decides to keep trying to save his marriage rather than become more involved with Pamela. Warren and Byron are immediately mobilized to fight the war in the Pacific, and Natalie, who is now pregnant, and Aaron find themselves in a very precarious situation, trapped in Mussolini's Italy. As the program closes, they board a decrepit ship full of Jewish refugees who are traveling to Palestine to escape persecution.

War and Remembrance opens in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war by the United States. Pug eventually secures another ship to command, Byron is transferred to the Pacific where his submarine patrols the waters for Japanese ships, and Warren flies missions from his base in Pearl Harbor. Natalie and Aaron decide to leave the ship bound for Palestine and place themselves in the hands of a former student of Aaron's, Werner Beck (Bill Wallace), who holds a Nazi administrative post in Italy. His professed concern for them and promise to get them safe passage back to the United States convinces them to trust him, though it proves to be a fatal mistake. His true goal is to get Aaron to make speeches in favor of the Nazi position for broadcast in the Allied countries. Unwilling to do this, Aaron tries to stall him while they come up with an alternate plan. Both Rhoda and Pamela try to strengthen their hold on Pug, though Rhoda's continued interest in Palmer gets in her way. Slote continues to try to get someone to pay attention to the rumors about what is happening to the Jews in Europe, but to no avail.

A number of battle scenes are dramatized, in the Pacific and in Europe, most of which involve at least one of the fictional characters. All three Henrys are involved in the battle for Midway. Warren does not survive it, however, and the family must deal with his loss. Both Pug and Byron find themselves in dangerous situations as well, though they are able to survive them. Pug's ship does not fare as well, however, and after his ship is sunk, he is sent on more diplomatic duties that take him back to Washington and Europe. He continues to encounter Pamela in his travels as she accompanies her father on his work related trips. Their attraction to each other

remains strong, but with his resolve to work things out with his wife she eventually becomes engaged herself. Once Rhoda and Palmer have parted way, she becomes involved with an Army officer, Harrison "Hack" Peters (Mike Connors). Her devastation at the death of her son and her continual solitary state while Pug is away, eventually leads to her divorcing Pug in favor of Hack Peters. Pamela and Pug eventually find their way back to each other as well, and after his divorce they marry and settle in Washington. Slote, having encountered one obstacle after another in his quest to have the Jewish question heard, eventually gives up his position with the State office. He joins a paratrooper squad, and is eventually killed on a mission in France.

Natalie's situation becomes more and more precarious as the war continues. Along with her Uncle Aaron and her son Louis, she eventually goes into hiding through a network of Jewish families in Vichy France. While there, she has one brief encounter with Byron, who is fighting desperately to get her back to the United States. There is an opportunity to get them out at that point, but they do not take it as it seems too risky. They eventually wind up with another group of stranded Americans awaiting transfer home, but when Aaron becomes sick and they must take him to Paris for treatment, they once again encounter Werner Beck. When Aaron is no longer able to stall him, they are sent to Theresienstadt, a Jewish Ghetto in Czechoslovakia that is said to be a luxury community for prominent Jews in Europe. When they arrive, they find out how untrue the description was, as the conditions are deplorable and they are treated as any other prisoners. They maintain some protection from the work conditions due to Aaron's notoriety and his eventual agreement to serve as an elder for the community. But that protection does not turn out to be enough. Though Natalie is able to smuggle Louis out of the ghetto through her cousin Berol, who is working with the resistance, she and Aaron are eventually sent to Auschwitz. Though Natalie is selected as strong enough to work and thereby avoids the gas chamber, Aaron is not, and he is gassed upon arrival at the concentration camp. Natalie is eventually rescued by American soldiers

once the war in Europe has ended, but she is in a critical state. She recovers in a Red Cross hospital where she is reunited with Byron, but worries about their son's condition. Byron undertakes a frustrating search to find him, and eventually locates him with a group of children in England. At the close of the program the family is reunited and there is a promise of hope for the future,

Despite the fact that the majority of the action takes place outside the United States, the tale is told as a distinctly American story. Though a number of the Henrys' friends and colleagues are not Americans themselves, the perspective from which the story is told is an American one. And while the inclusion of the inner workings of the German government and military might suggest an objective interpretation of events, the series is far from even-handed. The Axis are most certainly the villains in the story, though there are suggestions that not all citizens of the offending countries were complicit in the evil.

The structure of these miniseries differs from the others mentioned here in the way in which the history is incorporated in the story. Just as in Wouk's novels, these programs contain segments where the fictional characters around whom the story focuses are not seen. These segments are meant to dramatize the history behind the story. The majority of these take us into the high ranks of the Third Reich and the planning and decision making processes behind it. A fictional character, General Von Roon, provides the eyes and perspective through which we see this action. Von Roon himself is peripherally connected to the Henrys by way of some early social/diplomatic contacts that are made when Pug serves as a naval attaché in Berlin during the months directly preceding the beginning of the war. Other than this tangential connection, however, these segments of the story are unrelated to the Henrys' story, except in how both are a part of the same larger history. This is a distinct difference from the presentation style of programs like the *North and South* trilogy, where the only history we see is the history that the characters are involved in (though the story is set up so that there are characters that can be involved in virtually

every aspect of the history of the time). The result is partially the same, in that we are shown the war from multiple perspectives, and yet we are distinctly cut off from part of it by virtue of having no real representative for this portion of the story. This reinforces the “us against them” mentality of conflicts such as these—the good guys are the ones we get to know and the bad guys are the ones we do not.

This segmented format, along with the use of screen labels designating not only the place and date of the action about to take place but also its exact time, lend to the sense of authenticity of the material. In reality this technique is most often used to heighten the drama of the story, but the preciseness of it gives it a distinct sense of authority.

The romance still prevails here, however, commanding the audience’s attention and focus. In addition to the tragically poignant situation of Natalie and her family caught up in the web of terror that was Hitler’s Final Solution, we also get caught up in the romance that develops between Pug and Pamela Tudsbury. Finding themselves thrown together as their travels take them from one scene of conflict to another, we fear for both their individual safety and the future of their relationship as they continually find themselves in dangerous predicaments, from the London Blitz to the battles in North Africa. There are also the affairs of Pug’s wife, Rhoda, who is often left alone as her husband serves all over the world, and she gets caught up in the attention of the important men she meets through her husband. Other liaisons between secondary characters also contribute to the story, creating an almost perfect generic example of romance where love struggles against the conflicts of war and only the truest examples of it manage to overcome and survive.

The history offered here is perhaps less skewed than that presented in the *North & South* trilogy, but is still romanticized and nostalgic. The relative proximity of this historical setting keeps the nostalgia in check to a certain degree, but the solemnity with which this part of our

collective past is held also limits the degree of critical consideration the audience will tolerate. And then there is the romance, the driving force of the program, which ultimately dictates the way the history is presented.

One point that the tremendous scope of this program does make clear is the enormity of the conflict that was World War II. Though it is told from a distinctly American point of view, these two miniseries set the American experience in a global context, acknowledging the many alliances and conflicts that the United States was involved in both before and during its actual involvement in fighting the war. This is significant, as most American interpretations of American history tend to be told in something of a vacuum, with the international context left out. In this way, then, these miniseries may actually have broadened the American public's understanding of this familiar piece of history.

As is the case with most presentations of this scope, the situations are rather contrived. After all, in order to tell such an enormous story it is necessary to have characters with access to a variety of places and situations. However, the inclusion of the "factual" storyline in this series allows for a less contrived feeling. We are able to see the important pieces of the puzzle from those outside the Henry circle when it is necessary, even if we as the audience have more information than the characters we are following.

A New Wave in Miniseries Production

The miniseries reached its peak as a genre from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. The programs produced and aired during this time have many characteristics in common including the epic scale on which they were produced and their multi-episode broadcast that tended to monopolize viewership during the week or weeks when they aired. Miniseries are still produced today, but they tend to be less spectacular productions than the earlier programs and shorter in

length, airing on only two or three nights instead of taking up a week or more. They are occasionally categorized as made for television movies due to their shorter length. Historical subjects are still popular in the genre.

For example, in the late 1990s, NBC aired a pair of music heavy miniseries that depicted more recent American history. The first, *The 60s*, told the story of two families, one white and one black, during this tumultuous decade. Spanning the entire decade in just four hours, the pace of the program was fast. The main storyline followed the middle class Hurlihy family from Chicago. A Catholic family devoted to John F. Kennedy, they are devastated by his assassination. As the decade, and the show, continues, the three Hurlihy children-- Brian (Jerry O'Connell), Michael (Josh Hamilton), and Katie (Julia Stiles)-- follow very different paths. Disappointed in his failure to secure a football scholarship to Notre Dame, Brian enlists in the Marines before U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia is assured. Eventually he is sent to Vietnam, however, and while his letters home sound confident, when he himself returns he is deeply troubled by what he has seen and done. Michael is drawn into the social issues of the day, first through an opportunity with his church to work as a freedom fighter registering black voters in Mississippi, and later through involvement in student protests against the war. He becomes politically active, and while he becomes involved in some of the more radical protests of the day, he keeps a level head and does not get carried away into madness as many of those around him do. Katie, anxious to grow up, sneaks out of the house to parties her parents do not approve of. At one of those parties she has a sexual encounter that results in pregnancy. When her conservative father finds out, he loses his temper, and Katie runs away to look for the musician who fathered her child who was on his way to participate in the countercultural scene at Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco. She does find him there and becomes a part of the "hippie scene." She has her baby and then must struggle to provide for him. She eventually joins a commune where some of her new friends are living. Though the Hurlihy siblings

go their separate ways for most of the decade, they are reunited at Woodstock and return home together where they are welcomed back to the family.

In a less developed storyline, the experiences of the Taylor family are chronicled. A black minister's family living in Greenwood, Mississippi, the Taylors are actively involved in the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The two subject families of the program cross paths for the first time when Michael Hurlihy arrives with his church group to help with the voter registration drive in Greenwood. Shortly after the protest that erupts in response to the registration efforts, the Taylor's church is burned down and they take the opportunity to move to California, to the Watts area of Los Angeles, to set up a new ministry. There they become involved in the 1964 Watts riot. Father Willie Taylor (Charles S. Dutton) is killed by police as he is trying to stop son Emmet (Leonard Roberts) from looting a store. Devastated by both the riot and his father's death, Emmet wanders aimlessly, winding up in Haight-Ashbury (where he connects with the Hurlihy family again when he meets briefly meets Katie). He is recruited by the Black Panthers, but finds their methods hard to deal with and eventually gets involved with Fred Hampton's breakfast program, where he feels he is contributing to the community in a way his father would be proud of.

The show is framed by a collection of period music which, by virtue of its origin in the subject decade, adds somewhat to the period flavor of the program. The music is used strangely, however, and the song being played at any given time might have little or no apparent connection to the action taking place on screen. NBC used the soundtrack to advertise and sell the movie and marketed the soundtrack as a CD. The series also used the establish historical miniseries techniques of inserting date and place labels at crucial points during the program to help mark the passage of time and give some historical context to the fictional storyline being dramatized. Actual news footage was also used to help move the story along. All of these techniques add to the sense

of historical accuracy that the program had. It was well received by audiences, posting high ratings for the two nights it was on in February 1999.

The following year NBC broadcast a second series, *The 70s*, that followed the same format but focused on a new, unrelated group of characters. Though it was not as successful as *The 60s*, the series brought in a respectable audience. Also music heavy and organized by the use of time/place labels and actual footage, the storyline followed four friends who, at the beginning of the program, find themselves at Kent State in May 1970 when several students were killed during a standoff between student protestors and the Ohio National Guard. Three of the four main characters are students at the school and one is in the Guard. All deeply affected by the tragedy, they each choose different paths to follow. Byron Schales (Brad Rowe), who has just graduated, moves to New York to attend law school. While there, he becomes involved in politics and eventually leaves school to join the Nixon reelection campaign. He becomes involved with the Watergate scandal and eventually must leave the Nixon administration due to the subsequent investigation into it.

His girlfriend, Eileen Wells (Vinessa Shaw), is a naïve straight-laced girl who follows Byron to New York and continues her education there after deciding she can not return to Kent State after the tragedy. When Byron leaves her for his new job and another woman, she must learn to make it on her own (inspired by period images of women on their own, including, for example, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) and she eventually becomes caught up in the feminist movement. Struggling to find work as a design artist, she is forced to take secretarial jobs when no one will take her seriously because she is a woman. She eventually ends up suing one of the companies for sexual discrimination. Though she loses her case, it eventually helps her get where she want to go. She and Byron reconcile at the end of the program and marry.

Byron's sister Christie (Amy Smart) drifts from place to place trying to find her niche. Her beauty lands her some modeling jobs, but her lack of focus and her fast paced, party heavy lifestyle interfere with her growing career. She sets off on a cross country quest to find her path and is eventually taken in by a cult in California who brainwash her. Her friends and family must kidnap her in order to try to undo the mind control the cult has worked on her. She is finally returned to her original self, though she still wonders what she will do.

The last of the friends is Dexter Johnson (Guy Torry), an African American man who becomes disillusioned after his presence as part of the National Guard that day at Kent State leaves him searching for something new. He finds himself in an African American community in California where he buys and refurbishes a dying movie theater in an attempt to help revive the community. He becomes more and more involved in urban renewal and trying to improve conditions in the community. He becomes estranged from his old friends, mostly due to disagreements on political and racial issues, but is called upon to help with the deprogramming of Christie and as a result reconciles with them.

The series ends with Byron's and Eileen's wedding. The group of friends has overcome their individual obstacles as well as their conflicts with each other. Like *The 60s* and many other historical miniseries, the program ends on a hopeful note. No matter how blunt the miniseries are in addressing the difficult events of the past, they leave the audience with a sense of optimism, as if to point to the certain superiority of whatever will follow. This belief in progress and the ascendancy of the future is, of course, very American. No matter how compelling our history and the stories that it tells are for us, the future will always be more important to us as a culture.

The Future of the Miniseries

The shift in format from the epic highly concentrated miniseries broadcast to a smaller scale and extended broadcast model may prove to alter the impact of the genre on the viewing audience, especially for those of a historical nature. But despite the change in format, however, historical miniseries continue to appear on television. Highly acclaimed cinematic filmmaker Stephen Spielberg is bringing an epic consideration of the American West to the cable channel TNT in the summer of 2005. The much hyped *Into the West* is expected to garner sizeable audiences over the six weekly installments that are scheduled to air. Other recent uses of the genre include ABC's reinterpretation of the Laura Ingalls Wilder classic *Little House on the Prairie* shown over the course of several weeks in the spring of 2005. This was advertised as a test run for a possible spot on the network's upcoming prime time series lineup. This use of the miniseries format, though not in keeping with its typical storytelling purpose, has a more practical component to it. Regardless of the network's motives, however, for the audience the viewing experience is essentially the same. Sometimes referred to as "limited series" now that they are broadcast as weekly installments over a longer span of time, they lack some of the intimacy that the more concentrated programs had. Their treatment of history is similar, however.

The epic historical miniseries from the 1970s-1990s are now available on VHS and DVD, for rental and purchase, keeping them alive for previous and new viewers. They are also incorporated into the broadcasting schedules of cable channels from time to time, increasing their availability. Though it may be less true today than it was twenty years ago, the miniseries continues to be the quintessential historical television genre. Well suited for this type of storytelling and a familiar medium for historical content, the historical capital of these programs is likely to remain high, even as the format of the genre changes over time. History in the television miniseries, like that found in television series drama only magnified, is epic. The characters that exist there are

extreme, either glamorous or desperate, heroic or evil. The historical issues that are dealt with, though they are convoluted and/or unclear from time to time, are absolute, the outcome is certain. The sweeping nature of these productions suggests the sweeping scope of history, and yet the stories typically deal with a relatively small number of characters involved in specific dramatic situations, and while the stories are generally contrived to allow for those characters to be involved in critical and well-known events from the period they are dramatizing, only a portion of the story of the era is actually told. Because this television genre which has become so closely associated with history interprets the past this way, that is the way the public has come to think of the past. Since *Roots* gave us the chance to see inside the horror that was American slavery, we have looked to these kinds of historical dramatizations to take us into the past in order to understand it from the inside out. And while this way of personalizing history, presenting it from the perspective of individuals rather than as a series of facts in a textbook or encyclopedia, makes it more potentially meaningful for the audience, it frames it in a very specific way, leaving a very specific image.

Though we as scholars may not like the kind of history that these programs are helping to establish in the minds of the American public, it is important that we understand it and the reasons that it exists if our historical scholarship is to have any impact on the larger society. The popular American historical consciousness, though it may be a highly elusive concept, does exist and it is a factor in contemporary and future American society and culture. Knowing what it is, where it comes from, and how it is formed is crucial to understanding how Americans think of themselves. But ultimately what is most important to consider here is not necessarily the specific "lessons" that are being taught through these programs, but the fact that they have this kind of impact in the first place. While it may actually be myth making that is going on in these miniseries and countless other popular history forms, it is presented as history making, and as long as that distinction is not drawn and recognized by the audience, it is a moot point. The generally reassuring and progressive

messages that are sent through these televisual interpretations of history fail to capture the complexity of the American past, the reasons behind the events of the past and how and why the course of events went in the direction that it did. The narrative nature of these stories, like the popular novels on which many of them are based, does not allow for any kind of modeling of historical inquiry that might allow the viewing public a glimpse into historical method and practice. And so the experience of viewing most televisual histories at once creates a visual image of the past and reinforces our understanding of it as a static, concrete entity. Though not all history on television follows this same pattern, the popularity and pervasiveness of these dramatic genres make them the primary determinant of the popular American historical consciousness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Made Possible By Viewers Like You: Televisual History PBS Style

More than any other history on television, the historical programming aired on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) has the best reputation as a trusted source of historical education. This is a public designation (as opposed to a scholarly one), to be sure, but it is widespread and well entrenched in American society. This is due in part to PBS's status as "educational television," a label it has had from its earliest days.

Founded in 1969, the network is a private, non-profit entity made up of member stations across the nation, much like commercial networks. As a non-commercial entity without traditional advertising breaks in its programming, PBS is dependent on corporate and viewer financial support for its funding. Though its reputation as a producer of "high brow" programming has made for smaller audiences than its commercial competitors, a PBS network is available in nearly every television market today. Its current membership includes 348 stations nationwide, run by community groups, colleges and universities, state authorities and local educational or municipal authorities. Today the network estimates that through its on air programming and its related web sites it reaches 90 million viewers, representing all segments of American society, per week.¹

Historical subject matter has always been a part of the networks lineup, and today it offers a number of regular historical series and frequent special presentations, more historical content

¹ This information comes from the companies own profile as given on their own web site, <http://www.pbs.org>. This and other information about the network can be found on the "about PBS" page, http://www.pbs.org/aboutpbs/aboutpbs_corp.html.

than any other network except the specialized cable networks devoted entirely to history, such as The History Channel. It has also joined the online community with a large web site that offers not only programming information but also acts as a supplement to many of its programs, providing additional information and educational material for use in the classroom. The website also includes an online store where DVDs of PBS programming, as well as supplemental materials such as books and music CDs, can be purchased. An alternate store specifically for educators offers a portion of the inventory at a discount as well as additional materials to facilitate the use of the programs as part of the curriculum. PBS DVDs are also widely available in stores across the country. The on-air broadcasts coupled with the DVD production makes this networks programming widely available; however, its educational reputation does limit its appeal to many viewers who see it as less recreational viewing.

Regular Historical Programming

The network's regular historical series include *American Experience*, "television's longest running, most watched history series."² Debuting in 1988, this weekly program offers documentary style programs, ranging from one hour single episode to multi episode treatments, profiling important American historical figures, some of them very well known and others quite obscure, well known landmarks, and popular culture and technology subjects. For example, recent installments have considered the Miss America Pageant, the building of the Alaskan Highway, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst and the lives of people as diverse as Emma Goldman and Mary Pickford. Many installments of the series have garnered critical acclaim and an unusually high viewership, and the series has won many broadcasting and industry awards.³ Like many PBS programs, *American*

² "Who We Are," *American Experience*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whoweare.html>.

³ *American Experience*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/>.

Experience has its own web site that includes educational materials to facilitate classroom use, and a child-centered page that uses bright colors and cartoon like characters to present historical information in a kid friendly format. Many *American Experience* segments are also available on DVD.

One of the network's newer historical programs is *History Detectives*, first broadcast in 2003. According to the series' web page, "*History Detectives* is devoted to exploring the complexities of historical mysteries, searching out the facts, myths and conundrums that connect local folklore, family legends and interesting objects."⁴ Using historical as well as scientific and investigative methods, the "history detectives" attempt to solve several "puzzles from the past" in each episode. A number of those puzzles are suggested by viewers who submit their queries to the producers via email accessed through the program's web site. That web site includes the familiar educational page where educators can find materials to use with their students to undertake similar quests, as well as a "do it yourself how-to guide" for viewers who want to try their hand at the historical detective work themselves. This program models historical inquiry, of a particular kind, for the audience and suggests something about the difficulty of "knowing" the past. The detectives do not always come up with conclusive answers. This is, of course, a valuable lesson to learn about historical inquiry and our ability to really "know" the past. However, shows such as these on PBS have a comparatively low level of historical capital, due to their relatively small viewership. Despite the network's claims that they reach every segment of American society with their programming, the highest percentage of regular network viewers tend to be more highly educated than the average American. The audience for programs such as these, then, is more likely to already be familiar with the malleable nature of historical knowledge, as they are more likely to have been exposed to this idea through their extended schooling. Those viewers most in need of this lesson, then, are less likely to be a part of the show's audience.

⁴ "About History Detectives," *History Detectives*, <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/about/index.html>.

One of the network's more widely viewed programs, while not strictly historical, has had a significant impact of the popular American historical consciousness. *Antiques Roadshow* has become a familiar and popular program among Americans from all walks of life since its debut nine years ago. On the show "regular folks" bring in their old objects, some of which are cherished heirlooms and others that are nothing more than objects taking up space in the owner's attic. The objects are then appraised by experts in various fields who are able to identify their origin and an estimated worth for the owner. While there are many different items being appraised in the locations where episodes of the program are being filmed, only certain appraisals are recorded and broadcast as part of the series. The instances that are recorded, of course, are those where the object and/or story is most unusual or interesting. Though some inconclusive appraisals are included, the majority of the segments end in what is presented as the certain identification of the object. Many of the objects turn out to be worth far more than the owner anticipated, while others turn out to have far less monetary worth than the sentimental value the owner has for them. And while the program is not billed as historical, it has a definite historical flavor to it due to the antiques that are its focus.

The public interest in the program has resulted in the creation of similar programs on other networks as well as appraisal events similar to those portrayed on the show in locations all over the country. The popularity and influence of this show give it a higher degree of historical capital than some of PBS's designated historical programs. And, as opposed to *History Detectives*, this program points to the certainty of historical knowledge, as the experts identify the historical context of the subject objects, ending the mystery surrounding it for its owner and, consequently, for the audience as well.

Ken Burns, Historian

The programs on PBS that tend to get the most attention, and thereby have the most historical capital, are its special programs. Their “specialness” as well as the increased publicity they receive attracts not only regular PBS viewers but also those who do not number the network among their regular viewing choices. In the past few decades, a number of these special programs, and some of PBS’s most highly rated programs ever, have come from filmmaker Ken Burns. Though not a historian by training, Burns’ work focuses exclusively on historical subject matter. His ever growing notoriety, however, has placed him, and his oft watched films, in the public eye. Like journalist Alex Haley and filmmaker Stephen Spielberg, Burns has become one of the most influential historians in contemporary American culture. His films, and therefore his historical interpretations, provide more historical knowledge to more Americans than any professional historian’s work could hope to do. This, of course, is a great concern to many in the academy who question Burns’ interpretations and the conclusions his films suggest. Regardless of those concerns, however, the impact of Ken Burns on the collective historical understanding in the United States (and elsewhere) today is tremendous.

Burns’ first film was *Brooklyn Bridge*, a sentimental, nostalgic consideration of the New York landmark that is familiar even to those who have never seen it in person themselves. The film was nominated for an Academy Award, and was later rebroadcast on PBS to a much larger audience than its original theatrical release. Throughout the rest of the 1980s, Burns continued to write, produce and direct (often all for the same film) historical documentaries, including treatments of the Shakers, the Congress, the Statue of Liberty and Depression era senator Huey Long. By the end

of the decade, Burn's work was being exclusively presented via PBS stations, an association that continues to this day.⁵

It was in 1990, however, that Burns became a household name, when his *The Civil War* debuted on PBS in September of that year. An eleven hour miniseries that was broadcast in nine episodes over the course of two weeks, the film broke all PBS records for viewership, reaching forty million people with its initial broadcast, and making it PBS's highest rated program, a title it still retains today.⁶ The film won a number of honors, including two Emmy awards, a Peabody Award and the Television Critics Association award.⁷ Its success spawned a number of companion products, including a coffee table style book and an audio version of the same, and later VHS and DVD releases of the series. As a result of its tremendous popularity, *The Civil War* became the first documentary to gross more than \$100 million.⁸ The film is regularly rerun on PBS stations, especially during fund drives when increased viewership is needed, drawing new viewers as well as those who have seen it before.

The film was an enormous undertaking that took six years to create, two years longer than the war itself lasted. Using photographs, letters, diaries and other archival material, Burns and his team created an image of the war using the same techniques that characterize all of his historical films. Images of photographs, letters, and drawings interspersed with shots of objects and landscapes appeared on the screen while a narrator (in this case publicly well-known historian David McCullough) and academic experts provided historical information, and familiar actors gave voice to those who participated in and were effected by the war itself by reading their letters and diary entries, all while period music played in the background. The production team worked with

⁵ For an extended discussion on Burns' work and its impact see Gary R. Edgerton, *Ken Burns's America* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁶ "The Filmmakers: Ken Burns," *Ken Burns on PBS: The Civil War*, <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/filmmakers/>.

⁷ "Awards and Nominations: The Civil War," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098769/>.

⁸ "Biography: Ken Burns," *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0122741/bio>.

experts to interpret the written and visual images left behind from this time and constructed a historical narrative that touched the hearts and minds of countless Americans.⁹ The use of professional historians as commentators, the documentary style and label of the program, and its presentation on PBS all contributed to the sense of accuracy that the program embodied, and therefore the accuracy of the interpretation of the Civil War that it presented.

The reaction to the miniseries *The Civil War* provides a clear example of how divided professional historians and the general public are on the subject of history. The tremendous public response, both in terms of the number of letters Burns received and in the sentiment that was expressed in them, illustrates how affected viewers were by what they saw on the screen. Letter writers spoke of family histories that were brought to life by the series, regional sensitivities that were soothed by the perspectives presented, and racial tensions that were addressed by the content, among other things.¹⁰ Historians, on the other hand, critiqued the series sharply on many professional considerations. An overemphasis on military aspects of the war and a distinct lack of consideration given to the experiences of women and African Americans, for example, were raised as problems with the series. Factual errors and unsubstantiated interpretations were other charges lodged against Burns and the film by historians specializing in the era. Though not all professional historians found fault with the film, the consensus was that, as history, Burns' film was lacking.¹¹ But the viewing audiences were overwhelmingly pleased and moved by it. And the fact that so many Americans viewed and were affected by the program is a matter of concern for many in the

⁹ For Burn's own description of the process the team went through in creating the film see Ken Burns, "Why I decided to make *The Civil War*," *Ken Burns on PBS: The Civil War*, <http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/film/index.html>.

¹⁰ For more on this see David Glassberg, "Watching the Civil War." in *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 87-108.

¹¹ For an extended discussion of this, as well as the words of historians and Burns himself on these issues, see Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

discipline of history because of the misinformation and misinterpretation they feel may be disseminated through it.

Unlike the majority of PBS programming, Ken Burns' films, especially *The Civil War* and, to a lesser degree, his other extended films shown as PBS miniseries that followed it (*Baseball*, *The West*, *Jazz*), have a great deal of historical capital. The number of Americans whose image and understanding of the Civil War, for example, is guided by Burns' film is significant. And whether or not he "got it all right," he presented his interpretation in a way that captured the emotions and imagination of a nation. To be sure, the American intrigue with the Civil War itself magnifies the impact of this particular film on the public in a way that other subjects are not likely to create. But the appeal and success of this film extends credibility and recognition to all of Burns' other work as well.

After the phenomenal success of *The Civil War*, and Burns became a household name, his work took on a notoriety that elevated him to the position of respected historian for the American public, despite his lack of formal training and experience in anything but filmmaking. He continued to write, produce and direct documentaries on a variety of American historical topics, from early radio to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. His subjects included historical figures, cultural institutions and revered national landmarks. He has become a fixture on PBS where all of his films are now originally aired. One example of his more recent work is a profile of founding father Thomas Jefferson, shown in two two-hour episodes on PBS in 1997. In a similar fashion to *The Civil War*, the film is buoyed by a cadre of academic historians, literary professors and well known writers who provide information about Jefferson and his life as well as their interpretation of the man and his actions. There is a narrator who guides the audience through Jefferson's life, and quotes from Jefferson, his family members and his colleagues are read as well in voice over. The narration and quotations are done by well-known actors whose voices are familiar but who are not

identified until the credits roll at the end of the film.¹² Most of the experts, who are seen in clips and identified by name and profession, are unknown names in the public sphere and not popular history figures like Burns himself. The narration and commentary are supplemented by musical tracks of patriotic and period appropriate music, and between filmed clips of the expert commentary, images flash across the screen that are drawn from everything from interior shots of Jefferson's home, Monticello, to old lithographs and portraits of the famous figures and locations that the narration comments upon. The show moves at a slow pace, lingering on images and pausing between scenes. This format is typical of all Burn's productions.

In the film Jefferson is presented as the quintessential American historical figure, an enigma full of contradictions and hard to completely understand. His entire life, from his birth to a modest farmer and his wife in rural Virginia to his death at Monticello on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of his "Declaration of Independence," is chronicled. Though from time to time the various professional historians offer differing interpretations of Jefferson or particular parts of his life, he is presented as a knowable and known entity. His many contributions to American history and American life are noted, often with great admiration, but he is not portrayed as without flaws. His contradictory stances on slavery are discussed, and it is even suggested, based on his own writings, that he not only was conflicted on the issue of slavery but also held distinctly racist views at at least some point in his life. The much discussed issue of whether Jefferson was sexually and romantically involved with his slave Sally Hemmings, and whether or not he was the father of her children, is also addressed, though it is only referenced in one small segment of the film. It is here that perhaps the least consensus of the experts is found, exposing the inconclusive facts that exist on the matter.

¹² Interesting to note- quote from Martha Jefferson, his wife, are read by actress Blythe Danner, who played the role of Jefferson's wife in the movie version of the musical *1776*. Though there is nothing to suggest that Burns chose her to read that part in his film as a result of her role in the music, the coincidence suggests that it might be possible, and make an interesting popular cultural connection.

When this clash of interpretations does come up, however, it is downplayed, and the film is presented in a mostly concrete manner, with little suggestion of the uncertainty of historical research. This is significant, as documentaries not only provide information deemed important on the subject, but also model historical inquiry to an audience who tends to think of history in a much more concrete and absolute manner than those in the academy. It is the closest that televised history ever gets to scholarly history, and if the malleable nature of historical knowledge is not presented through this channel than it is unlikely to be presented at all. That Burns chose to downplay the inconsistency of the historians' commentary is simultaneously expected and disappointing. To successfully "sell" the documentary to the public, a sense of certainty would be needed; however, an opportunity to challenge the public perception of the past as a concrete, unchanging entity was lost.

Showing It As It Really Was

Another example of special programming on PBS that has captured the attention of television viewers is the "Hands-on History" project series. Initially produced for British television, the programs put contemporary people into historical settings and then film their experiences as they attempt to "live in the past." The first in this series was *The 1900 House*, set in England and produced by Britain's Channel 4. Broadcast on PBS in the United States in June 2000, the program profiled the experience of one British family as they lived for three months in Victorian England. Living in a house with no post 1900 amenities, the family lived, dressed, ate and generally existed in as close to a turn of the last century environment as the late 1990s would allow. Their experience was met with mixed response, but both they and the audience were shown an image of the era seldom seen in contemporary depictions of it, especially in film and on television.

The program was successful in both Britain and the United States. Sequels to *The 1900 House* in Britain include *The 1940s House* broadcast in the U.K. in January 2001 (though not aired in the U.S.), 2002's *Manor House* (also known as *The Edwardian Country House*) which expanded the cast to include both the family and their extensive group of servants, and *Regency House Party*, set in the early 1800s and broadcast in 2004 (also in the U.S.). As for American viewers, after enjoying *The 1900 House*, they began to contact PBS about the possibility of creating a similar experiment that would explore American history.¹³ The network responded, and the first American Hands-on History project, *Frontier House*, was filmed in 2001. It was followed by *Colonial House*, which aired in 2004. Currently underway is a third American project. Entitled *Texas Ranch House*, the series will be set in 1867 on, as the title suggests, a remote ranch in Texas. With filming scheduled for the summer of 2005, the series will presumably air in the spring of 2006.

Though it does not appear to be the expectation of the project participants, the producers of these programs have some distinctly anti-nostalgic intentions. Committed to historical accuracy, the period environments that are created for the projects are not sugar-coated in any way. Participants are dressed and provided with resources in a manner appropriate to the time period, and although precautions are taken to protect their safety, as little interference from the modern world as possible is the goal of the series creators. They are trying to create for the participants, and the audience as well, an experience that will allow them to see what things were "really like." This, of course, stands in conflict with the majority of historical interpretations on television which are often blatantly nostalgic, relying on its emotion to capture the audience's attention. And yet, despite great effort and the best of intentions, even these "experiments in time travel" are not able to completely escape nostalgia.

¹³ "The Project: About the Series," *Frontier House*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/project/series.html>.

To be sure, this is close as popular culture gets to debunking the nostalgic view of the past to which we are most susceptible. It is hard to ignore the realities being portrayed on the screen. But even the producers themselves claim to want to explore not only how far we have come but also what we have lost.¹⁴ This claim reflects the perhaps inescapable appeal of a nostalgic conception of the past, at least in some capacity.

These programs are also a reflection of the current cultural obsession with “authenticity” and reality programming. Indeed, the programs are classified as “reality TV” by both industry insiders and PBS itself. And while in many respects these programs have little in common with *The Bachelorette* and *The Apprentice*, there is a survival element to them that could be likened to *Survivor* or *The Amazing Race*, and they most definitely include the element of exploring the dynamics of human interaction that is central to all reality programming. Though their affiliation with PBS and the nature of the shows themselves leave less suspicion of scripting than most other reality programming, there is, of course, the inevitable influence that editing has on any program to consider in looking at the history that is being presented.

Back to the Prairie: *Frontier House*

In April 2002, PBS aired its first American Hands-on History project, *Frontier House*. Seeking to answer the question, “Can three modern families carve a small community of homesteads out of the Montana wilderness?”,¹⁵ the series followed the same basic format as its predecessors, only broadening it out to include more participants. Out of over 5000 applicant

¹⁴ The intentions and opinions of those behind these programs are shared in brief documentaries about the making of the programs (*Frontier House: Behind the Scenes*, *Making Frontier House*, and *Colonial House: Behind the Scenes*) that can be found as supplemental material on the DVD versions of the programs, and that were originally shown as short spots before and after the original broadcasts on PBS.

¹⁵ Opening Dialogue, *Frontier House*, DVD, directed by Nicolas Brown and Maro Chermayeff (2002; PBS Home Video, 2002).

families, three were chosen to live for five months as 1883 homesteaders in the Montana territory. Two of the families included two parents and children, and the third consisted of a father and son team in the opening weeks and then was converted to a newly married couple when the son's fiancé arrived and the father returned home after having helped his son get started in his new home. The filming took place from late spring through early fall of 2001 in a rural area of Montana still largely untouched by modern advances. Just as in the earlier British projects, the intention of the producers of the series was to give these families the opportunity to live under "the same conditions" as nineteenth century pioneers. In order to measure the success of the experiment, the question of whether or not the participants would have been in the position to survive the harsh Montana winter at the close of their time as pioneers was used.

Before settling in their temporary home in the wilderness, the participants went through a two week training period in period villages in Virginia City and Nevada City in Montana with "experts" who taught them the basic skills that they would need to survive. The team of experts included a domestic life historian whose primary job was to educate the women and girls in the group on the domestic skills they would need to care for their families; a historic preservation specialists who, among other things, taught the men to use the tools of the time and the adults how to handle the fire arms they would need to protect themselves and their livestock; and an animal handler who taught the families to ride and care for their horses and milk and handle their milk cows. All manner of lifestyle issues were covered in the training, including personal details, such as the methods of dealing with menstruation and contraception in a historically accurate manner. Participants were also taught how to turn their livestock into food stuffs, including the proper methods for killing and preparing animals for cooking. All of these lessons were filmed and aired as part of the series' opening episode, so that the audience, as well as the participants, was confronted with at least some of the historical realities.

The series included a narrator who provided historical information and context about the experiences the audience was seeing recreated on the screen, and provided transitions between scenes. There was also the occasional commentary by some of the experts who had been involved with the program that offered information about the kind of research that went into creating the project. The choice of the frontier as the first site for an American historical reenactment seems appropriate as it is perhaps the most familiar of all American historical images, both for Americans and those outside the country as well. As the narrator says in the opening segment of the series, “fictionalized, mythologized, often romanticized, now see the real experience of life on the frontier.”¹⁶ True to its anti-nostalgic intentions, the series endeavored to replicate the “harsh realities” of life in the past for its participants, and by extension, for its audience as well.

In recognition of the fact that no two homesteaders came to the frontier for the same reasons and with the same resources, each family was given its own identity profile. Using historical research, the producers tried to create profiles that wove the modern family’s circumstances together with actual experiences of settlers in the nineteenth century. The result of these individual profiles meant that different families started in different places once they arrived at the project’s location. Some families had to build their home from scratch, while others had either a partial or completed homestead to work with.

Some tasks and some resources were common to all the families, however. Each family had to file a claim for their land and sign a document similar to the one used during the time. In this case, the family member who filed the application to participate in the project was the one to file the claim, regardless of sex or marital status. Based on this criteria, in one family it was the wife who filed the claim. This is one of the first instances where there is a historical clash, as only men and single women were able to file land claims according to the Homestead Act. Aside from

¹⁶ Ibid.

this authenticity glitch, however, the experience of the homesteading experience began as it did for the actual nineteenth century pioneers.

Each family was provided “period animals,” horses, milk cows, and dogs, that would be a part of their lives during their tenure on “the frontier.” Difficulties in procuring animals that were historically correct for the project was noted in the opening episode, particularly with the cows which are no longer bred and used as they were in the late nineteenth century. The participants were also supplied with a collection of foodstuffs, such as those that would have been available in that area at the time, and that was supposed to last them five weeks. They were provided with money that they could use to set up and/or build their homesteads and to replace their supplies at the end of the first five weeks in a recreated general store. A selection of medicines of the day was also provided. Finally, each person was supplied with the appropriate clothing for his or her sex and age, from undergarments to outdoor wear. Both dress clothes and work clothes were provided, and the participants also received the appropriate haircuts and styles at the end of their training period. Due to the accepted standards of the historical time and place they were to inhabit, the women and girls in the group were not allowed to have any cosmetics to use, much to the dismay of many of them.

In order to simulate in some small way the arduous journey west that settlers had to make, the project began with a two day wagon train trip to Frontier Valley where the homestead claims lay. As the narrator says, “Nothing captures the epic adventure of America’s pioneers better than the image of wagon trains rolling across the Wild West. It’s a romantic vision that hides a harsh reality.”¹⁷ The actual trip that the participants made bore the statement out, as they encountered difficulties that complicated the trip and even put them in danger. A runaway horse team nearly

¹⁷ Episode Two, *Frontier House*, DVD, directed by Nicolas Brown and Maro Chermayeff (2002; PBS Home Video, 2002).

trampled one of the women and threw one of the children from the wagon it was pulling. A washed out road required a lengthy detour for the people, though the horses and wagons received the aid of twenty-first century conveniences to navigate the difficult passage. The trip prompted one of the participants to comment that it was already “a little more real than I anticipated.”¹⁸

Before they even arrived at their specified location, clashes in beliefs, morals and ethics between contemporary society and that of the 1880s were being noted. Using hand held cameras that they were provided to record their reactions to the experience, the time travelers expressed frustrations and objections to some of the tasks that they were going to have to do and the conditions they were going to have to endure. There were also clashes between participants whose contemporary views and personalities didn't always mesh.

Once the experiment was underway, the participants had varying reactions to it, from enthusiastic anticipation to downright misery. The teenage children of one family were caught smuggling in modern items such as cosmetics and modern shampoo and were forced to admit their deception and bury their contraband. Other members of this same family confessed their doubt that things on the frontier were really as harsh as the conditions to which they were being subjected. They expressed resentment toward the hardships they encountered and repeatedly claimed that things were “not fair.” The other families seemed to enjoy their experience more, though not consistently. Each participant expressed unhappiness and frustration at some point during the project, though when it came time to return to the twenty-first century nearly all of them were sorry to go.

Each family had to work to make their own homestead first viable, and then successful, but there was also an expectation of community that existed for the project. Efforts were made early on to help one another with the building of houses and adjusting to their new old lifestyles, but

¹⁸ Ibid.

strained interactions quickly lead to resentments that interfered with the continued level of community initially expressed. The participants received some initial help from the experts with difficult and dangerous tasks to help insure their safety, but soon they were left to their own devices. Food rationing became a problem for one family in particular, though it was a reality that all had to deal with. In another clash between centuries, modern day laws prevented the hunting that would have supplemented the purchased food that settlers would have had. Without this option at their disposal, in this way the participants of the project were actually more disadvantaged than their nineteenth century counterparts. In yet another historical anomaly, a local Crow Indian provided the family with a deer he had killed due to the less restrictive tribal laws he was able to take advantage of. Though he was conflicted about his gesture due to the atrocities inflicted on his ancestors by the homesteaders of the area, he took advantage of his contact with the project's participants to share some of the local Native American history. This is the one and only time that Native Americans are represented, or even mentioned, during the course of the series.

As the project continued there was a regularly expressed appreciation for the realities of the present from all of the participants. For one woman, health concerns prompted her contact with a contemporary doctor to diagnose her ailment. However, the subsequent bill she received, converted into 1883 funds and in need of payment from the family's limited savings, caused her to regret her decision to call upon the physician, and prompted commentary on the similarity between her own situation and that of many contemporary Americans who fail to seek medical assistance due to high costs.

Over the course of the project, the participants engaged in a variety of activities appropriate to the time. There were trips to the general store and post office that had been created for the project, modeled after an actual nineteenth century store in the area owned by a Chinese immigrant (and played for the program by a member of the local Chinese historical society), and

the necessary trading and bartering amongst themselves and with the store owner. There was a nineteenth century style wedding that occurred when the fiancé of one participant arrived to join the remainder of the project. The families had to survive a freak June snow storm and protect their land against a potentially destructive cattle drive undertaken by a local (modern day) rancher. Each family had to decide on and then implement a plan to survive and prosper once their homesteads were completed. Most relied on some combination of farming and animal rearing, though one family turned to the illegal production of moonshine as part of their livelihood. The families came together to establish a private school for their children, because any public school they could have utilized would not have allowed the children of the one interracial couple in the community to attend, and their twenty-first century sensibilities would not allow for this perceived injustice.

In addition to the isolation and loneliness that the participants felt, they also endured physical changes that caused concern for some who felt their health was failing as a result of their experience. This fear caused one family, the same one whose teenagers smuggled in the modern contraband early in the project, to break the rules and trade with local, modern day neighbors for food that they themselves did not have access to. During this visit the children took the opportunity to watch television and enjoy some of the comforts of twenty-first century life as well. When word of this got back to the other participants, there was resentment and anger, further straining the sense of community. Tensions were not limited to neighbor relations, however, as another family found itself on the verge of divorce, partly as a result of the difficulties they were enduring.

As the project neared an end, the families focused on their goal of demonstrating their ability to survive the impending winter to the experts who would visit at the end of their time on the frontier. The competition between some members of the families that had always been simmering below the surface throughout the series became more blatant. A harvest fair was

planned by the group as a community, despite the tensions that existed among them, where they were able to release some of their competitiveness through the contests and games that were planned.

At the end of the project, after the experts had made their determinations, the families returned to their twenty-first century lives, all of them affected by their experience to one degree or another. Though most reentered their lives as they had left them, they did so with a professed increase in appreciation for what they have, as well as an understanding of what has been lost as a culture over time. They received their evaluations on their winter preparedness with varying degrees of acceptance. Though great admiration for what the participants were able to accomplish during their time in Montana was expressed by the experts, the ability of the families to survive the winter was in doubt in all three cases. Two of the families were given a chance of survival, while the third was not expected to survive at all. Regardless of these determinations, however, everyone involved seemed convinced that the project itself had been a success.

Exploring the Roots of the Nation: *Colonial House*

Following the success of *Frontier House*, PBS launched another “living history experiment” entitled *Colonial House*. Following the same basic premise as all the previous “House” projects, this latest installment was to be set in 1628 New England. Instead of looking specifically for families this time, the network put out a call for applicants in general, encouraging both individuals and family groups to apply. There was a stated interest in recruiting participants from a variety of backgrounds. Over 10,000 applications were received, and from those seventeen were chosen for an original group (with a number of other participants who were selected to join the project later on), including two family groups with children, one couple, five single men and two single women. The participants included not only Americans but British citizens as well. Despite the call for

increased diversity in the casting, all but three of the participants were white. Two of the others, one single man and one single woman, were African-American, and the third was a single Asian-American man, though their race did not seem to influence their status in the community once identities were assigned.

Though it is not incorporated in the opening episode of *Colonial House* as it was in *Frontier House*, the participants did undergo a similar two week training period before filming began, conducted at the living history museum Plimouth Plantation.¹⁹ There the participants learned skills they would need to survive in their new old environment, including construction techniques and food preparation. They were also taught about first aid techniques and traditional forms of entertainment for the period. They were fitted for their costumes as well, though they did so while blindfolded so that their clothing would not reveal anything about the identities they would adopt once they arrived at the colony.

Located in Machias, Maine, in a remote area of the state that was separated from developed land, filming took place over the summer and fall of 2003 and the series was broadcast over two weeks in May 2004. Before arriving at the primarily completed village that was to become their home, however, the participants endured an ocean voyage on a replica tall ship where they began to get a sense of “what life was really like” for colonists. Nearing the Maine coast, the ship was docked and the participants, first the men and then the women and children, used row boats to reach their final destination. Before disembarking however, identities were assigned. Unlike the “characters” in *Frontier House*, these participants arrived and existed as a group, a group of largely unrelated strangers, who would have to function as a community in order to survive and meet their goals. This was meant to simulate the actual conditions under which most real colonists arrived. As such,

¹⁹ Some footage of this is shown in the short documentary *Behind the Scenes: Colonial House* that is included as supplemental material of the DVD version of the program and that was broadcast during the original airing on PBS in May 2004.

there was a hierarchy that had to be established, and the assignment of identities reflected that need. First, a governor for the colony was assigned. He and his family would inhabit the most privileged position in the community. That designation having been made, the governor proceeded to name the other positions and the people who would assume them, as determined by the project's producers. There was a lay minister who also acted as "second in command," three indentured servants, two to the governor's family and one to the lay minister and his wife, four free men (one with his family in tow) and one free woman. The indentured servants were required to sign contracts as they would have during the depicted era.

Once they had arrived at the specified location, they found four mostly completed cottages, of various types and levels of "amenities," and houses were assigned on the basis of status within the community, the governor's family occupying the most comfortable house and so on. The three free men were housed together in the least developed house, and the one single woman boarded with the free man who lived with his family in their own home. Though she was a share holder in the community just as each of the free men were, she was not in control of her shares due to her sex and marital status, and was forced to board with the family so that she could be "looked after" by a man of the community. This was the first suggestion of the highly stratified gender roles for the community, an issue that would prove to be very difficult for the female participants to adjust to and accept.

In addition to the houses the participants were also provided with communal supplies, including livestock (chickens, goats (which provided milk for the group), pigs and dogs), farming implements, and foodstuffs, consisting of dried and preserved food and alcoholic drinks, meant to last them for several months. The goal of the group was not only to survive under the appropriately primitive living conditions but also to plant and harvest a successful crop and secure furs and other desired items to send back to England to pay off the debts to the community's

investors. The governor decided that the community would raise a corn crop, so in addition to adjusting to their new living situation, the group also needed to secure the necessary seed corn to start planting.

Enter the local Native American tribe, the Passamaquady. In actuality, the land that was used to film *Colonial House* was owned by the local tribe, and on several occasions members of that tribe played the parts of their ancestors to interact with the show's participants, sometimes in a friendly manner and sometimes in a more tense environment. Their first encounter is peaceful, and the two groups are able to establish a trade agreement which allows the colonists to acquire the seed corn they are in need of. Once the business transaction has been concluded, the participants spend the evening with their Native American neighbors where they learn more about the oft neglected subject of Native American history at this time. For one of the participants who is of partially Native American descent, the experience is uncomfortable. A similar reaction is felt by both the African-American participants at different points in the experiment as well.

The roles of servant and master and other aspects of the hierarchical social structure that existed within the community are something that required varying degrees of adjustment for the participants. Certainly those in the more subservient roles had the most difficult time adjusting, but the foreign environment took its toll on each individual in one way or another. In addition to the social hierarchy, the community is a male dominated society, a reality that is difficult for the twenty-first century women who inhabited it. A regular meeting of all of the free men is established to keep order in the colony, but the voices of women, children and servants went unheard for the most part. And, of course, the physical demands of such a project also took their toll on the participants, many of whom became sick very early on.

The twentieth century came crashing into the project early on when the eldest son and the fiancé of the oldest daughter of the governor's family were in a car accident back at home. The

fiancé was killed and the brother seriously injured. As a result, the family left immediately, and the colony lost nearly a third of its members and were left without their leader. The lay preacher and assistant governor stepped up to assume leadership, but was not able to inspire the discipline or work ethic necessary for progress to be made toward the project goal. Without the motivation that the actual colonists would have had, the order in the community broke down and little was accomplished. A short while after leaving the project, the governor himself returned, without his family, to resume his position. Inspired further by the recent tragedy his family had suffered, he was committed to making a success of the project. He consulted with his council of free men and resolved to strictly enforce laws as they existed in the seventeenth century. These laws included a ban on profanity and mandatory standards of public dress, among other strict social and moral codes. He announced the enforcement of these laws and the subsequent punishment that would result should they be broken. Those who broke the laws were punished by wearing a scarlet letter that announced their crime to the community. Continued offenses resulted in time spent in the stocks. These punishments did not prove to be much of a deterrent, however, as continued disregard for the laws occurred. Eventually, in frustration, the governor gave up on enforcing the laws entirely.

When the rest of the governor's family returned to the colony, eight more participants came with them, including another family and several more single men and women. This resulted in a housing shortage and put an added strain on the food supply, but the community found room for the newcomers until a new house could be constructed. The added participants were welcomed as additional members of the community and of the work force.

Changes in the makeup of the community and the relationships between its members continued throughout the course of the project. Midway through the project, one of the participants took it upon himself to leave the colony for a few days, to do some exploring as 1628

freemen seemed likely to do. On his journey, he crossed the boundaries of the project and found himself moving about the twenty-first century world. When he returned to the colony, he was welcomed back by all but the governor who was personally offended by his actions because this participant had promised to stay within the confines of the colony property. He was not punished, however, and was allowed to resume his place in the colony. This was the only instance in this project where the outside modern world infiltrated the project. Unlike *Frontier House*, the participants were isolated enough that they generally were not tempted to stray from their historical setting. Even the one participant who did encounter it did not intend to do so. However, when he unexpectedly came across it, he was unable to resist its appeal.

The only free woman in the colony left the project shortly after this. It was prescribed by the identity she had been assigned that she do this, as return to England, especially for a single woman without wealth or prospect of marriage, was common among those who made the journey to the new world. Her departure was mourned by the group, but had the benefit of freeing up space in the overgrown community until a house for the new family that had arrived could be built.

In an unusual and emotional segment of the series, one of the indentured servants came out as gay to the community as part of a testimonial portion on a Sunday service. Though homosexuality was punishable by death in 1628, the participant was not punished. The other participants were largely accepting of his announcement, though not without exception. The belief systems of their twenty-first century lives seemed to dictate the responses of individual community members.

As the project progressed, the governor did not seem to be succeeding as a leader. In addition to his inability to enforce seventeenth century law, the food supply was spoiling, the crops were left unattended as he directed the entire work force to devote their attention to building the new house that was needed, and he was unable to successfully establish crucial trade relationships

with the local Native American tribe. As things became more strained and the work force appeared inadequate to handle the work necessary for the community to remain viable, reminders of the eventual use of slavery came to mind. This proved enormously uncomfortable for the one African American man in the community, so much so that he was unable to continue with the project and voluntarily removed himself from the community. His loss was keenly felt, but his reasons for leaving were acknowledged and respected by all members of the community.

A second family emergency resulted in the permanent departure of the governor and his family later in the project. He was replaced by the assistant governor, an appointment that was not met with universal approval. Shortly after this change in the power structure, however, a Cape Merchant was sent by the investing company to assess and oversee the colony. His arrival was initially resented by many, but he proved to be an asset to the community and that resentment soon faded. One of the things he was able to help accomplish was reestablishing trade with the local Indian tribes, a crucial relationship needed by the colonists in order to pay their debts.

As the project neared its close, the community worked toward proving its viability to the team of experts that would soon be arriving to judge them. They harvested a modest corn crop and worked together to dry it for storage and trade. They also worked to make improvements in the community so that its appearance would be favorable. Once the corn crop was harvested, the governor suggested using some of their remaining time to engage in more creative pursuits, something that hadn't been possible up until that time. A map of the area was created by one participant, while another was commissioned to sketch a portrait of the governor. A poster contest was announced to encourage the design of posters that could be used to recruit new colonists for the growing community. An informal school was established where the governor, a college professor in his twenty-first century life, taught interested participants ancient Greek. The practicality of such endeavors while more basic tasks needed attention was questioned by some, but

the creative endeavors continued nonetheless. Finally a site for a community church was staked out, though there was not time to begin construction.

Shortly before the end of the project the community received a visit from a tribe of Wampanoag Indians. The tribe, who traveled from Massachusetts to experience a 1628 experience of their own, first visited the colony while the community was engaged in church services. They investigated the site, and one of the braves stole a chicken from the coop. When he returned to his tribe, he was chastised for his action and had to apologize to the tribal elders. Once the colonists became aware of the tribe's existence, they made several attempts to contact them and invite them to the village, but the Indians remained distanced for sometime. Angry about the treatment of their ancestors by white settlers for centuries, the tribe wanted to make sure that they were prepared and in control of the situation before they visited. Eventually they did come to the colony, and there was some interaction but it remained strained. The Wampanoag were very blunt with the colonists, telling the story of their history. The colonists were greatly affected by what they heard, and while some initially resisted the truth of the words, the impact of the words was eventually felt by all.

At the close of the project, the community prepared a feast for visitors who had been involved in the project, including the experts who would judge the community's viability. The feast was a success, and everyone involved celebrated the achievements of the project. When the verdict had been rendered on the success of the community, they were found viable, despite some significant misgivings about their preparedness. As the program concluded, the audience saw the participants being bused to a hotel where they were finally able to take advantage of modern conveniences to make themselves feel clean for the first time in a long time.

Two elements that are central to the action in *Colonial House*, that were essentially missing in *Frontier House*, though they could have, and probably should have, been included, are religion and

interaction with Native Americans. In 1628, church attendance was mandated by law. Failure to attend was punishable as a crime. As such, the participants were required to attend Sunday services, regardless of their personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof. Among the participants there was a wide variance of religious beliefs, from that of a Baptist minister to a family whose views would best be labeled atheistic. Though efforts were made by all to abide by the law, despite reservations about what the experience would be like, as the project continued this became more and more of a controversial issue. When one family took it upon themselves to skip one Sunday meeting, consequences were duly enforced. In addition to the mark of the scarlet letter made for all law breakers, a loss of freedom was inflicted on the dissenters by tying their legs to a post and forcing them to sit in exile for a designated period of time. The punishments did not work, however, and absence from church spread within the community, to the point where so many were being punished that the work force was depleted. As a result of his inability to enforce the church attendance law, the governor suspended the law. This decision was met with mixed response.

The Native American neighbors to the colony were regular visitors and a body that had to constantly be considered and dealt with. Not only were they crucial trade partners for the community, but there was a precarious relationship that had to be nurtured in order to maintain peaceful coexistence. Their physical proximity to the colony made a congenial relationship that much more essential. The ongoing interaction provided stark yet valuable lessons in Native American history and the Indians made a point of sharing their history with the participants of the project, and, by extension, the audience.

The powerlessness of women in the seventeenth century was something that the female participants in the project found very difficult to endure, just as the *Frontier House* women had experienced, only more so. Indeed, they continually acted outside the social norms of the time. When the departure of the governor's family taxed the functionality of the community, for

example, they banded together to come up with a cooking schedule in order to allow each woman days off from the task. This, of course, would have been unheard of in 1628, but these women justified their actions as necessary to the survival of the community. Similarly inappropriate actions by the women of the colony continued throughout the duration of the project.

The Effects of Hands-On History

Though the intention to “debunk” historical myths and misconceptions that is behind the Hands-on History projects is admirable, limitations prevent them from wholly achieving their stated goals. As the programs themselves clearly demonstrate, it is simply not possible for a group of contemporary people to leave the twenty-first century behind. For some participants that inability to escape the present extended all the way to smuggling modern products into the project site, but for all of the participants, and for the producers and “experts” behind the projects as well, leaving behind the attitudes and expectations that life in the twenty-first century has led them to develop was impossible. And if those who were intimately involved in the projects were not able to get beyond their contemporary mindsets, then the audience, passive observers of the time travel experiments, certainly could not.

This should not be surprising, of course. We are a product of our social environment just as those who came before us were a product of theirs. It is also not surprising to note that the “reality show” nature of these programs interfered with their pure historical intentions. Just as in every program that falls into this new television genre, the human interaction and character flaws of the participants become a focal point of the presentation. Though the usual competition and financial incentives of reality shows was not built in to the framework of these projects, there was enough organic rivalry in the communities to bring at least part of that element to the final result. Personality conflicts, inevitable when a group of strangers is thrown together, especially under

trying circumstances, also became a central part of the storytelling in the series. This was especially true in *Colonial House* due to the highly communal nature of the experiment. The highly stratified backgrounds and opinions of that particular group of people even leaves the audience to wonder if the volatile mix of personalities was created intentionally by the producers, just as other reality show producers are often accused of doing.

Though the projects appear to be generally successful as time travel experiments, there are certain ways in which they are unable to succeed. As both American projects demonstrated, it is impossible to recreate in the modern participants the inherent motivation and sense of desperation of the actual settlers, or colonists, for whom the experience was life or death. Though participants in each project expressed an abstract recognition of this fact, it did not significantly change their approach to the experience, or encourage them to attempt to think like those whose parts they were taking would have thought. And without this crucial element, the simulation can only go so far.

The insistence of the creators and producers of these programs on framing the experiments in such a way that they are looking to show “not only what we have gained but also what we have lost” insures that the anti-nostalgic intentions of the program will not be fully realized. The inherent comparison between then and now that this premise sets up makes some degree of nostalgia inevitable, especially when it is assumed that some loss has occurred. Of course, this attitude and assumption are very much in keeping with the public’s view of history as something that is valuable only in its ability to comment on the present. By working from this premise these projects reinforce that belief rather than question it.

The nostalgia that is created in these American projects is false nostalgia. The periods that are being “reexperienced” are well outside the personal memories of the audience, meaning our knowledge and conceptions of the period are drawn entirely from books and filmed interpretations.

This is also true, then, for the participants, whose entrance into the projects is generally based on many misconceptions. Regardless of their experiences, however, at least a portion of the idealized image of the era that they brought with them seems to remain intact. And, as it is for the participants, so it is for the audience. This nostalgia maintained in the face of hardship has an enormous power to it. If it can survive such a treatment, then there must be something to it.

Despite all of these shortcomings, however, these Hands-on History projects make a unique and important contribution to the body of history on television. Their drive for historical accuracy is unprecedented in televisual historical interpretation, and there has never been anything like this particular kind of interpretation on television before. Indeed, the very inclination to produce such a show indicates an interest in truly understanding the past for what it was. And though their status as PBS programming does, perhaps, limit their audience, the novelty of these programs seems to have gained the attention of the viewing public, resulting in a larger audience for these programs than most other PBS shows.

A Different Kind of Popular History?

The concerted effort of PBS to bring historical content to television audiences is clear. Indeed, some of its most popular and most celebrated programs in recent years have been historical programs. The regular use of professional historians as both behind the scenes and on air contributors to these programs also shows a strong commitment to “getting it right” seldom found in the creation of historical programming on TV. And unique styles of historical presentation, such as the living history experiments that are the Hands-on History programs, also have an important impact on the larger body of work, capturing the audience’s attention in unfamiliar and therefore influential ways, and at least hinting at the malleable nature of historical inquiry.

Still, the smaller audiences drawn to PBS programming, due to its reputation as educational in nature, does limit the impact that shows such as these have on the larger public and its collective memory. Still, as some of the most watched programming on the network, their influence is not without effect. The historical capital generated here, especially via Ken Burns and the Hands-on History programs, is high. Ironically, the same reputation for educational programming that limits PBS viewership also endows its programs with an enhanced sense of authenticity and trustworthiness. Well made and often unusual in their approach, these programs make an impact and remain in the historical memory of both the individual and the culture as a whole.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Beyond the Narrative: A Survey of Other Sources of Televisual History

Aside from the historically based series and special programming like miniseries and made for television movies that air on regular network and cable stations, history comes across the small screen by way of other television genres and the many specialty networks that are now available through satellite and cable broadcasting. Though it is through the narrative programming found on television series that television makes its greatest impact on the popular American historical consciousness, in order to understand the larger impact of television on historical conceptions it is necessary to consider these other venues as well.

History on the News

One such venue is the news. Nightly news broadcasts routinely incorporate historical segments for human interest and/or context for current stories and trends. And since the advent of specialized, 24-hour news stations in the 1980s there have been many more opportunities, and many more programming hours, to incorporate this kind of material. National holidays and other national events such as the inauguration or death of a president, or the commemoration of national monuments, often generate additional historical programming, to remind older Americans of the history they themselves experienced and to educate younger Americans who did not.

For example, November 2003 marked the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the occasion certainly did not escape the attention of the media and, therefore, the public. Each of the major networks offered at least one special program, usually hosted by top news anchor people and shown during prime time the week preceding the actual anniversary date. Some cable networks, such as CNN and The History Channel, also covered the event, and still others acknowledged the anniversary by rerunning documentary and biography programs about the president and his famous relatives or one of the many television movie and miniseries interpretations of the Kennedy family.

Both CNN and the NBC all-news affiliate, MSNBC, devoted almost an entire days worth of programming to the event on the actual anniversary date of Kennedy's death. Presenting a combination of old and new programming and showing several of these programs numerous times, the anniversary was treated as a news event, relegating the actual news of the day to brief update sequences that were interspersed into the Kennedy focused day.

Of particular note was an MSNBC show that consisted of nothing but interviews with famous people recalling their exact location and their reaction when they first heard of the shooting of the president and his subsequent death. In this program, and in the promotional spots for the program that were part of every other NBC affiliated news program in the days and weeks preceding the airing of the show, the interviewees and the hosts recalled with great emotion their shock and dismay at the loss of the president and the violent circumstances that surrounded his death. Many also shared their memories of their near constant attention to the television and the coverage of the arrest and later assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald, the arrest of Jack Ruby and the coverage of the funeral in the days that followed the assassination. They expressed the depth of their grief and their sympathy for the young family of the president, and their own feelings of loss for a man they felt they knew.

That this program was produced and presented by a news organization and shown alongside documentary programs and live coverage of anniversary events being held on that day in Dallas, Texas where the assassination occurred, is highly significant. The program and the context in which it was presented elevated personal memory to factual historical anecdote, making the remembrances of people who were familiar to the audience by way of their celebrity, but still unrelated to the actual events surrounding the occasion that was being commemorated, the basis for a factual representation of historical events, both for those who lived through them and those who have only heard about them. In situations such as these history and memory are conflated, and one becomes indistinguishable from the other

And yet this program drew upon a common bond that any American old enough to remember November 1963 is a part of: the “Where were you when Kennedy was shot?” connection. Generations of Americans can name the exact place they were and recall the exact moment they heard the news of the president’s fate, and will share with tearful eyes the details of those memories. It is a moment for most people who can recall it where History, with a capital H, and their own lives connected. The use of this connection that exists, both among people and with history, by NBC News is reflective of our cultural relationship to our past and symbolic of the conflicted nature of that relationship. We prefer our history personalized and emotional, and yet by including those dimensions in our consideration of the past we inevitably remember it wrong.

The presentation of such material under the guise of news programming lends an air of authenticity and trustworthiness to the presentations. Most Americans, after all, receive their knowledge of what is happening in the world around them from television news, and it is generally accepted at face value. Hearing historical news from trusted anchor people, and seeing it presented in familiar news-like formats reinforces the factual, authentic nature of the information being

presented. This gives these kinds of programs a high degree of historical capital. Because it is received in the same manner as current news, it takes on the same sort of verifiable nature.

History Through the Networks

In addition to its regular appearance on news broadcasts, historical programming of the non-narrative variety has long been associated with channels known as “educational.” The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) channels were the first to be recognized in this way, but with the advent of cable, other specialty networks were launched that developed this same kind of reputation.¹ Early entries into the growing cable market included The Discovery Channel. Providing a mixture of historical, scientific and adventure programming since its debut in the summer of 1985, this “educational” channel has relied primarily on documentaries for its broadcasting schedule. Never one of the most popular networks, it has acquired a loyal enough following to maintain its place on the cable line-up, reaching over 80% of U.S. household by 2003, and expanding into a collection of specialized subsidiary networks.² An even older network, The Learning Channel (TLC), was also developed on the foundation of documentary programs addressing a variety of “educational” subjects. In existence since 1972, the network was originally founded by the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare and NASA as an instructional channel and was broadcast via satellite before the more familiar cable networks were functional. It became privately owned in 1980, and when acquired by The Discovery Channel in 1991, was able to greatly expand its reach, being available in nearly 80% of U.S. homes by 2003.³ Though not specifically devoted to historical material, as TLC’s subscriber base grew, so did the number of historical programs it broadcast.

¹ For more on PBS and its historical programming, see chapter 7.

² Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, 8th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 310-12.

³ *Ibid.*, 672.

The reputation of such channels as primarily educational in nature, and the high percentage of documentary programming broadcast there give these kinds of channels a great deal of authority and clout. However, their lack of popularity among viewers, especially compared to other networks broadcasting occasional documentary style programming, limit the amount of historical capital these networks and their programs have. For those who tune into these networks, the impact of these programs is likely to be high. But as contributors to the larger collective historical understanding, they carry little clout.

The most successful of the cable “educational” channels has been the Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E). First broadcast in early 1984 and available in 80% of U.S. homes by 2003, the network developed as a result of a merger of two other, failed, networks, ARTS and The Entertainment Channel. Originally known for its “cultural programming,” the network’s schedule has always included a sizeable percentage of documentary programming. Another A&E mainstay in its early years was British programming, much of it drawn from the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).⁴ This added to its reputation in the United States as a source of cultural programming. As the network developed, however, it became more and more dependent on its own, original programs, which included both documentary offerings and narrative programs in the form of both movies and series. Like many cable networks, A&E also made use of series reruns from regular network television to round out its schedule. Historical programming was well represented on this channel from its earliest days, both in its documentary presentations, with shows such as *Civil War Journal* and *The Real West*, and in its narrative programs, such as *Sherlock Holmes’ Mysteries*, which often have historical themes and settings. The most popular program for the network, however, has been its *Biography*, a documentary program that probes the lives of public figures, from ancient British monarchs to the most contemporary pop music artists. A

⁴ Ibid., 70.

revived version of a series originally broadcast in the 1960s, *Biography* quickly grew from a weekly program to a daily offering, and was eventually the basis for an entirely new network, The Biography Channel, which debuted in 1998.⁵ It also became the catalyst for an explosion of like minded programs on other cable and regular network channels. Hosted by well-known news anchors and actors, the program took on an air of authority that made it a trusted source of information, historical and contemporary, for its audience. In recent years *Biography* has expanded its offerings to include profiles of particular years in history and cultural phenomena like popular television series. The mix of topics that *Biography* presents, coupled with its reputation as a reputable source of information, offers an interesting commentary on history as it may juxtapose a profile of a revered historical figure like Thomas Jefferson and one of a cult TV favorite like *The Brady Bunch*. The differentiation between the vast subject matter and the way the information in any given episode is presented is left up to the viewer, allowing for a variety of responses. Episodes, made available in VHS and DVD format, have become acceptable classroom materials and a chief source of biographical information, not only for popular contemporary artists and leaders, but for revered historical figure as well.

A&E's reputation as a reputable purveyor of historical information was further solidified when it launched a subsidiary channel devoted specifically to historical content in 1995. The History Channel, available in nearly 80% of U.S. homes by 2003,⁶ is built primarily on historical documentary, most focusing on traditional and serious subjects such as warfare and presidential profiles, but some addressing less traditional and less serious topics such as an installment of the *American Eats* series entitled "History on a Bun," and devoted to the history of fast-food favorites such as the Big Mac and White Castle "sliders." The majority of the network's programs address

⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁶ Ibid., 536.

familiar classroom history subjects such as military engagements and the history of the American West, but less school-like subjects are also included, such as a historical consideration of UFO sightings or a consideration of the American muscle car tradition. Also included on this network's line-up are movies and miniseries with historical themes, often broadcast as part of the recurring *Movies in Time* series and hosted by well-known television news personalities. These movies are supplemented by expert commentary, where the host discusses the way the historical material is handled with authors and professors who are knowledgeable about the film's subject. Authors and academics are central to much of The History Channel's programming, providing both behind the scenes research and on screen commentary for the network's original programs. The success of the original network resulted in the creation of several affiliated networks, one devoted to international history (allowing the original channel to focus more specifically on American historical subjects, a tendency of the network from the beginning, but raised by critics as a limiting characteristic), and another specializing in military history, though much of the programming on the other networks is military in nature as well. There is also a Spanish language version of the network available.

In addition to the programming available on The History Channel itself, a History Channel Club is also offered. Membership in the club includes a bi-monthly magazine that includes articles and photographs covering a variety of historical subjects, as well as opportunities to participate in trips to "historic destinations," and discounts on genealogical products and historical books and DVDs. The network also maintains its own web site, common among both cable and regular networks since the explosion of internet offerings and increased access to online services. Accessible through the online address www.history.com, the site offers the usual scheduling and program information, but also offers time lines and "This Day in History" summaries that provide additional historical information. A "Classroom" link on the site's main page takes users to a gateway to online tutorials and resources designed for teachers and history buffs that take on a

textbook-like approach to popular historical topics, such as the Civil War and Ellis Island, as well as seasonal topics like the historical roots of American holidays and traditions. The web site is rounded out with an online store (also quite common for television stations in the internet age) where viewers can buy VHS and DVD recordings of The History Channel's programs, and accompanying books, as well as other history books. By providing this highly complete treatment of history, from television to publishing to the internet to the marketplace, The History Channel has solidified its position as *the* media source for historical information. Though clearly not the only source of historical documentary on television today, its very name, to say nothing of its web address, commands consideration as an historical source, particularly for those outside the academy. Its mix of historical subjects, while far from complete, provides an admirable coverage of history, at least in the selected areas it addresses. The growing availability of the channel, its devotion solely to historical programming, and its use of "experts" in the development of its programs all give this network a high degree of historical capital. It is important to note, however, that the reputation the network has gained, due primarily to its documentary program, extends to it less factual programming as well, including the *Movies in Time* offerings, which were generally created without the same regard for historical evidence that documentaries generally rely on.⁷

In addition to these documentary based networks, however, there are also a number of other networks, found primarily on cable systems, which highlight historical programming as at least part of their regular schedule. From "classic" movies to favorite series reruns, these networks keep the mediated histories of the past alive on television screens for those who remember seeing them before and for those who are viewing them for the first time. Some of these networks also

⁷ For a scholarly consideration of The History Channel's earlier programming, see Brian Taves, "The History Channel and the Challenge of Historical Programming," in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, 261-81 (Louisville: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

offer original programming to either complement or elucidate the older material for contemporary audiences.

As discussed earlier, movies originally produced for the screen have found a regular home on television since its earliest broadcasting days. The arrival of cable networks increased opportunities to screen films of various ages, and entire networks, many of them requiring the payment of additional fees for access, were created to provide new movie viewing options for television audiences. In addition to the many pay-cable movie channels that offered recently released movies for home viewing, other regular cable channels were developed that offered “classic” movie fare. One of the first of these was American Movie Classics (AMC), which debuted in the fall of 1984. In its early years, AMC broadcast a collection of “second string” movies and short subjects from the 1930s through the 1970s. It was a commercial free network, and supplemented the films that were its main offering with the occasional interview spot, quiz show or documentary. It was well received by audiences and by 2003 was available in approximately 79% of U.S. households.⁸ The network even tried its hand at two original series set against the backdrop of the entertainment industries of the 1930s and 1940s.⁹ These series were met with only moderate to weak reception, however, and the network did not attempt to mount any other series. By the early 2000s, however, AMC had shifted its focus somewhat. Its movie fare was drawn primarily from more recent years, from approximately 1970 through the 1990s. No longer commercial free, the channel now supplements its films with interview shows as well as the occasional documentary.

American Movie Classics’ change in focus may well have been in response to the advent of other movie channels dedicated to broadcasting “old” movies. Turner Classic Movies (TCM),

⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁹ See Chapter Three for more on these series.

developed by cable tycoon Ted Turner, was first broadcast in the spring of 1994 as a commercial free venue for showing both well-known and more obscure films from the 1930s through the 1960s. Turner had acquired a substantial library of “classic” films and much of the network’s fare was drawn from this collection.¹⁰ In addition to these films, the network also broadcast short subjects and its own documentary and interview/trivia spots. Many of its film offerings were “hosted” with before and after commentary on the movies and/or its stars that put the movies in some sort of cultural, though usually not historical, context. In addition to the standard classic Hollywood fare that the network was based on, TCM also offers the occasional silent film as well as foreign language films from its target time period.

Later that same year (1994), Fox Movie Classics (FMC) also debuted. Not solely devoted to the “classics,” FMC broadcasted primarily from the 20th Century Fox film library and offered a variety of movies, from the “old” to the “new,” as well as short subjects and clips from Fox’s Movietone newsreels.¹¹ Though neither of these channels has attained the reach that AMC has (60% and 23% of U.S. homes respectively), their continued presence on cable systems speaks to the interest that the public has for the material these channels provide. In addition to these “niche channels” which highlighted the film “classics,” older films have also found their way onto the schedules of some of the pay-movie channels that specialize in newer releases as well. Like television reruns that have been a part of television broadcasts since the medium’s earliest years, these movies have become historical documents, offering today’s viewers a glimpse into the lifestyles and attitudes of earlier generations.

There is also an element of nostalgia, both false and true, involved in the public interest in such networks, as evidenced by the continued success of AMC even after it shifted its focus to more

¹⁰ Brooks and Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time*, 1235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 430.

contemporary film fare. Though still representative of the years in which they were produced, the more recent “classics” that can be found on AMC, and to a certain extent FMC as well, draw viewers who remember their first encounter with the movies as new theater releases and tune in to relive their past, not to experience a piece of history. Still, the consumption of the past that takes place, whether it is a personally remembered past or not, still becomes a part of the viewer’s historical understanding.

Just as whole networks were created to accommodate the broadcast of “old” movies, the ever growing collection of television programming from the past has also been used to sustain, or at least bolster, new cable networks. It has become commonplace for even the most specialized of networks to include television series reruns as a part of their daily schedules, filling many daytime hours if not the more lucrative prime time programming. Though the time gap between a series’ original air dates and its run in syndication has dwindled to almost nothing, television series from all segments of television history have found new homes and new audiences on new cable networks. For most of these networks, reruns make up a relatively insignificant portion of their overall programming. Other networks, however, have made reruns a central part of not only their programming schedule but also their image or their “niche.” One example of this is The Hallmark Channel, available in nearly half of U.S. homes by 2003. Widely known for their greeting cards with sensitive and inspirational messages, the Hallmark Corporation has been associated with television for decades through its acclaimed *Hallmark Hall of Fame* movies. It has also been involved in the production of other movie and miniseries projects that aired on regular network television. In 2001, it launched a network in its own name, having acquired that same network, along with the Jim Henson Company, in 1998. Originally a religious channel, known as Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN), airing discussion based programs and documentaries on spiritual subjects, it had shifted its focus in 1996 when it became known as the Odyssey Channel and began to include rerun

programs that promoted “family values” such as the contemporary *Our House* and historical programs like *Father Murphy* and *Brooklyn Bridge*.¹² With Hallmark’s acquisition, the network moved further away from its religious origins, expanding on the family value focus. Its current programming consists of a regular slate of rerun regular network series and Hallmark produced programs, such as the aforementioned *Hall of Fame Movies* and successful regular network programs like the miniseries *Lonesome Dove* that Hallmark produced. New movie programming in this same vein is also broadcast on the channel. The series included on the networks schedule is conspicuously historical, though not entirely so. *Little House on the Prairie*, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, *The Waltons*, and *M*A*S*H** are all shown at least once daily along with more contemporary family focused shows like *Touched By An Angel*. Though not intentionally historical in its focus, the large number of historically set shows draws attention to that connection between “family shows” and historical settings, and provides a context in which the series are viewed in their current incarnation. This connection is recognized by the network, and passed on to the viewer whether the viewer is aware of it or not.

The use of reruns on both cable and regular network stations is generally supplemental, serving as filler for less lucrative daytime broadcasts and other gaps in programming. Still other channels, like The Hallmark Channel, have incorporated these rebroadcasts into their larger programming mission. There are a handful of networks, however, that have turned rerun broadcasting into something of a programming mission of their own. Viacom’s TV Land and Nick-at-Nite are prime examples of this. These two sibling networks have turned “old” television into profitable niche marketing. Originally conceived of as an answer to empty prime time hours for a children’s programming network, the idea grew into something of a broadcasting phenomenon. In July 1985, Nickelodeon, a commercial-free children’s programming network that broadcast only

¹² Ibid., 499.

during daytime hours, launched a slate of evening programming consisting of reruns of television sitcoms from the medium's early years. Christened "Nick-at-Nite," the network hoped to capture the attention of the baby boomer parents of their daytime audience with the true nostalgia that series from their childhood would hopefully provoke. In addition to the shows themselves, the network use kitschy marketing and promotional spots that used the nostalgized images of the 1950s and early 1960s that were already well ingrained in the minds of the public after the '50s nostalgia craze of the 1970s.¹³ This experiment worked, and Nick-at-Nite became a popular alternative to regular prime time programming, not only for the baby boomers but also for their children who responded to the false nostalgia that the network encouraged through both its programming and its marketing. As the network developed, it gradually shifted its focus forward in time, highlighting programs from the 1960s, then the 1970s and so on until the majority of its current programming is drawn from 1980s and 1990s hits. This shift forward also coincided with the launch of TV Land in 1996, a 24 hour rerun programmed station that included not only old sitcoms, but also a collection of dramas as well. The new network also included a variety of old commercials, titled "retromercials," in its commercial spots, completing the nostalgic TV viewing experience.¹⁴ Now well established as a part of most cable line-ups (Nick-at-Nite is available in 81% of U.S. homes and TV Land in 74% as of 2003), the networks have established themselves as the keepers of television history. TV Land in particular has taken on this role, producing its own documentary style programs that investigate trends in television programs, presenting viewer generated "top 10 list" programs, and recycling *60 Minutes* and *Entertainment Tonight* segments that address the old series and their stars into new programs that provide a pseudo-historical context for the reruns it is highlighting. There is even an annual TV Land Awards show (first broadcast in 2003), that

¹³ Ibid., 856.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1164.

combines quirky viewer decided awards (such as “Most Memorable Mane” and “Best Broadcast Butler”) with more traditional honors for long running and well loved series and an annual designation of a “future classic” from among the first run series airing on the regular networks. The network has even branched out into marketing its own products, from books on television to board games that test contestants on TV trivia, further solidifying its reputation as television historian. In its own way, TV Land has become a history channel of its own. By consistently reminding its viewers of its entirely old programming, the network has taken on a reputation as a source for experiencing our national cultural past.

Reruns as History

The rerunning of television series, just as with the rebroadcasts of movies, also has an impact on our conceptions of the recent past. A regular part of television broadcasting from its earliest days, reruns actually make up a larger component of total television broadcasting hours than new programs do.¹⁵ In this case it is the contemporarily set programs that take on the distinction of historical artifact. They provide us with a visual record of the eras in which they were created, becoming historical documents themselves. Their contemporaneousness in their time is what qualifies them as historical, once they are being viewed outside the environment in which they were created. They have a built in sense of authenticity for the audience, both for those who lived through the time and those who did not. These rerun series provide a glimpse into not only the physical environment of the time (the clothes, the cars, the houses and the neighborhoods), but also its mood and mindset (how people interacted, what the prevailing attitudes were, what the subjects of interest were).

¹⁵ For an extensive consideration of the rerun and its significance to television broadcasting and American culture in general see Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Of course, there is a limited scope of history that has been documented this way. Only since the late 1940s have original television programs been created and broadcast, and many of the earliest shows were not preserved for future broadcasts, so we do not have this kind of record for earlier eras. But as television's tenure in our culture continues, there will be more and more televisual historical records of this kind. Already our cultural conceptions of the 1950s have been largely influenced by such television classics as *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, first produced in the 1950s and rebroadcast almost continuously since that time. The true nostalgia that these shows provide for those who experienced them during their first run years is especially powerful as the shows themselves are part of the personal memories of those viewers. Unlike programs that seek to recreate a historical time period through story and setting, these programs bring with them the credential of being an actual part of history. For those who remember the programs, these shows take on a magnified historical significance, increasing their power to replace even lived experience in the minds of the viewers. The false nostalgia that these programs promote is equally as strong, however. Again, the distinction of these shows as a part of history magnifies their historical significance. For those who did not experience the time being portrayed first-hand, it is an opportunity to learn about the time in a much more palpable, entertaining and engaging manner than classroom textbooks and lectures provide. The knowledge that others view these programs as part of their lived experience also heightens their historical significance. The historical capital of reruns is high, not because of their content but because of their connections to the past.

Television reruns have developed a stronghold on our cultural and historical conceptions of our recent past. Through shows like *Leave it to Beaver* we have conceived an image of 1950s family values and national prosperity so well entrenched that it is now used as a measuring stick against which contemporary society is judged. Television programs from this era have contributed to our collective memory of it as an ideal social environment, one which we should strive to replicate

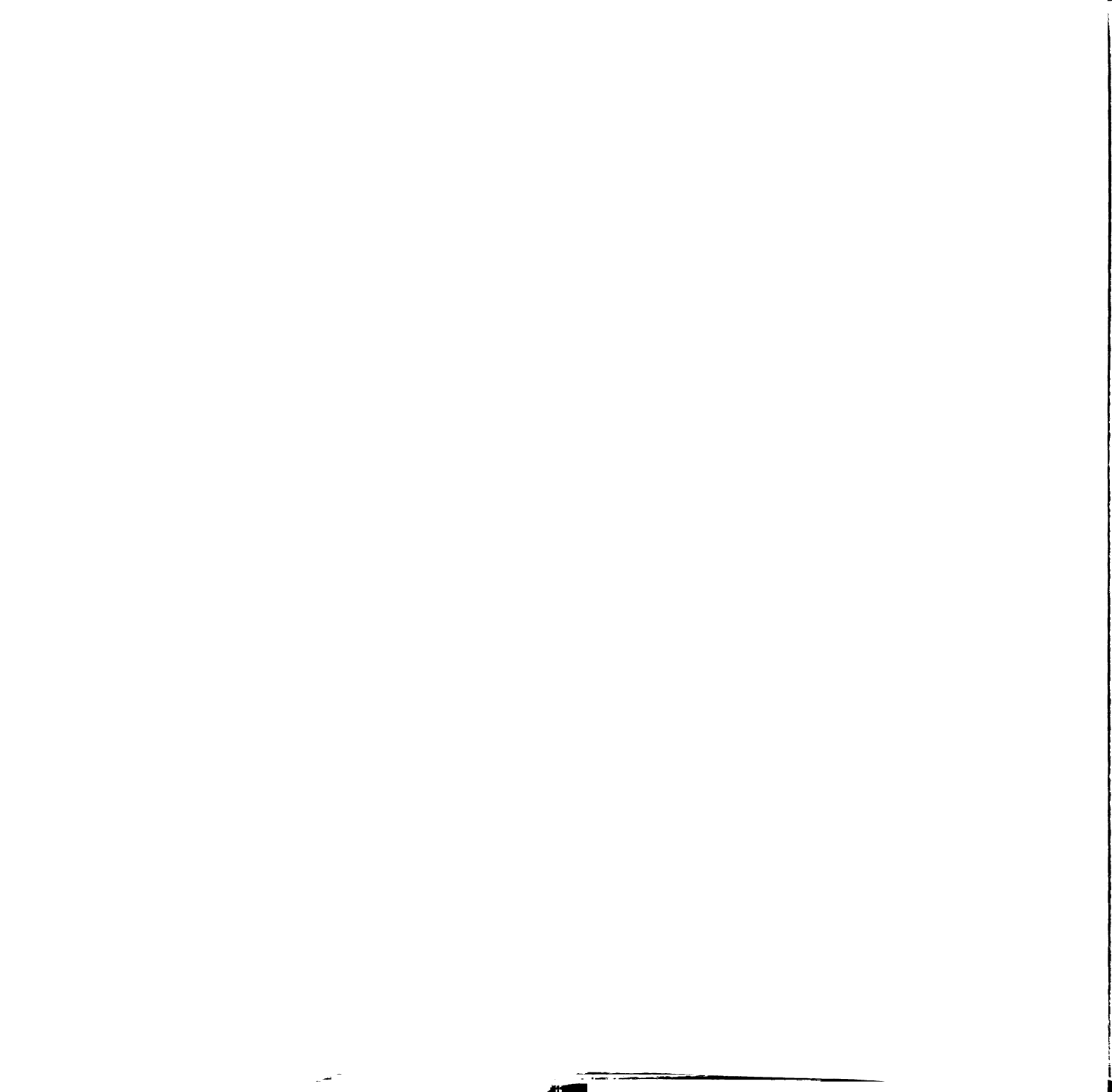
wherever possible. Politicians campaign on this image and companies market products on it. So powerful have these nostalgic televisual images become that they have replaced our more realistic knowledge of the era and the problems that existed alongside the practiced values and traditions that many consider ideal. These television programs, and their immortal life through the practice of rebroadcasting, have become a part of American mythology, casting their image on the collective memory of the nation in an indelible way.¹⁶

Reruns play an interesting role in influencing the popular American historical consciousness. Though they are no more universally reflective of the time in which they were created than today's contemporaneous programs are of our own, they do carry the distinction of being artifacts of the past, and that distinction cannot be ignored. Regardless of their limitations, they are, through the magic of television, living examples of what life was like, for at least some people, at a given point history. They are also living evidence of what was being presented via television at that given time. Yet when they are viewed on television today, they come without context as random glimpses into the past. Like much of the history presented through the media, these programs are free-floating historical documents, appearing to audiences without the associated knowledge to truly appreciate their historical significance or their historical message. Even on rerun-centric networks like TV Land, there is an inherent randomness about the way the programs are broadcast that minimizes the historical import these historical documents have to offer. The availability of many series on DVD is changing that to a certain degree, in certain cases. The tendency of DVDs to include "bonus features" along with the featured film or program allows for the inclusion of new and original programming that can provide some of the missing context for older shows. Of course, not all series on DVD include these "bonus features," and even those that

¹⁶ For a larger discussion of this topic see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

do not always include the kind of programming that provides that context. But in some cases, such as the aforementioned *American Dreams* first season DVD release, attempts are being made to ground the programs in their proper cultural and/or historical framework.

Though not as influential as the narrative programming that dominates prime time television, historical segments on news broadcasts, the offerings of networks specializing in historical programming and the rebroadcasts of “old” television shows do contribute to our collective historical understanding. And it is necessary to include a consideration of these kinds of influences when looking at the larger picture of the popular American historical consciousness in order to gain a more complete understanding. Taken all together, the role of television in the shaping of our collective historical consciousness becomes very clear.



CHAPTER NINE

History by Television: Conclusions

It is clear that the history that is disseminated through television is not the same history that is found in the classroom, or through any other medium or venue, except perhaps film. Nostalgic, emotional, intimate, without context, and grounded in contemporary concerns, televisual history is created and received in a highly commercial environment where the emphasis is on entertainment and ratings (and therefore earnings) and not education. Regardless of the conditions under which is transmitted, however, history is learned through television. And no matter how distressing that notion may be to scholars, it is a reality that must be understood. The popular American historical consciousness is molded, at least in part, by the interpretations of that past that are presented on television.

So what does that televisual history look like then? There are many characteristics of history on television that should be considered in order to answer that question. Though there is a variety of historical programming that has been broadcast since the birth of the medium and that can be found on television today, we can identify certain characteristics, based on individual consideration of the genres and venues through which history is disseminated, that allow us to see what this kind of history looks like. Series and miniseries are not the only sources of televisual history these days, as the previous chapters have revealed, and the more venues there are for history on television the more diverse that body of programming will be. But by considering these certain characteristics together, we can create a picture of televisual history. Once we have drawn

that picture, we will be better equipped to understand the collective memory that is alive in American culture and society today.

Painting a Picture of Televisual History

Perhaps the first characteristic about televisual history that needs to be acknowledged is that it is widely available. Of all the mass produced mediums that surround us today, none is more readily accessible than television. Now an expected component of any American home, the television requires little additional investment other than time to be used. Americans typically consume several hours of television every day, and television programming is a common experience that Americans from different walks of life share. So ingrained in our day to day lives has television become that we routinely consume it, and take in what we see and hear in a largely uncritical way.

A passive activity that is often done concurrently with any number of other tasks, watching TV is something that nearly every American does on a regular basis. And though the programming choices have continually grown since the advent of cable broadcasting in the 1980s, a large portion of the material on television is accessible to all. Its high degree of accessibility makes television an important vehicle for both influencing and understanding common ideas. This is as true of historically based television programming as any other type of broadcast. Since the earliest days of television, and especially since the early 1970s, historical programming has been a part of prime time schedules and available to American audiences. As an accessible and familiar medium, television transmits history in a comfortable manner to the entire spectrum of the American viewing public.

Equally important is the narrative nature of history that is presented though television. Unlike the history that is presented in the classroom, history on television generally comes to us through narratives that use storytelling and character development to relate the circumstances of the past to

us. Through emotional and compelling narratives, often fictional tales are told within historical frameworks that transmit knowledge in a subtle, often unrecognized manner. As studies such as that conducted by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have shown, Americans respond better to history when it is presented in a manner that engages and touches their emotions. Through appealing and exciting stories involving characters, and sometimes situations, that audiences can relate to, historically based television programs portray history in an entertaining and casual manner, allowing the history to be taught without the viewer even realizing it.

The dramatic nature of these historical presentations makes history interesting for the audience, even if they are not normally inclined to seek out historical information. Familiar storylines and sympathetic and interesting characters inhabit the dramatizations of the past that are broadcast over our television screens. They are at once familiar and exotic, an intriguing combination. Even those historical programs that aren't told using traditional narrative structures and techniques, such as documentaries and historical news presentations, are presented in such a way that their transmission of historical material takes on a story-like quality. The PBS documentaries of Ken Burns, for example, are built to communicate the historical information not as a list of absolute facts or collection of important events, but as a story of a time and place and the people that inhabited it. Similarly, the commemorative programs that news organizations put together to mark the passing of national leaders or the anniversaries of significant events in American history are not presented in the usual "stick to the facts" manner that characterize nightly news broadcasts, but as stories that narrate the life or event. Even the non-narrative historical programming on television, takes on a narrative quality.

Some of television's most basic characteristics as a medium must also be considered carefully when investigating televisual history. *Primary among these is that the television industry is a highly commercial one, and therefore the material that is broadcast through the medium is done with chiefly*

commercial interests in mind. The historical accuracy of any given program, then, is secondary at best to the commercial success of that program. The television programs that are shown are the television programs that sell products and reach the target demographic of advertisers. Similarly, shows are produced with the ultimate goal of profitability and viewer appeal. If historical accuracy has to be sacrificed for the sake of keeping viewers interested and advertisers happy, then so be it. This is not to say that historical accuracy and profitability are incompatible, or that there aren't accurate portrayals of the past that occur on popular shows. Indeed, it is even possible that historical accuracy, or perceived historical accuracy, might enhance the marketability of a historically based program. What is important to remember, however, is the priorities under which television shows are created and broadcast. A program's ability to appeal to a target audience is simply essential to its existence, and so it will always be the first and foremost consideration in its production.

Another characteristic of television that affects the transmission of televisual history, and therefore affects the quality of that history, is its episodic nature. Whether it is through regular television series, miniseries presentations or intermittent special programs, the history that comes across the screen is rarely presented as a single complete story all at one time. The historical information is broken up along with the story being told as necessitated by broadcasting schedules and commercial concerns. This can have both positive and negative effects on the way the history is received. On the positive side, the extended presentation can offer valuable time for reflection in between presentations, allowing for a more thoughtful consumption of the material than a more concentrated presentation might allow. Extended presentations also allow for a stronger engagement with the material by the audience who becomes more invested in it with each successive episode. On the other hand, gaps between installments of televisual history can lead to an incomplete and/or misunderstood reception of the history being presented. Missed installments

or a failure on the part of the viewer to remember what occurred in a previous episode could easily compromise the overall accuracy and effectiveness of the history that is portrayed. The growing number of viewing options available to television audiences at any given time also increases the likelihood that the complete text of an extended televisual historical presentation will be seen by any given viewer, as competition for television viewing hours is sometimes fierce. Regardless of the specific kind of impact that it has on a viewer, however, the episodic nature of televisual history is important to consider in understanding its impact.

Perhaps related to this episodic nature, though much more significant to the overall understanding of televisual history, is that history on television is presented without context. No matter how completely a subject is researched or performed, history on television is always presented out of historical context. Even extended treatments of historical subjects are not situated within the larger scope of American and Global history. This is not surprising, nor is it necessarily unreasonable. The scope of American history, to say nothing of Global history, is enormous, and to properly contextualize any given televisual history would be impractical if not impossible. However, no matter how reasonable this lack of context may be, it is an important characteristic of history on television, and must be considered in order to understand the kind of contribution this kind of historical interpretation has on the popular American historical consciousness.

To be sure, some televisual historical presentations lack more context than others. The history that is dramatized in *Quantum Leap* with its random leaps through time is less grounded than the history seen on *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, where a six year look at a specific time and place in the nineteenth century is created. But each piece of history that comes to us through television comes to us as an isolated piece of the past. Add to this the fact that some periods of history are widely interpreted on television and other are not interpreted at all, and the scope of history on television becomes even more incomplete. If television is in fact the chief source of historical

information and understanding in American culture, then our collective memory is incomplete and ungrounded.

Some of televisual histories most important characteristics that transcend genre have less to do with the nature of the television industry and more to do with the nature of television viewing. The intimacy and immediacy of television presentations that has been so well documented by television scholars in recent years has an enormous influence on the kinds of programs that are aired. The perceived interests of the viewing public in regard to history and what it has to offer us in the present also affect those programs. These two considerations come together in providing a rationale for televisual histories most profound characteristic. *That is, television histories are heavily influenced by nostalgia.* There seems to be a never ending appetite within American culture for idealized interpretations of the past. This is particularly true for considerations of recent history that is within the personal memory of the audience. As the past has come to provide a sort of safe haven from the difficulties and uncertainties of the present and future in our lives, happy, safe and positive images of that past are preferable to more realistic portrayals that might include references to additional problems or tensions that would have to be considered. It is natural to want to remember the past fondly. Indeed, we mediate our own recollections of the past through various filters that allow us to remember some things and forget others. Why wouldn't we want the same kind of filtering to occur in public presentations of the past? And though this inclination may be perfectly normal, and even harmless, it does affect the history that gets dramatized as well as the way it is presented.

Recent years have seen more attempts to temper the amount of nostalgia that is included in historical programming. Programs with a more biting style of nostalgia, where the feel-good aspects of the past are included, but not at the complete dismissal of its realities, are becoming more common. There are even some programs that attempt to interpret the past entirely without

use of nostalgia, such as the PBS Hands-on History series whose stated goal is to show the past “as it really was.” These efforts toward limiting nostalgia are only moderately successful, though. While the impact of the efforts is significant, nostalgia continues to exert a powerful influence on televisual history.

Nostalgia is such an important factor in history on television that it cannot be contemplated enough. It is important to remember, however, that there are a number of different forms that nostalgia can take. The “false” or “true” nature of the nostalgia and whether or not the potential audience all shares the same relationship to that nostalgia (in other words if the nostalgia is false for all audience members or whether there is a mixed perception based on the age of the viewer), whether the nostalgia is presented in a pure manner or whether it is presented with a bite to it, and whether the goals of the producers of the nostalgic program are to create the longing for the past that nostalgia encourages or to dispel that longing as much as possible must all be considered in order to truly appreciate the nostalgia for what it is and what its effect might be.

For very similar reasons and in a very similar vein as the role of nostalgia on television, televisual histories are also generally comforting in their interpretation of the past. Television is primarily a venue for entertainment. The majority of television audiences watch TV as part of their leisure time activities, and leisure time is generally viewed as time to relax and escape from the difficulties and complications of daily life. To comply with the desires and expectations of their audiences, then, networks and producers tend to present programming that will comfort rather than challenge audiences. Though there are programs that specifically provoke viewers and attempt to shake them into rethinking their ideas, the history that is presented on television does not tend to be among those programs. In light of the powerful American appetite for nostalgia and simple, uncomplicated interpretations of the past, it is to be expected that producers would create, and audiences would prefer, comfortable portrayals of the past rather than challenging ones. Even

those shows that have attempted to do a little “shaking up” of collective historical conceptions, such as PBS’ Hands-on History projects, have not completely escaped the tendency to cast at least a partially rosy glow on their presentations of the past. The perceived appeal of comfortable portrayals of the past for audiences engaging in leisure time viewing affects the kind of history that is presented, just as our desire for nostalgia does.

Similarly, American history on American television is presented with an eye toward patriotism.

Televisual history tends to highlight the successes of the past rather than pointing to its failures. The same desire for positive, reaffirming images of the past that makes nostalgia so popular and calls for comfortable portrayals of the past rather than challenging ones, also creates a need for patriotic interpretations of our national history. Even those programs that acknowledge our shortcomings, such as *Roots* and *American Dreams*, do so in a way that lets us feel good about the progress we have made since these “indiscretions” were made. American televisual histories rarely present derogatory visions of Americans. And while there is nothing inherently wrong with this patriotic tendency, it is important to recognize it as we consider the nature of televised history.

Other general characteristics of televisual history cannot necessarily be attributed to the nature of the television industry or the nature of the television viewing experience, but rather to the contemporary attitudes of Americans outside the academy of history itself. *For example, history on television is presented as a knowable and recreatable entity.* Unlike professional historians who view history as a changing entity whose current interpretation varies depending on prevailing levels of evidence and cumulative research, the public tends to view the past as a fixed point that provides a constant foundation for the present and future. Since the past is, well, past, it cannot change. And if it cannot change, then it is something that is inherently knowable. And if we can know it, then we should be able to recreate it, at least in terms of dramatizing it through a venue like television. This commonly held perception of history is reflected in nearly every historical interpretation in

popular culture, but is especially characteristic of televisual history. In fact, without this most basic assumption, televisual history would not even be possible. And while this conception of history is in essential conflict with professional historical practice, the recognition of it is crucial to understanding how Americans conceive of their past.

Similarly, history on television is presented through a contemporary lens. Another essential conflict between popular history and professional history is the inclination of popular history to be presented through a contemporary framework. While professional historians strive to keep present day attitudes and biases out of their historical considerations as much as possible, the public almost requires a contemporary filter through which they can consider and understand the past. Because the past is generally considered something which is valuable primarily in its ability to comment on and elucidate the present, without modern day considerations through which to understand and use it, history loses its meaning.

As a result, television on history tends to take up modern day concerns and present them in a historical framework, or focus on history that has some sort of direct lesson to offer for the problems and priorities of the present. Grounded in contemporary concerns, televisual history is inherently problematic for professional historians, but well suited to popular expectations. The blurring of the line between the past and the present that is the result of this contemporary frame affects not only the history that is presented but a larger understanding of the passage of time. This is a very important aspect of history on television.

These ten characteristics, taken together, provide a picture of history as it comes to us across the small screen. While some of these characteristics may be more potentially dangerous to a complete and accurate understanding of American history than others, it is important to consider all of them, and the reasons behind them when possible, in order to understand televisual history. Though it looks substantially different than the history that is taught in the classroom, it is still an

important body of historical information to consider when trying to understand the history that influences contemporary and future American society and culture.

Particularly because of the ever growing diversity of historical programming on television, it is difficult to consider televisual history and its impact as a single entity. Painting a picture of this kind of programming using characteristics such as those considered here is useful, but considering the individual programs that make up the genre is equally important. To more accurately and more practically study history on television then, the concept of historical capital can be used to measure the impact of various television genres and programs in terms of their relative impact on the popular American historical consciousness. Considerations such as a program's ability to capture the attention, imagination and emotions of the viewing public and the reputation of the network on which it is broadcast or the production team that was behind it determine the degree of historical capital and thereby the degree of impact of any given program on the larger historical consciousness of contemporary America. A measure such as this allows us to not only consider individual televisual histories but the larger genre as well. Considering the body of work that constitutes historical programming on television in terms of both its shared characteristics and its diversity provides that best key to understanding how television shapes our collective sense of the past.

The Conflict Between Professional and Popular History

Now that a picture of televisual history has been drawn, what does that mean to the larger entity that is history? It is clear that neither the goals nor the practices of these two brands of history are completely in sync with one another. Professional historians have been critiquing and decrying the popularized history of popular culture for several decades now, blaming the lack of respect for both the body of the knowledge and the discipline that protects it on the sensational and nostalgic interpretations of historical events that come across the screen or through the museum

exhibit. The failure to adhere to the accepted practices of the discipline and standards of evidence employed by trained historians by popular historians and other conveyors of history makes their work suspect, and because of its broad dissemination, dangerous.

As for the public, a distinct distaste for that body of knowledge commonly known as history exists within our culture. As the work of scholars like Rosenzweig and Thelen has shown, classroom history as most Americans experience is dry, un compelling and forgettable, so much so that a rejection of the very term history is made in favor of more comfortable terms like “the past” even when the definition of the two could be seen as essentially the same. The information about the past that is meaningful to those outside professional circles is emotional, personally meaningful and made relevant to contemporary life. As this study has shown, the history that is on television generally meets all those criteria.

To be sure there is a great deal of inaccurate and unsubstantiated history being disseminated through popular culture in the United States today. Mass media with commercial interests at heart are rarely concerned enough about the accuracy of a historical presentation to compromise the bottom line. Popular appeal is generally the priority, not only for the media but for less commercial enterprises like museums and local history societies whose very existence depends in their ability to draw visitors to their sites. Without trained professionals to advise them and with practical concerns to be dealt with, the history that gets presented is often incomplete or under researched or in some other way substandard by academic historical standards. This reality is unfortunate, but it is in fact a reality, a reality that must be recognized and dealt with even as it is mourned.

That having been said, is it possible for those in the academy to reconcile themselves to the reality that is popular history in order to affect some influence on it? Or, even if the influence

necessary to alter it significantly enough to find it acceptable is not possible, is there some way to accept it for what it is and work with it whenever possible? Consider the following questions:

Is it better to have some historical knowledge than none? A positive answer to this question may be difficult to accept, but it is worthy of consideration, for is it not preferable for Americans to have some historical knowledge at their disposal, even though it may be incomplete or framed by contemporary thinking?

How can we correct the problems? Should we? The answer to this second question is likely to be a resounding yes, but the first question must temper the enthusiasm of the second. Still, if academic histories are not making an impact on the general public, perhaps a change in format or approach should be considered in order to garner a larger audience. Surely there must be ways to maintain professional disciplinary standards and still find more widely appealing modes of presentation.

Can we temper, contextualize and/or frame it? The real question here is whether or not it is possible to put difference aside to allow for the collaboration of forces from the two historical camps.

Professional historians have for so long dismissed the work of popular historians that the thought of working together is not even considered. Similarly, the lack of respect felt by popular historians within the historical community has led to resentment and self-imposed isolation on the part of those who interpret history for the public. It seems that the intentions of both groups ought to be similar enough to allow for collaboration if each was willing to give up old grudges and move on.

There seems to be tremendous potential for improvement in the dissemination of American history to the American public. There already exists a venue for both sides of the coin—one for the

thoroughly researched creation of historical knowledge and one for the creative expression of it. If these two could come together in some way, everyone would benefit from it.

Understanding the Popular American Historical Consciousness

As the most pervasive medium in American culture today, television provides the most logical starting place to begin looking for any kind of culturally determined collective knowledge. Based on the assumption that what we see and hear has an inherent affect on what we believe and how we understand our environment, it naturally follows that in the United State today television programming has a significant impact on our common perceptions of the world around us. This is as true of our collective historical memory as it is for anything else. Historical television programming can be seen as the foundational building blocks on which the popular American historical consciousness is built. Considering this programming provides a starting point for understanding this important component of American culture.

To fully understand popular conceptions of history, however, the consideration cannot stop there. Televisual histories make up only a portion of the historical material that exists in American culture and that affects the larger understanding of the past. To start with, there are a number of other media that provide interpretations and images of the past to the American public in similar ways that television does. Principal among these is film, which, though it is distinct from television in a number of important ways, complements and mediates the history that is taken in through television.

Television, film and other mass media belong to a category of popular historical engagement that is passive. History disseminated through these mediums requires no active involvement from the consumer. The history is simply presented and the viewer takes it in. In addition to mass media forms, museum going activities of all kinds are also included in this group.

Depending on the participant, there maybe active thinking and/or discussion that takes place as a result of the viewing experience, but none is required in order for the transfer of information to take place. The consumer is acted upon by the medium, rather than the other way around.

The other category of popular historical engagement is active. In these activities, the consumer is actively involved in both the creation and consumption of the history. Examples of this kind of activity include the practice of genealogy, the involvement in historical societies of various kinds, the participation in heritage tourism and collecting historical objects. In each of these cases, the consumer must contribute to the creation of the history. To be sure, there are other contributing factors to its creation, but the consumer's action is required. These activities exert a greater influence on the historical consciousness of those who participate in them, but they are less widely practiced. Still, the growing popularity of these kinds of activities means that their influence increases every day.

In order to paint a complete picture of the popular American historical consciousness it is necessary to consider all these activities, within their own category and as a whole. The nature of the experience, the specifics of the history that is consumed and the relative impact of the larger culture must all be weighed. It is an enormous task to be sure. But in order for Americans to truly understand themselves and their relationship to their history, it is a task that must be undertaken.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Listing of Prime Time Commercial Network and Cable Historical Television Series

Series Title	Broadcast Dates	Genre	Network
1. <i>Americana</i>	December 1947-July 1949	Quiz	NBC
2. <i>America Song (American Songs)</i>	April 1948-April 1949	Music	NBC
3. <i>Mama</i>	July 1949-July 1956	Comedy/Drama	CBS
4. <i>The Girls</i>	January 1950-March 1950	Situation Comedy	CBS
5. <i>The Wonderful John Acton</i>	July 1953-September 1953	Drama	NBC
6. <i>You Are There</i>	February 1953-October 1957	Documentary Drama	CBS
7. <i>Life With Father</i>	November 1953-July 1955	Situation Comedy	CBS
8. <i>Combat Sergeant</i>	June 1956-September 1956	War Drama	ABC
9. <i>O.S.S.</i>	September 1957-March 1958	War Drama	ABC
10. <i>The Gray Ghost</i>	October 1957 (39 episodes)	Adventure	Syndicated
11. <i>The Lawless Years</i>	April 1959-September 1961	Police Drama	NBC
12. <i>Pete Kelly's Blues</i>	April 1959-September 1959	Drama	NBC
13. <i>The Untouchables</i>	October 1959-September 1963	Police Drama	ABC
14. <i>The Roaring Twenties</i>	October 1960-September	Newspaper Drama	ABC
15. <i>Winston Churchill – The Valiant Years</i>	November 1960-April 1963	Documentary	ABC
16. <i>Margie</i>	October 1961-August 1962	Situation Comedy	ABC
17. <i>The Gallant Men</i>	October 1962-September 1963	War Drama	ABC
18. <i>McHale's Navy</i>	October 1962-August 1966	Situation Comedy	ABC
19. <i>Combat!</i>	October 1962-August 1967	War Drama	ABC
20. <i>The Great Adventure</i>	September 1963-August 1965	Dramatic Anthology	CBS
21. <i>World War I</i>	September 1964-September 1965	Documentary	CBS
22. <i>Broadside</i>	September 1964-September 1965	Situation Comedy	ABC
23. <i>Hogan's Heroes</i>	September 1965-July 1971	Situation Comedy	CBS
24. <i>Convoy</i>	September 1965-October 1965	War Drama	NBC
25. <i>The Time Tunnel</i>	September 1966-September 1967	Science Fiction	ABC
26. <i>Pistols 'n' Petticoats</i>	September 1966-August 1967	Situation Comedy	CBS
27. <i>Jericho</i>	September 1966-January 1967	War Drama	CBS
28. <i>The Rat Patrol</i>	September 1966-September 1968	War Drama	ABC
29. <i>Blue Light</i>	January 1966-August 1966	Spy Drama	ABC

Series Title	Broadcast Dates	Genre	Network
30. <i>The Second 100 Years</i>	September 1967-September 1968	Situation Comedy	ABC
31. <i>Garrison's Gorillas</i>	September 1967-September 1968	War Drama	ABC
32. <i>Here Come the Brides</i>	September 1968-September 1970	Comedy/Adventure	ABC
33. <i>Young Rebels</i>	September 1970-January 1971	Adventure	NBC
34. <i>Chicago Teddy Bears</i>	September 1971-December 1971	Situation Comedy	CBS
35. <i>Bearcats</i>	September 1971-December 1971	Adventure	CBS
36. <i>M*A*S*H</i>	September 1972-September 1983	Situation Comedy	CBS
37. <i>The Waltons</i>	September 1972-August 1981	Drama	CBS
38. <i>Anna and the King</i>	September 1972-December 1972	Situation Comedy	CBS
39. <i>Roll Out</i>	October 1973-January 1984	Situation Comedy	CBS
40. <i>Happy Days</i>	January 1974-July 1984	Situation Comedy	ABC
41. <i>Little House on the Prairie</i>	September 1974-March 1983	Adventure/Drama	NBC
42. <i>Paper Moon</i>	September 1974-January 1975	Situation Comedy	ABC
43. <i>The Manhunter</i>	September 1975-April 1975	Detective Drama	CBS
44. <i>Sons and Daughters</i>	September 1974-November 1974	Drama	CBS
45. <i>Beacon Hill</i>	August 1975-November 1975	Drama	CBS
46. <i>Laverne and Shirley</i>	January 1976-May 1983	Situation Comedy	ABC
47. <i>Sara</i>	February 1976-July 1976	Western	CBS
48. <i>Baa Baa Black Sheep</i>	September 1976-September 1978	War Drama	NBC
49. <i>Gibbsville</i>	November 1976-December 1976	Drama	NBC
50. <i>Operation Petticoat</i>	September 1977-August 1979	Situation Comedy	ABC
51. <i>Goodtime Girls</i>	January 1980-August 1980	Situation Comedy	ABC
52. <i>Palmerstown U.S.A.</i>	March 1980-June 1981	Drama	CBS
53. <i>The Gangster Chronicles</i>	February 1981-May 1981	Drama	NBC
54. <i>Father Murphy</i>	November 1981-June 1984	Drama	NBC
55. <i>Joanie Loves Chachi</i>	March 1982-September 1983	Situation Comedy	ABC
56. <i>Voyagers</i>	October 1982-July 1983	Science Fiction	NBC
57. <i>Gun Shy</i>	March 1983-April 1983	Situation Comedy	CBS
58. <i>AfterMASH</i>	September 1983-December 1984	Situation Comedy	CBS

Series Title	Broadcast Dates	Genre	Network
59. <i>Boone</i>	September 1983-August 1984	Drama	NBC
60. <i>Call to Glory</i>	August 1984-February 1985	Drama	ABC
61. <i>Crime Story</i>	September 1986-May 1988	Serial Drama	NBC
62. <i>Rags to Riches</i>	March 1987-September 1988	Comedy/Drama	NBC
63. <i>Tour of Duty</i>	September 1987-August 1990	Military Drama	CBS
64. <i>Private Eye</i>	September 1987-January 1988	Detective Drama	NBC
65. <i>The Wonder Years</i>	March 1988-September 1993	Situation Comedy	FOX
66. <i>The Dirty Dozen</i>	April 1988-July 1988	War Drama	ABC
67. <i>China Beach</i>	April 1988-July 1991	War Drama	ABC
68. <i>Dirty Dancing</i>	October 1988-January 1989	Comedy/Drama	CBS
69. <i>This Is America, Charlie Brown</i>	October 1988-July 1990	Cartoon	CBS
70. <i>Quantum Leap</i>	March 1989-August 1993	Science Fiction	NBC
71. <i>The Outsiders</i>	March 1990-August 1990	Drama	FOX
72. <i>Brewster Place</i>	May 1990-July 1990	Drama	ABC
73. <i>Memories... Then and Now</i>	September 1990 (52 episodes)	Magazine	Syndicated
74. <i>Homefront</i>	September 1991-April 1993	Drama	ABC
75. <i>Brooklyn Bridge</i>	September 1991-August 1993	Comedy/Drama	CBS
76. <i>The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles</i>	March 1992-July 1993	Adventure	ABC
77. <i>I'll Fly Away</i>	October 1991-February 1993	Legal Drama	NBC
78. <i>The Untouchables</i>	January 1993 (44 episodes)	Police Drama	Syndicated
79. <i>Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman</i>	January 1993-June 1998	Western Drama	CBS
80. <i>A League of Their Own</i>	April 1993-April 1993	Situation Comedy	CBS
81. <i>Christy</i>	April 1994-August 1995	Drama	CBS
82. <i>Sliders</i>	March 1995-August 1997	Science Fiction	FOX
83. <i>Remember WENN</i>	January 1996 (56 episodes)	Drama	AMC
84. <i>Timecop</i>	September 1997-September 1998	Science Fiction	ABC
85. <i>Legacy</i>	April 1998-July 1999	Serial Drama	UPN
86. <i>That 70's Show</i>	August 1998-	Situation Comedy	FOX
87. <i>Any Day Now</i>	September 1998 (88 episodes)	Drama	Lifetime

Series Title	Broadcast Dates	Genre	Network
88. <i>The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer</i>	October 1998-October 1998	Situation Comedy	UPN
89. <i>Little Men</i>	November 1998-February 2000	Drama	PAX
90. <i>The Lot</i>	January 2001 (17 episodes)	Comedy	AMC
91. <i>State of Grace</i>	June 2001 (38 episodes)	Drama	Fox Family
92. <i>That 80's Show</i>	January 2002-May 2002	Situation Comedy	FOX
93. <i>American Dreams</i>	September 2002-May 2005	Comedy/Drama	NBC
94. <i>That Was Then</i>	September 2002-October 2002	Comedy/Drama	ABC
95. <i>Do Over</i>	September 2002-December 2002	Situation Comedy	WB
96. <i>Oliver Beene</i>	March 2003-September 2004	Situation Comedy	FOX

APPENDIX B

Listing of Historical Television Series by Longevity

Series Title	Series Run Length
1. <i>M*A*S*H</i>	11 Seasons
2. <i>Happy Days</i>	10.5 Seasons
3. <i>Little House on the Prairie</i> <i>The Waltons</i>	9 Seasons
5. <i>Laverne and Shirley</i>	7.5 Seasons
6. <i>Mama</i>	7 Seasons
7. <i>That 70's Show</i> (still airing) <i>Hogan's Heroes</i>	6 Seasons
9. <i>Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman</i> <i>The Wonder Years</i>	5.5 Seasons
11. <i>Quantum Leap</i> <i>You Are There</i>	4.5 Seasons
13. <i>Any Day Now</i> <i>Combat!</i> <i>McHale's Navy</i> <i>The Untouchables</i>	4 Seasons
17. <i>China Beach</i>	3.5 Seasons
18. <i>Father Murphy</i> <i>Tour of Duty</i> <i>Winston Churchill – The Valiant Years</i>	3 Seasons
21. <i>The Lawless Years</i>	2.5 Seasons
22. <i>American Dreams</i> (still airing) <i>Americana</i> <i>Baa Baa Black Sheep</i> <i>Brooklyn Bridge</i> <i>Crime Story</i> <i>The Great Adventure</i> <i>Here Come the Brides</i> <i>Homefront</i> <i>Life With Father</i> <i>Memories... Then and Now</i> <i>Operation Petticoat</i> <i>The Rat Patrol</i> <i>Remember WENN</i> <i>The Roaring Twenties</i> <i>State of Grace</i> <i>This Is America, Charlie Brown</i>	2 Seasons
38. <i>AfterMASH</i> <i>Christy</i> <i>The Gray Ghost</i> <i>I'll Fly Away</i> <i>Little Men</i> <i>Palmerstown U.S.A.</i> <i>Sliders</i> <i>The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles</i>	1.5 Seasons

Series Title	Series Run Length
46. <i>America Song</i>	1 Season
<i>Boone</i>	
<i>Broadside</i>	
<i>The Gallant Men</i>	
<i>Garrison's Gorillas</i>	
<i>The Lot</i>	
<i>The Manhunter</i>	
<i>Margie</i>	
<i>O.S.S.</i>	
<i>Pistols 'n' Petticoats</i>	
<i>The Second 100 Years</i>	
<i>The Time Tunnel</i>	
<i>Timecop</i>	
<i>Voyagers</i>	
<i>World War I</i>	
61. <i>Anna and the King</i>	.5 Season
<i>Beacon Hill</i>	
<i>Bearcats</i>	
<i>Blue Light</i>	
<i>Brewster Place</i>	
<i>Call to Glory</i>	
<i>Chicago Teddy Bears</i>	
<i>Combat Sergeant</i>	
<i>Dirty Dancing</i>	
<i>The Dirty Dozen</i>	
<i>Do Over</i>	
<i>The Gangster Chronicles</i>	
<i>Goodtime Girls</i>	
<i>Jericho</i>	
<i>Joanie Loves Chachi</i>	
<i>Legacy</i>	
<i>The Outsiders</i>	
<i>Paper Moon</i>	
<i>Pete Kelly's Blues</i>	
<i>Private Eye</i>	
<i>Rags to Riches</i>	
<i>Roll Out</i>	
<i>Sara</i>	
<i>That 80's Show</i>	
<i>Young Rebels</i>	
86. <i>Convoy</i>	Less than .5 Season
<i>Gibbsville</i>	
<i>The Girls</i>	
<i>Gun Shy</i>	
<i>A League of Their Own</i>	

Series Title	Series Run Length
91. <i>The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer</i>	Less than .5 Season
<i>Sons and Daughters</i>	
<i>That Was Then</i>	
<i>The Wonderful John Acton</i>	

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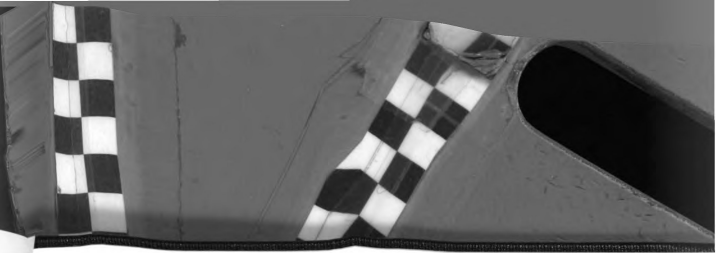
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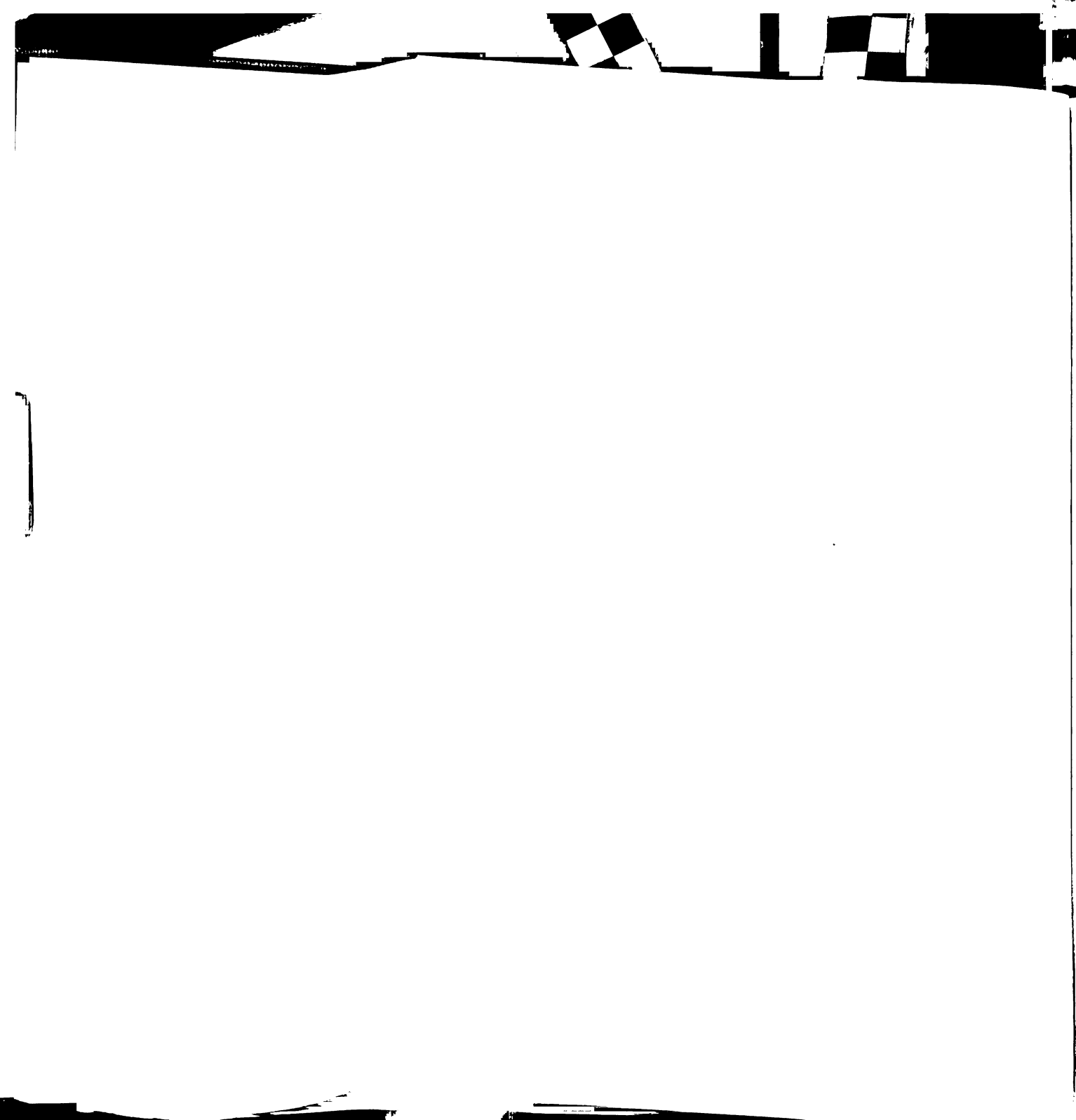
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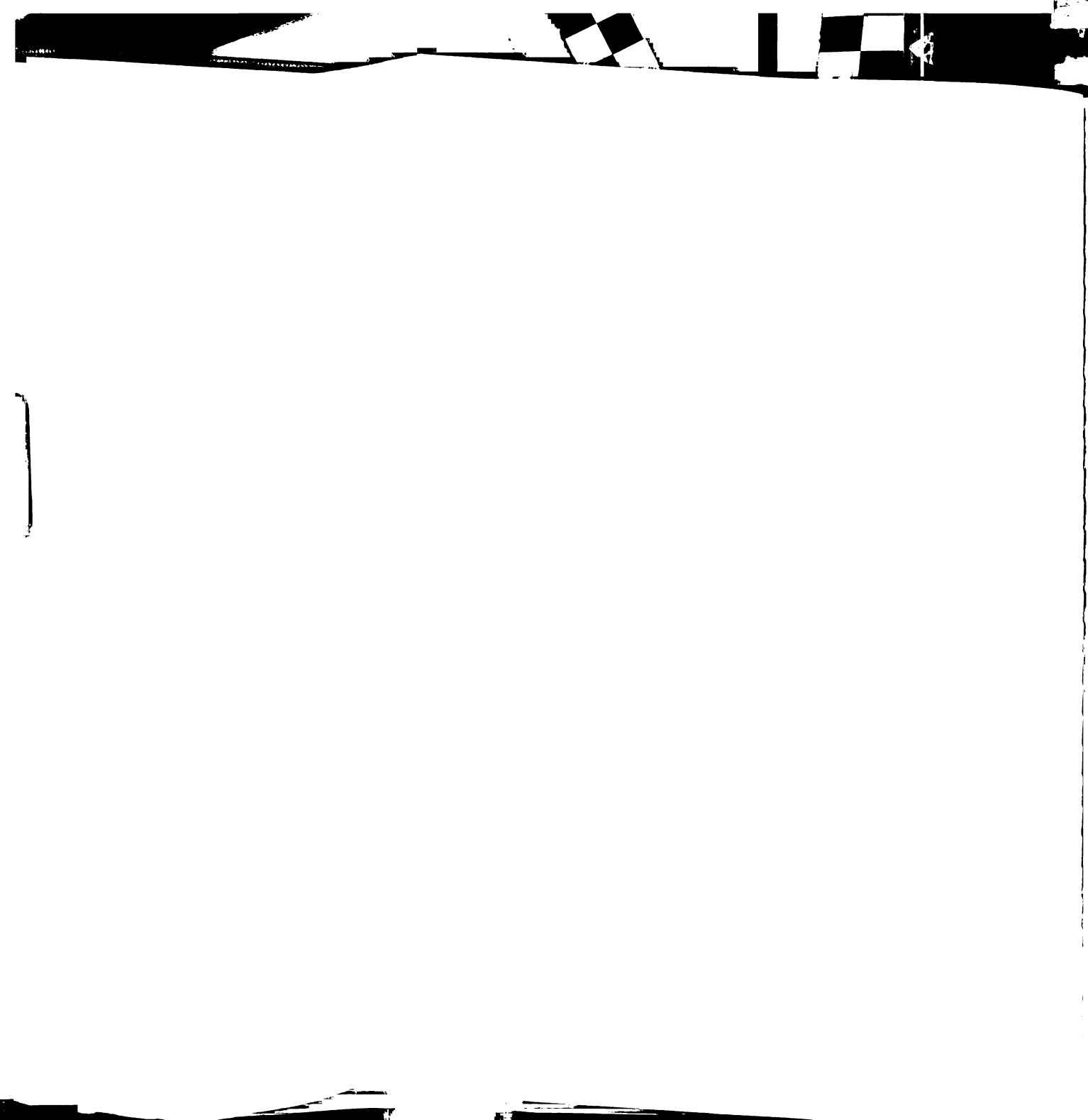
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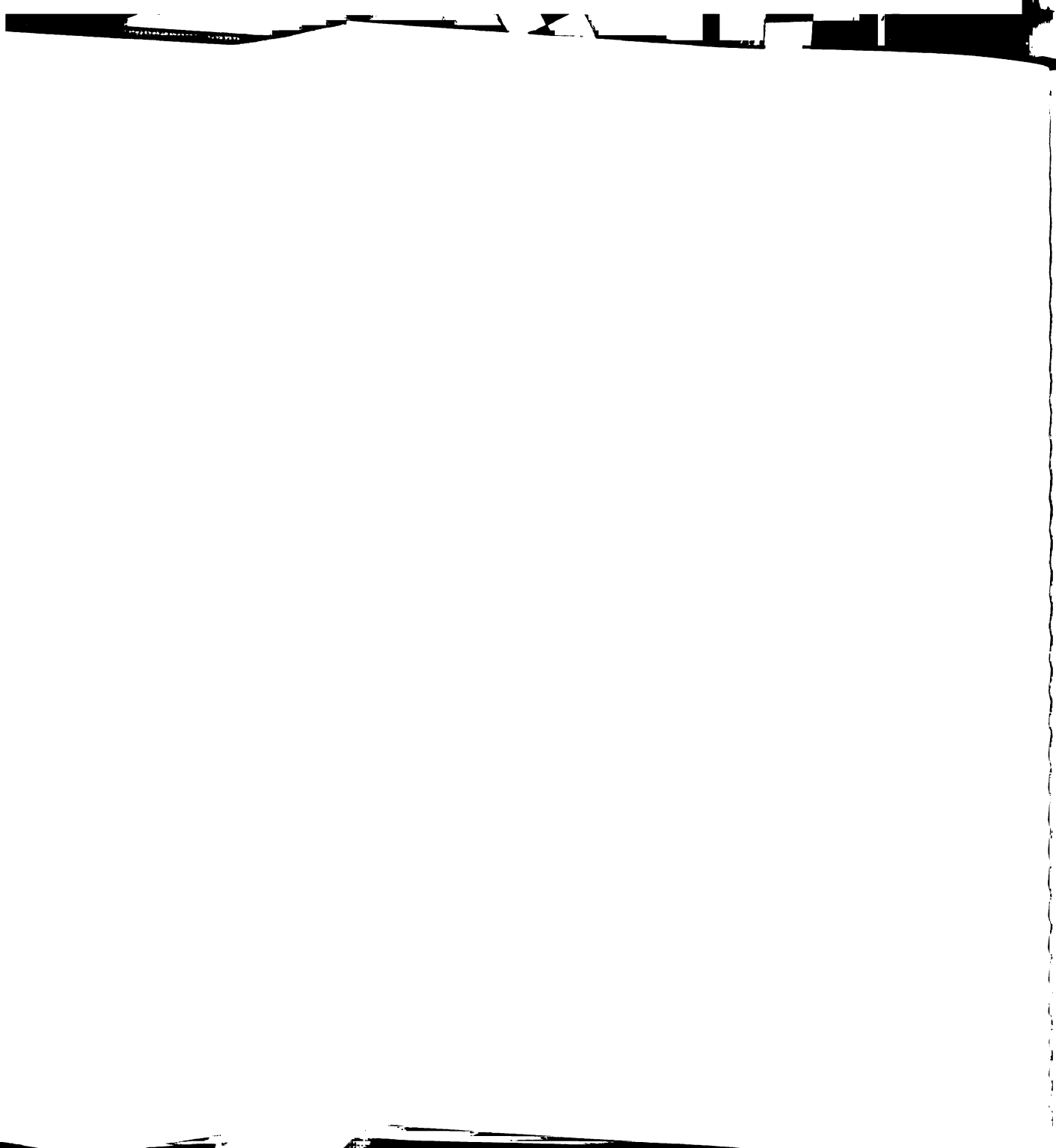
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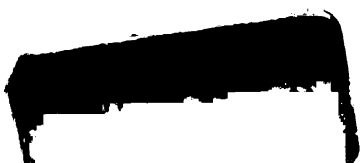
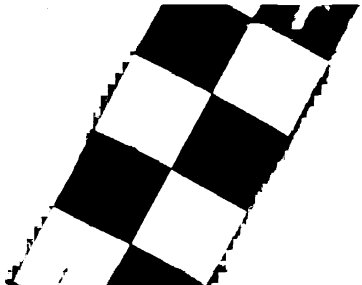
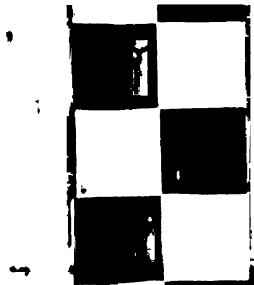
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