

TELEVISION AND ITS HISTORICAL PASTICHE

A cartoon in *TV Guide* shows three rows of bookcases in a library-like setting.¹ One is labelled "History," the second "Fiction," and the third is identified as "Made For TV." Here is a joke to be shared by the mass television audience, engaging a particular consciousness of history. It assumes that the distinction between history and fiction is clear, but it also acknowledges that television involves something else, apart from these familiar, conventional categories. There are various ways to interpret the cartoon. In relation to the dominant rhetoric of *TV Guide*, the "Made For TV" category should probably be taken as an aberration, needlessly and irresponsibly confusing or ignoring the long-standing meaningful distinction between "History" and "Fiction."² But the cartoon nonetheless represents the "Made For TV" category as equivalent to the other two; they stand together, each carrying the same potential to produce meaning. Here, television as a medium—as the exemplary mass medium—is understood as having the capacity to produce modes of knowledge that are culturally significant, and thereby to function as a mode of pedagogy. This pedagogy cannot simply be rejected as irrelevant or aberrant, although such reactions are far too often the initial and only responses to whatever it is that television does. No matter the amount of time spent with television, viewers must come to grips with what it means for television to be a part of the fabric of everyday life. This is not restricted to understanding television in terms of the information it carries, or the measurable effects it may or may not have on behavior. Of primary importance is an understanding of how television produces modes of discourse and knowledge that become familiar enough to become fodder for expression in contemporary culture, such as the cartoon in *TV Guide*.

An examination of the ways in which the medium works with

"History" as a conceptual category is important for a number of reasons. Such an examination can serve as a case study demonstrating how television produces modes of knowledge in relation to, but not totally dominated by, more traditional bodies of knowledge. (Other categories could also be examined, for example the family, politics, information, crisis, or childhood.) History is also considered a crucial category of learning—something we must know and understand as the foundation of social and cultural identity. If the very discourses of history as a category of knowledge are being transformed, it is important to come to grips with the new formations of thought that are subsumed by the term on a day-to-day basis. Even a cursory glance at the transformation of discourse about history through television brings up a maelstrom of examples.

What, for example, is the relationship between the "history" in the historical mini-series and the "history" at stake when "a historical confrontation" between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Mets will start in a few days? What of the history of the Red Sox—a constant theme of 1986 World Series reporting—as a team fated to lose the World Series, a historical destiny confirmed with yet another loss? How does the World Series as a historical confrontation, along with all the other historic yet regular confrontations from the world of televised sports—which will take place, are taking place, and are finally "history"—compare with another contemporary, historical confrontations cast in the same series of tenses, this time between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Rjeykjavik? In this context how can the references to a history extending back to the 1950s on *Late Night with David Letterman* be understood, when the audience already knows that the program has only been on the air for less than a decade? (This knowledge is explicitly avowed in *Late Night* anniversary specials still numbered in the single digits.) And the examples continue to spin out from the screen faster than they can be described.

At first glance such questions might seem trivial, even prosaic. But the very fact that one can pose such questions about the "history" produced on television on the basis of random viewing has crucial implications. Across an array of programs, genres and events of different orders, television invokes "history" as a meaningful term. Yet it is obvious that the result of this process—of identifying programs, genres and events as historical—is not homogeneous or unified, and indeed hardly conforms to the most common uses of the term "history." In particular in the above examples, television designates events as historical without regard for the temporal order, grammatical

tense, and/or referential weight that guide conventional assumptions about history.³ Rather, television generates a field of discourse under the label "history" that is fragmentary, multiple, and contradictory.

In its insistent (one might say persistent) invocation of the term, television promotes history as a crucial conceptual/experiential category. At the same time television would seem to drain history of its specificity as a term of singular linguistic/temporal distinction. Any event—past, present, or future—can be qualified as "historical" or given a "history," fictional or otherwise. Moreover, this is not a hypothetical potentiality, but an initial description of how history is actually expressed through the material that constitutes television. In this sense, television's production of history can be characterized as an overproduction, or to adapt Jean Baudrillard's term, a hyper-history.⁴ It seems as if there is *too much* history, as nearly everything is described as historical at one point or another.

Some of the questions of television and history are thus posed in relation to the problematics of postmodernism, which has been characterized in terms of simulation, pastiche, schizophrenia, non-meaning, the absence of master narratives, and even a "fundamental wierdness."⁵ In this context the invocation of "history" as a persistent term of reference is significant. It becomes an anchoring point of television discourse, one of the mythic concepts through which the concatenations of a culture in transition are expressed. Perhaps it is not surprising that a medium of electronic signals and "instant" transmission strives to situate itself and its texts in history—with all its associations with the weight of social, political, and cultural tradition. This chapter takes up the challenging and complex questions of television and history. This includes an analysis of the status of "liveness" in relation to history, the ways in which the history of television is routinely told, the representation of history by the medium in programming practices (a self-representation), and the production of the subject of history.

The relationship between "liveness" and "historicity" offers an overdetermined locus for examining the overproduction of history in television. In most conventional senses, liveness, presence, and immediacy, are implicitly opposed to history as closed, absent, or past.⁶ This is the case not only in the common sense of experience and temporality, but also in the linguistic distinction between *histoire* and *discours*.⁷ Yet in a variety of ways television correlates paradigms of liveness and of historicity in the form of equivalence, alibi, reversal, or identity. The practices and rhetoric of news and public affairs/docu-

mentary programming is one area in particular where the concatenations of liveness and historicity are particularly evident.

The production of news has always been a preeminent focus of television's "social contribution" as well as the arena in which liveness and being up-to-date (even up-to-the-minute) are valorized. The popular ideology of broadcast journalism is an unstable conglomeration of realism, liveness, personality, and immediacy. Yet in the context of television news it is not unusual to hear that something that occurred recently, is occurring now, or will occur soon is historic; or to hear that, through television, the audience is witness to "history-in-the-making." Implicit is the understanding that these invocations of history signify the import of such events in the present; they are *momentous* rather than historic. But the slippage here, in one sense an innocent colloquialism, is symptomatic of the collapse of the distinct temporal and discursive orders that have conventionally distinguished history as a mode of narrative discourse. More importantly it suggests that what is most unpredictable (because it is not yet a closed sequence of events with a beginning, middle, and end) can be—must be—historic if it is in the process of being recorded by television. The institution of television itself thus becomes the guarantor of history, even as it invokes history to validate its own presence at an event. Through this process history becomes a signifier of authority and social responsibility.⁸

The interplay between liveness and historicity is equally apparent in advertisements for news broadcasts (network and local) which variably stress traditions of journalism, historic events at which the news was present, and an ability to cover breaking events at a moment's notice—sometimes in conjunction with one another. The implication is that television news is here, now—where things are happening, so that it will have been there, then—where history was made. Or, conversely, because the news has been then and there, we can rest assured they will be here and now, as needed. In either case history and current events, the past and present become mutually supporting frames of reference, the one serving as the alibi and guarantee of the other.

This logic is not restricted to news programming, even if it is most fully and consistently expressed in this context. It impinges on all aspects of programming and promotion in which historical value—expressed as longevity—and innovation are correlated. For example, advertising campaigns promoting *Miami Vice* for syndicated rerun sales stress innovation and enduring values as coextensive character-

istics of the show. "Everything About Miami Vice Is New. Nothing About It Is Temporary."⁹ The text that follows this advertising headline elaborates on this.

Miami Vice is the *most innovative* series on television. But viewers watch it not only for what's *new*, but for what's *permanent*. Viewers keep tuning in because it's got the staying power of *classic entertainment*. Our research shows conclusively that what holds viewers are the *enduring qualities* of superb action, suspenseful plots, the ingenuity of the heroes, and the irresistible chemistry between them. Someday, in the future, Miami Vice may not be innovative. But what it will always be is watched. (emphasis added)

Being merely new or innovative is on the one hand desirable, but is not enough, because it is a transient status. Newness has to secure itself in relation to something else. The threat of evanescence is countered by the guarantee of longevity, and affiliation with the history represented by "classic entertainment."

The unstable, but self-validating relay among positions of contemporaneity, liveness, tradition, and history has pervaded broadcasting from the very start, and fully informs the very writing of the history of the medium. In particular this is inscribed in the designation of the 1950s as the "Golden Age" of live television production. The era of broadcasting thus named (roughly 1948–1958) includes dramatic fiction programming and the tradition of news and public affairs. In popular cultural memory and also in many academic accounts, this period is held up as an era of high quality production that was all too quickly supplanted by mindless, standardized, taped programs. As the putative origins of television, the Golden Age is also characterized in terms of innovation, experimentation and even innocence.¹⁰

The hallowed nostalgia cast on this period of network broadcasting is overdetermined by the relation of live television production to radio, the New York stage, and Hollywood film production. As a singular event the live production can be identified with theatrical performance; and even films are relatively singular in comparison to television series and serials. Liveness—construed in terms of standards of singularity and repeatability—establishes a hierarchy of cultural value to confirm the superiority of the relatively original or unique product. The promotion of television's historic, "live" productions affiliates the medium with the upper end of the cultural scale of value and confers on the medium an elevated, if lost, tradition of authentic creativity and aesthetic worth. This perspective includes the implica-

tion that television could be of higher social and cultural value if it returned to a version of singular or "live" production, concomitant with a willingness to sacrifice "mass appeal" and "mass production" for individuated productions with smaller, and presumably higher quality, audiences while at the same time ruefully acknowledging the economic realities of the television industry mitigate against such a return to the past. (It is significant in this respect that most discussions of the Golden Age attribute the decline of live dramatic programs to the need for economic efficiency in production *and* the development of a mass television audience that did not sustain the ratings for anthology drama. Here, business interests, recorded images, repetitive formats, mass audiences, lower taste, and lesser social value are all associated.)

In heralding the Golden Age as the origin and aesthetic highpoint of the medium, this version of television history offers a view of temporal and causal development valorizing live production by the networks as the period of experimental innovation.¹¹ In the process, earlier inventions and experimentation—including work in mechanical television in the 1920s and early 1930s, and the search for an all electronic system which began in earnest in 1930—are relegated to the status of "prehistory."¹² But what if this period of technological innovation is included in the story of television?¹³ Technological experimentation in television significantly antedates the Golden Age, and the ability to record images for (re)broadcast informed this development from the very start. Even during World War II, often considered a "dormant" period in television (pre)history, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) commissioned studies on the possibility of filming "live" programs.¹⁴ And while the programs of the Golden Age are relatively rare in comparison to contemporary taped television, they are also remembered precisely because they were preserved in recorded form at the time they were broadcast.¹⁵

From this perspective the "live" production of the 1950s does not represent an originary purity in television. Rather it can be reconceptualized as a transitional moment in larger, ongoing economic, institutional, cultural, and technological stories, in which the establishment of a nationwide system of television broadcasting by the networks precedes the deployment of standardized, perfected methods of recording, even though recording and transmission were always combined at the level of aspiring invention/conceptualization. In this light, to construe the "live" productions of the Golden Age as an aesthetic ontology (and as the origins of television) fails to consider

uneven developments in the innovation and diffusion of the particular technologies and discourses that comprise television.

More specifically, to relegate the pre-World War II period of technological invention and innovation to the status of "prehistory" associates the history of the medium with the rise of network television broadcasting. Perhaps this is not surprising to observers of contemporary American society, for current popular thought often seems to demonstrate a shared base of knowledge that begins with the rise of the USA-USSR superpower conflict and sees its own roots no deeper than World War II. As a part of its own historical representation, television downplays its roots in other aspects of American culture, with the partial exception of network radio. "Television" and its history are thus identified with the network system as it developed out of radio, which is in turn positioned as television's history, reinforcing the view that American television is the way it "had to be," predetermined as it was by an institutional and aesthetic base in radio.¹⁶ The Golden Age of television and pre-television radio can then be subsumed together in a generic media nostalgia. Television thus offers its own history as original; yet its history is largely a history of reconstruction and remaking of previous visual and verbal structures. So television's historical origins are not bound up in something new so much as something reified; yet the historical representation to the viewer (and by extension to society) is that of the new, bold, and innovative. By extension, the links between American society before and after World War II also remain obscured, because television so easily offers up its own history largely cleansed of a prewar cultural past. Many researchers working on television history have found this narrative beguiling, and placed the beginnings of their studies after the war, thus perpetuating this repression. The result is that television's historical self-representation is wholly projected as a postwar phenomena.

The point of all this is not to ignore the specificity of the 1950s as a moment within television history, but rather to suggest that the prevailing view of this era as the Golden Age is determined by an unthought privileging of "liveness" as an aesthetic ontology, which in turn follows the logic of particular cultural ideologies and is not ultimately at odds with industry interests. The discourse that promotes the Golden Age as the initiating moment of television history which is, crucially, characterized by liveness, experimentation, and innovation—and as a period of exceptional quality—functions as a retrospective myth of loss whereby the Golden Age is synonymous with Atlantis. It is a loss that confirms perceptions of contemporary televi-

sion's inferior cultural status, because there is seemingly not enough "live" production (although paradoxically there are more hours of live production now than ever before, especially if cable networks are included). It also affirms and naturalizes the value of television's institutional and economic base because the networks did once promote "live" production.¹⁷ In this history, "liveness" becomes the alibi to assure that the system is not in itself bad, and in fact is based in the best cultural traditions. History and liveness (and history as liveness) authenticate the social truths and cultural value of television as a whole. The valued history of the medium is the story of its liveness, while the ongoing deployment of signs of liveness and immediacy in broadcast network television confirm its social and historical value. Liveness and history thus emerge as equally mystified, but conflatable concepts. Examining other questions of television and history continues to reveal this process of mystification and conflation.

I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past. One is tempted to say that the very function of the news media is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past. The informational function of the media would thus be to help us to forget, to serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia.¹⁸

Television of course offers its own versions of history-as-presence in its flow of programming. History is evoked, rewritten, retransmitted, and reconstructed across television's genres and modes, in the reruns, remakes, compilations, and historical fictions that coexist with—and as—the originals, first runs, current events, and contemporary fictions that comprise television programming. In this conglomerate simultaneity of copresent options, the historical determinations of individual programs and events are at once in full evidence and subsumed in an overwhelming "present text" of television flow. Almost all forms of programming are subject to being rerun in their

entirety or in fragments (as segments of another show), over the course of a single season and over time, a process extended with the growth of cable and the use of video recorders.

History is thus preserved in forms of dispersal, as the specificity of temporal anchorage is relativized in the process of repetition. Programs from the 1950s air simultaneously, and consecutively, with shows from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. They are shown precisely because, or if, they are popular enough to draw an audience in the present, a "present" which is constantly in the process of being rewritten. An array of formats hold forth the promise of "life after prime time," including syndicated reruns, revivals, remakes, the made-for-TV movie, and most recently, release on videocassette. For example (one that encompasses several of these variations at once), the continuing popularity of *Leave It To Beaver* (one of the quintessential "old fashioned" family sitcoms) in syndicated reruns led to reassembling the cast for *Still the Beaver*, a network made-for-TV movie that picked up the lives of the fictional characters twenty years later. The relative success of the movie in turn generated the renewal of the series, based on the movie, first by the cable network Disney Channel and then in broadcast and cable syndication.

Many television series have been revived as remakes, with actors in contemporary situations assuming character roles familiar from previous incarnations of a program, or with new characters placed in a familiar context. These "new" programs, extending a program's history, often air while the "original" still shows in reruns. These include *The New Gidget*, *The New Monkees*, *The New Sea Hunt*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and *Gumby* to name only a few. And it is not only "old classics" that are subject to revival in this way, but also programs that have only recently been dropped by the networks, such as *Punky Brewster* and *Fame*. And in the extreme case of *The Honeymooners* the discovery of previously unseen ("lost") episodes allows contemporary audiences to see "new" episodes of the infinitely rerun series. In the case of programs in syndicated rerun that are also still on prime time television (or, through cable, syndicated on more than one channel), it is possible to see multiple stages of fictional development—multiple histories—on the same day (e.g. *The Facts of Life*, *Knots Landing*, *M*A*S*H**, and *Magnum, P.I.*, and so forth). The beginnings of videocassette distribution, rental, and sale of old television shows (*I Love Lucy* and *Outer Limits* are two examples) further clouds the issue.

Television represents its own history in this massive combination of texts that includes old and new, past and present, as equivalent

choices. Yet in this equivalence the "historical" differences among shows (as old and new, classic and modern) are maintained. Thus, certain networks have identified themselves as promoters of a classic heritage of old television programs. Nickelodeon's evening lineups of 1950s and 1960s situation comedies is promoted in self-parodic tongue-in-cheek commercials that insist on the high entertainment value (often "scientifically" proven) of "classic" entertainment. The Family Channel (FAM), newest incarnation of Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, also promotes its lineup of reruns as embodying enduring values. Television produces a history that is readily present, but perhaps remains unthought in its historicity precisely because it is present. In the process television continually constructs its own "tradition" as an effect of complex temporal overdeterminations. This can be read in a given market's programming schedule, in an individual's selections across a programming paradigm, and also may be enacted in the course of a single program.

It is not uncommon for long running series to periodically include episodes incorporating flashbacks. In some instances the fictional past thus represented is reassembled from earlier episodes (which a given viewer, or any number of viewers, may have seen at another time), while in other cases a fictional history which is not identical to the program's history may be retrospectively constructed. *Dallas: The Early Years*, a made-for-TV movie representing the fictional past of the show *Dallas*, was made after *Dallas* had been on the air for seven years, retrospectively dramatizing the history of the characters in the program. The 1986-87 season of *Knots Landing* included a series of flashbacks depicting a previously unknown "history" for several characters as a motivating factor for current narrative developments on the program. The retrospective reconstruction of a fictional past may or may not involve the re-presentation of a program's history; and an individual viewer is not necessarily in a position to tell the difference. Programs may even engage in both practices over time, offering flashbacks that are recycled footage from previous episodes in some cases, and "new" footage of the past in others. (For example, *General Hospital* has used both approaches in representing its fictional history.)

Anniversary and compilation specials offer yet another version of the medium writing its own history in the context of a single show. Programs of this sort celebrate past and present through the assembly of "old" and "new," or recycled and original images, with an implied future, if only of rebroadcast. Compilation specials have been devoted to particular genres, notably including commercials, sitcoms, and

bloopers.¹⁹ An anniversary special for *The Tonight Show* or *Late Night With David Letterman* marks progress, highlighting previous seasons with the repetition of selected segments, thus defining a tradition. It is here now, in the anniversary show in the present, because it has a past. The past guarantees the present which in turn surpasses it because it is, inevitably, more “contemporary” (and “sophisticated”) than the “dated” past on which it is built. Thus, for example, the hosts or guests in the relative present tense of recording such specials may joke disparagingly about the clothing and hairstyles they sport in a taped segment from the past.

This mixed attitude, of a present superiority to a past which is nonetheless celebrated, is extended to embrace the larger text of television history when David Letterman makes references to *Late Night's* origins in the 1950s. The self-conscious joke, shared by the audience, involves a complex set of assumptions about television and/as history. It contributes to *Late Night's* perceived status as a parodic reduplication of *The Tonight Show*, which does have its origins in the 1950s. By implication it also affiliates *Late Night* with television's Golden Age (a tradition of “liveness”), grounding the program in a tradition of innovation—if only by means of historical fiction. Further, viewing *Late Night With David Letterman* is a similar experience to watching a Golden Age program in that they are both recordings of live stagings. Through a play of association and disjunction this may reinforce the perception of *Late Night* as more modern, more hip than *The Tonight Show* precisely because it did not start in the 1950s; at the same time it may imply that *Late Night* is the “true heir” to this former tradition. Thus the “fictional” history carried by the joke proposes a “real” history to explain the joke, and any particular reading of the joke necessarily confirms the show's status in the overall, present context of the medium.

The very possibility of identifying or delimiting historical context becomes increasingly difficult, perhaps only a reassuring fiction. Historical specificity is redefined as dispersion, partiality, irregularity, and repetition, coalescing in an insistent “nowness” which is continually retransforming and rehistoricizing itself. Rather than situate its texts/events in temporal categories of past and present, television asserts a distinction between things that are on the air and those that are not, and both of these categories include “old” and “new” programs, “historical” and “current” events. History as presence is constructed in direct proportion with a process of commodification, because being on the air is finally a function of saleability—to net-

works, to stations, to sponsors, and to viewers: history as negotiable tender. In this sense, history represents a different kind of currency in its reception. Anything that is not on the air in this context is not free of the force of commodification, but simply a potential commodity awaiting an opportunity to enter into this history.

Our individual and collective memories offer a reserve of material with the potential to be re-presented. Thus it is not only in historical documentaries, news, docudramas, fiction dramas, and historical fictions that television writes a history, but also in counseling, therapy, advice, and talk shows, with their reconstructions of personal case histories. This might even be extended to include the use of consumer video technology. Thus, for example, a story in the *Weekly World News* (1987) tells of a woman who videotaped her husband's heart attack rather than calling an ambulance. (The "truth value" of this tabloid story—an admittedly unorthodox source—is less important than the symptomatic attitude it demonstrates regarding history and video; it is invoked as a contemporary allegory.) The woman is quoted as saying, "He bought the camera for me so we'd have a record of our family life." The article explains that she continued shooting as medics tried to revive her husband, and even attempted to follow him into the emergency room at the hospital. She is reported to have said, "My husband's dying and I've got to get it on tape." The "present" here is subjected to the scrutiny of a video camera with the record as the alibi; it must be recorded now so that in the future there will be a document, a family history. In the terms of the news story, this woman has mastered the values of broadcast journalism and brought them into her daily life.

If history only exists in its realization in the present text of television, the present can only be realized in something which will be a historical document. In the process of rewriting history in the present, television can hold the most extreme, discrepant modes of representation in simultaneity within its boundaries. (It is only the complete absence of representation, video black and silent audio, which is unacceptable.) A striking example of this in the context of a single episode is offered by *The Waltons*. In the episode in question, John-Boy Walton is working as a journalist and travels to New Jersey to cover the landing of the *Hindenberg*. The story thus implicates a common strategy of historical narrative fiction, setting up a fictional character to be witness to a "famous" historical event which the audience may be in a position to anticipate; historical retrospection generates prospective narrative anticipation.²⁰ In this case, the viewer familiar with the *Hindenberg* explosion is not disappointed. John-Boy arrives at

the landing site just in time to witness the arrival and explosion of the dirigible. At this point in the drama, documentary film footage of the *Hindenberg* explosion is intercut with the characters in the fiction as they react to the horrific turn of events. As the scene develops the actors in the "present tense" of the program's historical fiction, in color, are matted via special effects in front of the black and white documentary footage. This marks the historic event within the fiction as "really having happened"; it was not contrived for the story, but actually did occur, confirmed by the old, black and white images. At the same time the discrepancy between the documentary footage and the program's color images is jarring, to say the least. John-Boy, and the actor who portrays him, are obviously *not* present at the event, though the unity of the fiction purportedly requires that we take him to be an on-the-scene witness.

This sort of representational melange, a pastiche of historical styles and modes of representation, has become a prevailing impulse in contemporary television production. *Moonlighting*, *Magnum, P.I.*, and *Fame*, for example, have all aired episodes with (at least some) footage in black and white, evincing the visual style and narrative conventions of old movies (film noir for *Moonlighting*, the detective film for *Magnum, P.I.*, and the backstage musical for *Fame*—thus confirming the programs in their "proper" generic tradition). Simultaneously, black and white television series are being colorized (e.g. *Wanted: Dead or Alive*) along with the colorization of black and white films for television broadcast. Media history is hereby represented in the present rewriting of a textual past. Simply being old (historical) has no currency, thus "old" movies and television programs are remade as "new" products. But to simulate classic visual and narrative styles in this context becomes a sign of "quality" and prestige. The contemporaneity of *Fame* or *Moonlighting* lies precisely in the self-conscious remodelling of the classic movie genres of which they are the current expression. At the same time old movies and television shows can be revived—brought back to life as circulated commodities—not merely by situating them in current programming flow, but also, and even better (with presumably bigger audiences), by making them look more like current productions with the addition of color.

Contemporaneity and historicity are thus interrelated and coextensive in the present formation of visual and narrative style. To be situated in history, and as history, in television requires this conflation of past and present, a conflation which involves (re)historicization of the present as well as (re)presentation of the past. History in its otherness

masquerades as something new, while the present simulates itself as history. This in turn has the effect of producing an unstable, dispersed subject of historical consciousness. Such instability has ramifications for the process of reception and popular memory.

This is not the world of personal phantasy (and neither, obviously, is it that of reality); this is an oscillating work, in which there is room for the play of forms, a field liberated by the reversal of phantasy, but which still rests upon it. This has nothing to do with aesthetics and it does not necessarily produce hermetic works.²¹

The dispersion of history as a process of rewriting in the present text of television, impinges on all programs and implicates the viewer (all individual viewers) as an agent and effect of selective memory. One forceful expression of this—at once typical and exceptional—can be traced in the narrative development of *Dallas*. In the fall of 1986 at the start of the network prime time television season, *Dallas* premiered with an episode that immediately rewrote—indeed expunged—the whole of the previous year's diegetic narrative. Pam Ewing awoke, apparently the morning after her marriage to Mark Graison (dramatized in the final episode of the previous season) to find Bobby Ewing, her believed-to-be-deceased ex-husband, in the shower.²² The shock of this discovery was eased by the explanation that Bobby had never actually died; his death as experienced by Pam in the fiction and by the viewing audience was only a dream. In terms of programming time the viewer was thus returned to the final episode of the 1984–85 season, to the moments before Bobby was leaving Pam's house and was fatally hit by a car.²³

Bobby's death and burial were dramatized at the start of the 1985–86 season, providing significant motivation for new plot developments, along with the continuation of several narrative strands carried over from 1984–85. Bobby's "revival"—carefully anticipated and orchestrated in a massive publicity campaign—signalled the eradication of an entire year of narrative progression on *Dallas*. In popular formulations, a whole season was dismissed as "Pam's dream."²⁴ But if the program is taken literally (which is perhaps no longer possible, given this turn of events) "Pam's dream" only explicitly includes Bobby's accident, death, and (probably) her subsequent marriage to Mark Graison. What of the rest of the 1985–86 season, including major developments involving J.R. and Jack Ewing, Donna and Ray Krebbs, Cliff and Jamie Barnes, and Pam's kidnapping in Colombia? These

and a host of other subplots, culminating in an explosive season finale, were relegated to the netherworld of an unspecified memory.

The events of the 1985–86 season persist. They are part of the program, if no longer part of its fictional continuity or diegetic history. Their status is that of a “memory-effect,” an unstable intersection among Pam’s unconscious (as parts of her “dream” not brought to conscious recall), the program as a narrational source, and any number of individual viewers of the show who recall events of the 1985–86 season. This memory-effect also carries the potential to infect viewers of another prime time serial melodrama, *Knots Landing*, in which one of the main characters is Gary Ewing, Bobby and J.R.’s brother. Bobby’s death provided the presumed motivation for a number of significant plot turns on *Knots Landing* during the 1985–86 season; the program currently proceeds as if uninformed to the fact that Bobby never “really” died. *Dallas* asserts its own version of narrative logic here, including as one possibility an interpretation of *Knots Landing* as the extension of “Pam’s dream.”

Of course in relation to the genre with which *Dallas* is affiliated—the soap opera—none of this is surprising *per se*. The revival of deceased or disappeared characters—with the same actor resuming a role, or a new actor assuming the part of an established character—is commonplace in daytime serial melodrama; and the prime time soaps, including *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, have readily adopted this convention.²⁵ By the same token the “revival” of Bobby Ewing on *Dallas* offers a particularly extreme version of this practice. For it is not just the case that Bobby “returned” having never really died. Rather none of the events of the 1985–86 season have the status of diegetic reality. This total rewrite goes far beyond the “reversability” of the soap opera and allows us to characterize *Dallas*’ development as excessive in relation to (if exemplary of, as an extreme logical conclusion) the open-endedness of the serial form itself. A general, generically-based narrative mutability and repetitiveness is recast as an absolute repetition of a diegetic time span in complete narrative difference.

This excess may make more sense if situated in relation to television’s production of history as rewriting in the present. As a version of history which implicates fictional time and programming time in relation to the audience, it also offers a context for exploring the production of a historical subjectivity. For as *Dallas* rejects, via rewriting, its own fictional history, it simultaneously inscribes history as a space of meaning production specifically in relation to the perspective of the audience. The “new” plot developments promote a forgetting of the

previous season by offering a present, alternative version of the story. At the same time the "new" stories exist in the shadow of events as they were previously played out, and as they may be variously remembered by individual viewers. Narrative history, dispensed with as a figment of a single character's imagination (as a dream), is reinscribed as an amorphous imaginary (as memory) that lurks alongside the narrated events of the present season and may be activated by any regular viewer. Here programming history produces a body too much in the form of an "extra" season of narrative.²⁶

This logic is subject to extended reproduction in the context of syndicated reruns. To replay the series in continuity will repeat and exacerbate the terms in which it functions. One can imagine the possibility of suppressing (the desire to suppress) the 1985–86 season; it would be easy enough to slightly reedit the scenes involving Bobby's "death" and reappearance, redefining continuity (rewriting the history of *Dallas*), especially since there are no end-of-season cliffhangers in syndicated rerun (that is, syndication reruns are not seasonal). But this fantasy of restored diegetic continuity is immediately contravened by economic considerations. To hold back a whole season of a series from reruns would represent a significant loss of profits for the producers.

Thus in the context of a single program—in this example a contemporary, fiction melodrama—the full force of television's construction of history in relation to subjectivity as a process of imaginary reinscription activated by re-presentation and rewriting becomes recognizable. The subject of this process is singularly indefinite, the effect of an unstable alliance of a fictional character, a (any) regular viewer, and *Dallas* as an impersonal narrating voice. In this overdetermined subjectivity no "one" speaks the historical discourse, though everyone is potentially implicated in its reconstruction. It is produced in the interactions of individual fantasy and commodity circulation (the television program as commodity, the television star as commodity, and the television viewer as commodity; all three also the agency of fantasy), which cannot be collapsed as equivalents nor clearly differentiated.

The viewer's historical knowledge here is delimited, but is not finally determined by the *Dallas*-text, or by Pam Ewing as a functionary, and potential figure of identification, within this text. That is to say, the *Dallas* history can only be known to the extent that it has been represented by the institutional forces that produce and circulate it—not only in the weekly episodes of the show and *Dallas: The Early Years*, but also in the books licensed by the producers (including a series of fiction paperbacks rewriting the program's serial episodes,

and a volume detailing the history of the world and characters of *Dallas* as if it were "real," represented as history). But the institution thus defined cannot control how much of this any portion of the audience knows, or remembers, how much of the 1985–86 season it recalls and engages in its current viewing of *Dallas*, or even if that audience continues to watch at all.²⁷

Television produces history in an ongoing process of displacements and reinscriptions, as the texts which may activate and engage individual and social memory are always "live"—in the signal flow made present by turning on the television or the video recorder—and yet passing, if not already past. History is represented and reenacted in the ongoing, present dislocations in time, space, and subjectivity continuously reproduced by the medium. It is not just that all history is fiction, as Stephen Heath argues, but also and simultaneously that all fiction is history.²⁸ From the perspective of postmodern mechanisms of simulacral reduplication, television can easily be understood to participate in the dissolution of "history" as a category of experience, of discourse, and of critical analysis. And yet history seems to haunt the medium; it is both nowhere and everywhere within the discourses that comprise television as a social and cultural apparatus. History is what it does not have, except by virtue of liveness, indeed what it cannot have if it is to celebrate itself in terms of contemporaneity, renovation, innovation, and being up-to-date. History and tradition anchor this discourse of contemporaneity, endowing television and its electromagnetic impulses with substance and weight, offering connections to the social and cultural milieu in which it participates.

Within its multiple discursivity television repeatedly, if variably, invokes "history" in what might be taken as a compensatory struggle to find conventional meaning and order in temporal/social experience, in the very process of revealing the impossibility thereof.

Television has not eradicated the signifying distinction of history as a category once and for all. It can still be, and is, differentiated from its "others," as in the earlier discussed example of the *TV Guide* cartoon represented as "Fiction." But within the current discursive formation that includes television, the understanding of history and of its production cannot be confined to the "same old way" of thinking, whatever that was to begin with. And it is this simultaneity of historical reconceptualization and productivity that the cartoon represents, intentionally or not. In this context it is pointless to simply long for the distinctive clarity of a former signifying order (which is itself, possibly, only another retrospective myth).

If critical thinkers hope to intervene in the current social order and its modes of (cultural) production, the first order of business is to construct an adequate theoretical and descriptive representation thereof, even if it requires a thoroughgoing reconstrual of the very categories that ground the aspirations of transformation—including history. Such an activity is not the private domain of social leaders, but instead is a part of widespread critical citizenship. For, as Andrew Ross has pointed out, in an age of expert rule, the world of popular culture is perhaps the one field in which intellectuals are least likely to be experts.²⁹ This does not mean accepting things “the way they are,” but starting out with an adequate perspective on the discursive strategies that comprise our “world” and relations of knowledge within it. Television’s production of history and subjectivity, constituted simultaneously as past and present, old and new, here and there, live and preserved, ended and open-ended, is precisely one of the areas that allows the initiation of such a reassessment, rewriting itself even as we attempt to pin it down.

In his book *Ronald Reagan: The Movie*, Michael Rogin has demonstrated the tendencies of Ronald Reagan to conflate his cinematic roles with his everyday past, seemingly shifting with ease from his fictional past to his personal past and back again, creating a past persona for public memory that is also difficult to precisely pin down.³⁰ Television’s relationship to—or as this chapter has shown, its many relationships—with history can produce similar results for a shared popular memory of postwar American society and culture. Students and teachers need to be aware of this phenomena and consider “the historic” on television from a variety of critical stances and approaches. A part of this consideration must recognize there is in fact some value to the way television produces history, including the opportunity to view audiovisual representations of an array of twentieth century events and experiences.

One of the reasons that television can produce this phenomena is in the fact that history, especially the history of everyday life, is so accessible; a walk down the street, a glance out the window can show buildings and cars of different ages and eras; a trip to the library can show books and magazines of different generations stacked next to each other on the shelves; if the local community has a folklore festival, historical society, or even something as simple as a weekend farmer’s market, we are presented with a kaleidoscopic melange of past and present iconography; our language, habits, manners, food, and dress all contain elements of the past as well as elements of the

present. This ease of accessibility is one of the joys of history. However, the infatuation of television may someday threaten to take away that joy and exercise a monopoly power over it without society's realization of its loss. Unlike the mythic losses promulgated by a televisual past, society's loss of understanding, experiencing, and writing its own everyday history would indeed be painful. Hopefully, the empowerment of students and teachers with both the critical awareness of television's infatuation with history and the appreciation of the accessibility of history in everyday surroundings will prove a powerful preventative against such future loss.

At the same time media history—however commodified and mediated—is “real” history, it is part and parcel of the cultural and social forces with which we have grown up. Moreover, the fragmentary and dispersed nature of the historical field produced by television may allow for more room for individuals to find their own voice apart from the master's history which is presumably more clear cut than television's pastiche. Television's production of history as a category of knowledge, once broken loose from self-absorption, may hold the potential to empower teachers and students to tell their own histories in new ways which include popular culture.

