Loafing in the Garden of Knowledge: History TV and Popular Memory

We need history, but not in the same way a loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

The past is sometimes visualized on television in the kinds of narratives that give the appearance of not being about history at all.
There is remarkable consensus among both historians and media critics regarding television's unsuitability for the construction of history. Notwithstanding the History Channel's original promise to provide access to “All of History—All in One Place,” TV viewers are often characterized as victims in an epidemic of cultural amnesia for which television is both disease and carrier. TV, so the argument goes, can produce no lasting sense of history; at worst, it actually impedes viewers' ability to receive, process, or remember information about the past. Raymond Williams' theorization of the “flow” of televisual discourse is invoked to argue that the contents of television simply rush by like answers on the Jeopardy! board, without context or opportunity for retention. For Stephen Heath, television produces “forgetfulness, not memory, flow, not history. If there is history, it is congealed, already past and distant and forgotten other than as television archive material, images that can be repeated to be forgotten again.”

And, according to Mary Ann Doane, “Television thrives on its own forgetability.”

The roots of these arguments may be found in Fredric Jameson's contention that, in postmodern culture, TV and other visual media have fostered an increasingly “derealized” sense of presence, identity, and history. One of the casualties of this “derealization” is the ability to engage with or remember history in a meaningful way. Television is seen as overdetermined by its “ideology of liveness” and therefore dependent upon “the annihilation of memory, and consequently of history, in its continual stress upon the ‘nowness’ of its own discourse.” In spite of the old-fashioned, TV-hating prejudices which still underpin much of the writing about television and the widespread persistence of suspicion toward visual media for the construction of history, it is both possible and desirable to think more broadly about TV's place in contemporary historiography.

With the erosion of confidence in scientific historiography in recent decades, it has become increasingly acceptable to view history as overdetermined by the needs of the present, the desires of historians, and the ideological contexts of historical research. Once solid borderlines separating empiricist history from the idiosyncratic realms of individual and cultural memory now appear dynamic and permeable. Arguments for the inclusion of visual media (especially film) in historical discourse have developed a certain degree of credibility, even if the precise function and limitations of these media remain open for debate. Television, though still disparaged for its commercial-

Reconsidering Cultural Amnesia

Long a troublesome (or, more frequently, dismissed) concept for historians, memory—whether individual or collective—provides a key to theorizing the role of television in contemporary historiography. As numerous theorists of popular memory have argued, history does not end with the production of documents, narratives, or analyses any more than a film ends with its own theatrical release. People consume and process written, filmed, or televised histories within a web of individual and cultural forces. As Stuart Hall has argued, the intended meanings which are encoded into a particular cultural product may be decoded quite differently when they are received by an audience or reader. Further, historical meanings may evolve over time, reflecting, among other things, the extent to which our relation to the past is conditioned by present circumstances. As reception studies of television have questioned assumptions about the passive spectatorship of TV viewers, memory studies provide a way of looking at historical reception, what people remember of history, and the ways it is made useful in their lives.

Like history, cultural memories are produced and must be understood in relation to an array of cultural and ideological forces. As Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright claim:

Memory has a texture which is both social and historic: it exists in the world rather than in people’s heads, finding its basis in conversations, cultural forms, personal relations, the structure and appearance of places and, most fundamentally ... in relation to ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past and the forms of personal experience which are significant and memorable.
This conception of memory as a primarily social rather than individual phenomenon allows for exploration of the ways in which memories are rescripted in order to conform to existing historical narratives. As Maurice Halbwachs has argued, individual memories are always “interpenetrated” by collective influences which fill in gaps and ascribe significance to lived experiences. By arguing that all memories exist within a complex and fragmentary social milieu, Halbwachs’ model allows for a conception of forgetting which is not merely the opposite of remembering. Indeed, the displacement and reconstruction of individual memories—termed “creative forgetting” by Friedrich Nietzsche and “active forgetting” by Andreas Huyssen—may be viewed as productive and inevitable components of cultural memory. How, then, can we describe television’s role in the production and maintenance of cultural memory?

Under certain circumstances, TV is acknowledged as a primary, though sometimes contradictory, instrument in the construction of popular memory. In the case of historical events such as the Challenger explosion or the Moon landing, television is widely regarded as an ideal facilitator of cultural memory with its ritualistic, event-style coverage and capacity for endless repetition. TV is also recognized for its contribution to national remembrance and mourning, as seen in the televisial excess surrounding JFK’s funeral and the proliferation of programming related to the 50th anniversary of World War II. For Marita Sturken, television and other constituents of popular culture are engaged in a relationship of mutual determination—or “entangledness”—with the flow of cultural memory. According to this model, TV neither reflects nor determines cultural memories, however the two remain inextricably linked. Similarly, John Caldwell argues that television may provide viewers with “a great deal of textual and historiographic power, traits not normally associated with the medium in academic accounts that aim to define television’s essential qualities—presentness, amnesia, and lack of context.” And in an important challenge to foundational television theory, Mimi White proposes a reconsideration of “liveness” as a structuring principle of TV, arguing that history, banality, and “attractions” may be seen as “equally important conceptual frameworks for understanding television.”

History, duration, and memory are as central to any theoretical understanding of television’s discursive operations as liveness and concomitant ideas of presence, immediacy, and so forth. Indeed, liveness on television is routinely if variously imbricated with, and implicated in, history, momentous events, consumerism, and commodity circulation. Yet to make this claim flies in the face of certain influential theories of postmodernism which propose television as exemplifying, even propagating, the loss of history. Thus, for White, the privileging of liveness is not merely anachronous, but an active misconception rooted in theories of postmodernism still haunted by the idea of television as a bad object.

Politics of Memory

Part of the power and significance of popular memory lies in its flexibility and intangibility in comparison with “official” histories. Memories, which survive among individuals and communities, are frequently set in opposition to historical discourse which is propagated from the top down via cultural and governmental institutions. This has proven to be an extremely effective strategy for oral history projects which seek to incorporate marginalized voices—especially those of colonized or disenfranchised peoples—into the official record. Even Michel Foucault argued that popular memory functions as a crucial site of resistance for oppressed groups. “Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle, if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles.” Foucault also warned that institutional mechanisms work tirelessly to influence the content and transmission of popular memory. “Now, a whole number of apparatuses have been set up to obstruct the flow of this popular memory ... [Today there are] effective means like television and the cinema. I believe this is one way of re-programming popular memory which existed but had no way of expressing itself.” Although widely quoted in support of the oppositional relationship between history and memory, these passages by Foucault demonstrate a surprisingly idealized view of pre-existing social memories, untainted by the corrupting influence of mass media.

Ironically, nostalgia for authentic, prelapsarian social memories engaged in a David-and-Goliath struggle against official historical discourse implies the existence of precisely the sort of monolithic institutions and centralized apparatuses of social domination to which Foucault is elsewhere famously opposed. This conception of popular memory also fails to account for memories which are formed through, rather than in spite of, interaction with...
cultural apparatuses such as TV. A somewhat more modest approach is taken by Michael Frisch, who claims that the significance of popular memories lies not in their authenticity, but their functionality. "What matters is not so much the history that is placed before us, but rather what we are able to remember and what role that knowledge plays in our lives." Popular memory, thus conceived, highlights distinctions between the writing and the relevance of history, while simultaneously providing a crucial link between the two.

Persistence of Suspicion

Whether or not film and television are fundamentally useful to the needs of historical representation has been the subject of much controversy for historians. Under certain circumstances, film and TV are understood to make a unique contribution to historical discourse because they allow viewers to recover the "liveliness" and richness of the past—to see and feel what it must have been like to be a part of history. On the other hand, film and television are criticized because the stories they tell leave no room for critical interpretation and debate by historians. Each position is predicated upon certain assumptions about what constitutes a work of history and for whom the writing of history is most important. The first suggests that history is primarily the domain of individuals whose relation to the past is formed through identification with naturalistic representations (e.g., period films like Ghandi or historical programming like Roots). The second emphasizes the curatorship of historians over the past and worries that filmed or televised representations, whether documentary or narrative, are closed systems which resist the constant need for revision and debate.

This situation is further complicated by the enormous diversity of historical constructions which exist on film and TV, particularly at the extremes of the high/low binary: popular culture and the "avant-garde." In a rare attempt to address the significance of some of this work, Robert Rosenstone identifies a mode of "postmodern" visual history which "tests the boundaries of what we can say about the past and how we can say it, points to the limitations of conventional historical form, suggests new ways to envision the past, and alters our sense of what it is." However, Rosenstone limits his analysis to films which share the desire to "deal seriously with the relationship between past and present" as it has been defined by more conventional modes of history. The representational strategies mobilized by "postmodern history" are "full of small fictions used, at best, to create larger historical 'truths,' truths that can be judged only by examining the extent to which they engage the arguments and 'truths' of our existing historical knowledge on any given topic." Rosenstone thus essentially makes the argument that certain films and videos may be considered works of history because they try (with varying degrees of success) to do the same things that real historians do. "Postmodern histories," though unorthodox, may be recuperated to the extent that they point to histories which are verifiable through traditional means. Thus, ironically, Rosenstone ultimately reinscribes these film and video texts which he labels "postmodern" into a thoroughly modernist (rational, empirical) historical epistemology.

Since the late 1970s, historiographical theory has posed a much more basic challenge to historians whose work rests on the discovery or creation of "larger historical truths." Historiographers such as Hayden White have theorized that the work of the historian is not the transparent chronicling of a pre-existent past but the "emplotment" of historical information into recognizable narratives and literary tropes. Among other things, these narratives obscure the "discontinuity, disruption and chaos" of the past and enable the construction of histories which may be filtered, politicized, or influenced by their relation to systems of authority. Dominick La Capra has further argued that there is no historical "document" which may be considered naive or free of its own historical consciousness. No record of historical events, whether a personal diary or a documentary newsreel, may ever be considered neutral—it is "always textually processed before any given historian comes to it." Simply put, history does not exist "out there" (as the X-Files' obsessional Fox Mulder maintains) where it can be grasped by the right combination of representational tools and awareness of signifying practices. If history is constituted through discursive and cultural struggle, then its meaning must reside beyond the "footnotes, bibliography, and other scholarly apparatus" of professional historians to the way historical evidence is culturally processed, disseminated and remembered.

What does it mean to conceive of memory primarily as a site of discursive struggle? The goal is not to deny the immediacy or significance of individual memories to people's lives; it is only to acknowledge that they, like other types of historical accounts, do not provide direct access to the past. Memories, on both a personal and cultural level, acquire meaning in resonance with other historical constructs (images, narratives, politics, ideology, etc.). As Marita Sturken
writes, "unlike a photograph or a film image, memory does not remain static through time—memories are reshaped and reconfigured, they fade and are rescripted. While an image may fix an event, the meaning of that image is constantly subject to contextual shifts." Thus, the process of understanding how the past is transformed into memory—whether personal or "popular"—may be best described as an archaeology in which the goal is not simply to uncover something that has been buried, but to discover how and why its meanings have changed and additional layers have been built up on top of it.

In addition, the formation and function of popular memory depends upon the needs of a given community at a given time. In her research on undergraduate women at the University of Southern California, for example, Lynn Spigel found that students' belief in the progressive emancipation of women since the 1950s directly corresponded to the consensus view offered by television. Although her subjects were aware of the problems inherent in basing their knowledge of women's lives during the 1950s on *I Love Lucy* reruns and nostalgia shows like *Happy Days*, Spigel concluded that these women's popular memories served to "discover a past that makes the present more tolerable." Even admittedly unreliable cultural texts such as TV sitcoms thereby gained credibility and significance because of their use-value for a particular social group at a particular time. Thus, in considering the importance of popular culture to contemporary historiography, we must be willing to consider historical representations which make limited claims to authenticity but may nonetheless profoundly affect people's understanding of the past.

Some of the History, Some of the Time

Whether through reruns of shows and movies from previous eras or the innumerable series which are set in (or occasionally venture into) the past, TV is constantly looking back in time. The most obvious examples of this preoccupation with the past may be found in the recent proliferation of overtly historical or nostalgia-oriented programming such as the History Channel, Ken Burns-style documentaries for PBS, and the cable station TV Land (which initially claimed to reproduce entire programming schedules from the 1960s and 1970s, complete with original commercials). But history also repeats itself on television in more subtle ways, often in the form of playful or fantastic narratives which may not give the appearance of being "about" history at all. This is particularly evident in the science fiction and time travel narratives employed by shows such as the various incarnations of *Star Trek* (NBC 1966-9), including *The Next Generation* (Paramount 1987-94), *Deep Space Nine* (Paramount 1994-Present), and *Voyager* (Paramount 1994-Present), as well as *Quantum Leap* (NBC 1989-93), *Dark Skies* (NBC 1996-7), and *Timecop* (ABC 1997). A parallel trajectory may be seen in shows such as *You Are There* (CBS 1953-7) and *Meeting of Minds* (PBS 1977-81) which employ some of the same implicit historiographical strategies, but aspire to an explicitly pedagogical mode of address and more traditional standards of historical veracity.

In order to address some of the ways in which TV interacts with, and contributes to, the phenomenon of popular memory, the remainder of this essay will focus on shows which deal with questions of historical representation in playful or unexpected ways. The characteristics that unite these shows, rather than their historical accuracy or sincerity of purpose, are such factors as irreverence, creativity, and the willingness to utilize—but also experiment with—historical conventions. Examples are drawn from each of the past five decades, though the threads of continuity which connect them are less dependent upon chronology or historical context than conceptual strategies and expression of shared desires. Underlying many of these fantastic histories are questions which are simply unanswerable through the channels of traditional historical work, including:

"What if it were possible not only to reexperience history but to change it?"

"How might figures from the past understand and experience the present?"

"What if history as we know it were a lie, created and maintained by a massive government conspiracy?"

All of these questions, whether compelling or absurd, have been asked and answered in various forms by television programs, though seldom under the auspices of doing "real" history.

The visualizing of history on television, especially through fantastic scenarios like those suggested above, may represent both dream and nightmare to historians. Clearly, a show like *You Are There* strove for accuracy and fairness within the limits of accepted historical knowledge, reminding viewers at the end of each show that "all the events reported and seen are based on historic fact and quotation." It also succeeded in bringing history "to life" through the recreation of dramatic scenarios (such as Cortez's conquering of Mexico or the execution of Joan of Arc) for which no photographic
record exists. But the show’s basic strategy of creating a mock TV news broadcast, complete with on-the-spot interviews and anchor desk commentary, begs numerous questions regarding historical/journalistic integrity and faith in the televised image.

Interestingly, *You Are There* incorporated CBS’s own lead news anchors and reporters (including Walter Cronkite and Mike Wallace) and closely mimicked the structure of a nightly news broadcast, simulating balance and objectivity even when dealing with notorious historical figures such as John Wilkes Booth. Alternative historical opinions or disputable facts were ingeniously qualified as being uncorroborated due to the immediacy of the live, breaking newscast. Conventions of historical speculation and investigative journalism were merged in the figure of Cronkite, who orchestrated the incoming reports and provided restrained commentary on the context and significance of the events portrayed. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of *You Are There* is the show’s implication that historical figures possess full consciousness of the significance of their actions while they are happening and that historical events unfold according to familiar narratives. Although both of these elements undoubtedly contribute to the pleasure and popularity of the show, history’s “discontinuity, disruption and chaos” are thereby overwritten by a false sense of order and closure.

Although *You Are There* is not framed in terms of time travel (e.g., the presence of a news crew at the Battle of Hastings is treated as perfectly normal), the desire to go back in time and reexperience particular moments from the past seems to be a common motivator for these TV “histories.” Narrative devices such as the time machine or passage through ruptures in the “space-time continuum” (a favorite *Star Trek* phenomenon) make science fiction an ideal genre for this type of exploration of the past. Other motifs include the scientific experiment which went awry, causing the main character of *Quantum Leap* to come unstuck in time, leaping uncontrollably into the bodies of people from the past, and the flashback structure of the Canadian police/vampire drama, *Forever Knight*, in which the immortal characters remember and reexperience events from the distant past. As might be expected, TV time travel almost always involves familiar historical moments or figures. On *Star Trek*, the historical periods reexperienced include such eclectic moments as the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, the outbreak of WWII, the alleged crash-landing of an alien space craft at Roswell, NM in 1947, the first U.S. manned space launch, and the computer revolution of the 1980s. Similarly, *Quantum Leap* revisits events such as the Civil War, the Watts Riots, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Francis Gary Powers U-2 spy incident, the death of Marilyn Monroe, the

The extreme diversity and idiosyncrasy of these historical moments makes it difficult to define a single unifying characteristic or explanation behind them. However, it is possible to identify certain patterns and repetitions revolving around moments which lack historical certainty or closure. Whether due to the magnitude of the trauma or the sheer number of competing explanation-theories, an event such as the JFK assassination in November 1963 provides fertile ground for the writing of counter-histories (in addition to the Oliver Stone version, both The X-Files and Dark Skies have recast the assassination in terms of government conspiracy and coverup). The goal of such revisionism may not be the realization of a final or even most accurate ‘truth’ but the maintaining of cultural interest and the instrumentalization of existing histories/memories for some other agenda. Although it would be difficult to assess the extent to which this proliferation of counter-narratives actually affects the formation of popular memories, the obsessive rewriting and fictionalizing of an historical episode has become a part of the way history is written and remembered in contemporary American culture.

Strange New Worlds ... Same Old Sets

The recurrent notion that history is open to interpretation and modification is also expressed in a more literal sense in shows which explore the possibilities (and dangers) of time travel. The Star Trek series, for example, has enthusiastically developed this narrative trope, with deeply conflicted implications for the idea of historical agency. While the actions of a single individual may cause dramatic social changes, in two separate episodes, the unintended effect of those actions turns out to be Nazi domination of the planet. In later episodes, the “prime directive” against interference in developing cultures is extended to the past so that time travel narratives invariably revolve around maintaining or reinstating the status quo. A variation on this rule occurs, however, when the Enterprise crew encounters “strange new worlds” which happen to look exactly like specific moments in Earth’s past. The alarming frequency of this narrative device is undoubtedly motivated by the show’s famously limited budgets and the availability of pre-made sets and costumes, but it may also be read as allowing expression of impulses to “fix” history in ways that would not be possible in the “real” past. For example, in various corners of the galaxy, Captain Kirk (William Shatner) succeeds in reforming a 1920s-style Chicago crime syndicate, ousting a corrupt Roman proconsul, dethroning a despotic Greek emperor, and overthrowing a proto-Nazi regime.

In contrast, the NBC television series, Quantum Leap, is more open about its moralistic approach to the rewriting of history. In each episode, the show’s main character, Sam (Scott Bakula), “leaps” uncontrollably from one moment of history to the next, finding himself inside the bodies of various individuals (regardless of gender, age, race, etc.), “driven by an unknown force to change history for the better.” Sam is accompanied on his adventures by a holographic sidekick (Dean Stockwell), who runs computer simulations in order to figure out what changes he is supposed to make in order to “put right what once went wrong” and move on to the next leap/episode. Unlike most of the Star Trek historical narratives, in which the fate of the world seems always to hang in the balance, Quantum Leap deals with more personal struggles (e.g., an African-American doctor must survive the Watts riots to help rebuild his
community; a boxer must win his last fight in order to finance a chapel for a group of nuns, etc.). On *Quantum Leap*, history is malleable, but only within the constraints of a pre-existing master plan, the execution of which is governed by statistical probabilities and the good intentions of white, male scientists.

The desire evidenced by these shows to see the past through contemporary eyes is paralleled by instances in which historical figures travel forward in time in order to observe the present. Perhaps the most eloquent example of this was the public television talk show, *Meeting of Minds* (PBS 1977-81). Hosted by Steve Allen, *Meeting of Minds* brought together a group of four actors portraying historical figures from various time periods and cultures to discuss contemporary topics and their relation to history. The historical personalities were selected to ensure controversy and debate, with Allen acting as moderator and occasional provocateur. Interestingly, the guests on the show speak not only from their own presumptive historical knowledge but also as well-informed students of U.S. history, allowing them to make direct comparisons with the show’s present. Thus, for example, the personages of Frederick Douglass and the Marquis de Sade discuss not only the relative merits of bondage and corporal punishment in their own times, but the debates over reform vs. punishment in the American penal system of the 1970s. Likewise, with the introduction of Karl Marx (who is tellingly booed by a studio audience which, moments before, was cheering wildly for Marie Antoinette), Steve Allen promises to hold him accountable for the atrocities committed in his name in the Soviet Union. From an academic standpoint, such transparently contrived situations would probably be considered quasi-historical at best. However, taken in combination with the numerous other examples considered here, they suggest a cultural need to imagine a type of history that is productive rather than merely reproductive and, most importantly, open to interaction with the present.

At its most extreme, this “interaction” of past and present may include explanation or causation of actual historical events within the diegesis of a fictional story. Perhaps the most obvious cinematic example is *Forrest Gump*, in which the main character is digitally composited into archival film images as if he were both present at and responsible for innumerable recent historical events, including the foiling of the Watergate break-in and teaching Elvis to dance. Similar events happen in *Back to the Future*, in which (white) time traveller, Michael J. Fox, teaches Chuck Berry to play rock ‘n’ roll and foils the Watergate break-in. And on *Quantum Leap*, the series’ (white) main character helps to free Martin Luther King’s grandfather from slavery and teaches Chubby Checker to do the twist. The disturbing frequency with which these fictional scenarios involve white characters taking responsibility for (or facilitating) the historical achievements of African-Americans underlines only one aspect of the problematic nature of this type of “playful” historical revisionism.

Our Future’s Happening in Our Past: *Dark Skies* (1996-7)

Perhaps the most overt and consistent example of creative/fantastic historiography on American television was the short-lived NBC series, *Dark Skies*. The series premiere of *Dark Skies* opens with a scene of a fighter pilot in pursuit of an unidentified flying object which appears to be an enormous, black space ship.
moment later, the plane is blown out of the sky, forcing the pilot to eject while the U.F.O. disappears in a flash. Later, an archival news report on television reveals that the downed pilot was Francis Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. Later in the same show, the series’ primary conceit, the presence of aliens on Earth, is linked to several other “real” historical events including the Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of JFK. Subsequent episodes deal with such events as the first U.S. manned space flight and the arrival of the Beatles in America—all represented in archival footage and all events which are tied to individual and collective memories specific to the baby boom generation. Each week, during the opening credits, the show’s main character intones ominously, “History as we know it is a lie,” while the show’s promotional materials promise that Dark Skies reveals “The American history you never knew.”

But obviously this show is not about history in any conventional sense. Nor is Dark Skies adequately described as simply a show about memory or nostalgia (though it is both at times). The overriding tone and inescapable cultural context is that of contemporary paranoia and anti-government conspiracy theories (the show bears an uncanny resemblance to both The X-Files and Oliver Stone’s JFK). Although it would be possible simply to dismiss Dark Skies as a show about neither history nor popular memory, it may also be understood as a text which is particularly illustrative of the inadequacy of these two terms as they are frequently constituted in historiography and cultural criticism.

Perhaps what is needed is a more mobile conceptual framework which takes into account the ways in which historical information and the conventions for portraying history are culturally processed—and often turned into something else altogether. To borrow a concept from Andreas Huyssen, Dark Skies and its counterparts may be thought of as working with strategies of “creative forgetting.” Just as experimentation with language may display “the inherent oppressiveness of the symbolic order,” histories which are “uncoupled from the instrumental need to signify” may reveal their own kind of creativity and anarchy. According to Dark Skies’ creators, Bryce Zabel and James Parriott:

This is being presented as alternative history. Everyone has their (sic) favorite conspiracies, but we will challenge and expand on those by building a framework that adds consistency to the alien-awareness theories ... The series premise is simply this: Our future’s happening in our past.

As is obvious from the show as well as its promotional materials, Dark Skies was banking on its ability to connect with viewers’ interests in a fan community beyond the TV text itself. Among those interests are both a shared cultural framework (an invisible network of “favorite conspiracies”) and the readily mobilized history/memories of a shared past. However, in spite of NBC’s initially strong commitment to the show and a promising combination of elements (including the last minute addition of Star Trek Voyager supervixen, Jeri Ryan to the cast), Dark Skies delivered consistently poor ratings and was canceled after only one season.

Although television shows which engage in counterfactual histories are seldom written about in terms of historiography, these texts and the historical impulses they manifest serve as indicators of the cultural processing and elaboration to which all types of history are subjected. As such, their significance may be more useful for the creation of a new paradigm of “popular” historical thinking in which once heretical concepts (e.g., that present and past are mutually inter-determined; that time and history are non-linear and open to multiple interpretations) are all but taken for granted. Strategies of historical criticism which engage only with those types of historical representation which resemble or aspire to conventions of academic historical writing are singularly ill-suited to theorizing many of the “historical” texts and practices which permeate American popular culture. Part of the power of these texts may lie precisely in their incomprehensibility and potential threat to more conventional historical forms, forcing—or allowing—viewers to choose their own path through the massively complex array of historical imagery and ideologies to which they are exposed. Rather than simply learning new ways to forget, TV viewers may be acquiring a much more specialized and useful ability—to navigate and remember their own past with creativity and meaning—even if it goes “against the design” of historians.

Notes


2Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” in Mellencamp, 226.

3Doane, 227.

4Doane, 228.
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4Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.


8Foucault, 22.


11Rosenstone, 3.

12Rosenstone, 209.


14White, 50.


16Sturken, 17.


18A particularly overt example of this obsession with historical order is the ABC series, Timecop (1997), in which “temporal criminals” are pursued throughout history by members of a top secret government agency known as the “Time Enforcement Commission.” The show warns that, “with history itself at risk,” the TEC must fight to maintain law and order as well as the integrity of the “temporal stream” against time travelling villains who revisit notorious historical criminals such as Jack the Ripper and Al Capone. Apart from its obvious connections to the 1994 movie of the same title, Timecop echoes the pursuit through time of Jack the Ripper in Time After Time (1979) as well as the PBS children’s game show, Where in Time is Carmen San Diego? which pits junior historian-sleuths against a gang of thieves who rampage through time, stealing artifacts and changing history. In each of these cases, the possibility of time travel is conceived simultaneously as a threat to history’s “natural” progression and an opportunity to go back and fix errors or transgressions of the past according to a contemporary, enlightened sensibility.

19For the record, according to Dark Skies, JFK was killed by a para-governmental “Black Ops” team when he threatened to expose the alien invasion. Seemingly out of touch with its own irreverence at times, the show goes to absurd extremes to preserve the Camelot mythos, offering repeated assurances that Kennedy was not part of the alien coverup.


21Huyssen, 94.

22NBC Dark Skies home page.

23This conception of historically resistant reading is drawn from Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” from The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1984, an essay which valorizes the navigation of urban spaces in ways that defy the intentions of urban planners. For de Certeau, this “misappropriation” of public spaces constituted a form of resistance to cultural domination.

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