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Author(s): MIMI WHITE

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TELEVISION GENRES: INTERTEXTUALITY

MIMI WHITE

I.

In the weeks following the airing of ABC's "novel for television" *The Winds of War* (winter 1983), three prominent late night programs presented versions of the heavily promoted mini-series. Johnny Carson performed "Evelyn Wood's *The Winds of War*" on *The Tonight Show*; *Saturday Night Live* did a skit of "Mad Magazine's *The Windbags of War*;" and *SCTV* had a promotional spot for a forthcoming 28 part mini-series *The Long Hard War*. These parodies are hardly surprising; late night television is the acknowledged arena for irreverent, humorous treatments of familiar aspects of cultural and social life. If the rapidity with which all three shows addressed the same, highly visible television special is worth noting, what they did was unremarkably typical. This typicality is exemplary of the habitual ways in which television breeds television and plays off of itself.

Television programs are commonly described and differentiated according to generic categories. In the broadest sense the study of genre involves systematized familiarity, delineating expectations and conventions that guide the construction and reception of a particular set of programs or texts. Some of the familiar designations for television include situation comedy (with its sub-genre ensemble comedy), soap opera, crime drama, game show, news program, news magazine, and

so forth. These categories are distinguished by their programming slots and an array of shared conventions. Beyond this level of generality, the analysis of genre in television becomes increasingly difficult: What historical and structural principles inform the identification of genres? What elements are necessary and sufficient to constitute and delimit a genre?¹

The isolation and identification of specific genres inevitably involves recognition of generic overlap and mixing within individual texts. The generically "pure" text is a threshold of ideality, but stands as a norm and principle of coherence. A range of recent television programs can be seen to undermine this norm of generic unity. In some cases the combination and reconstruction associated with genre development have reached a point where conventional categories have become blurred, or even disappear. In the process the traditional designations lose force both as a standard of coherence with respect to individual programs, and as a principle of differentiation among programs.

Let us consider the case of *The Winds of War*. The mini-series is itself a mixed form of American television program, neither made-for-TV movie nor full blown series, though in light of its success in attracting audiences it has become a fully institutionalized programming option. As an identified program category it raises certain expectations, particularly with respect to narrative development, and carries assumptions regarding production value and prestige. As historical fiction, *The Winds of War* poses additional complications to the extent that the genre of historical narrative intersects with the docu-drama.² The late night parodies

MIMI WHITE teaches in the Department of Radio-TV-Film at Northwestern University.

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of the show paid as much attention to its status as a mini-series as they did to its particular elements (plot, characters, acting, etc.). The very nature of this format was examined in terms of its limits through Carson's "Evelyn Wood" rendition and *SCTV's* 28 part series. In the latter case the difference between a mini-series and regular season program was defined only in terms of promotion and scheduling, especially given the average full-season run is 26 episodes, and the proliferation of limited series, test series, and replacement series which are notably shorter.³

If this sort of comic exaggeration pushes the limits of a specific program format to the point where it is no longer distinct, regular daytime and evening shows similarly exhibit a tendency to combine and collapse clear generic distinctions. *Hill Street Blues* is commonly considered a police drama, and the familiar characteristics of this genre are apparent in the show. These include a focus on urban crime, and attention devoted to daily police procedures, squadroom routine, and the structure of the police force.⁴ These aspects of the show's narrative and mise-en-scene are considered integral to the general "impression of realism" of the police drama as a genre. In *Hill Street* this is redoubled by the film style with its consistent use of hand-held camera, practical light sources, and overlapping sound. While these aspects of the show seem to overdetermine its status and realism as a police drama, they coexist with narrative strategies derived from ensemble comedy, the serial, and romantic melodrama.

The comedic and personal stories are not merely "color" added to police drama (to provide, for instance, depth of characterization) but integral elements of the show's dramatic structure. For example, towards the end of the 1982-83 season, attention was focused on the relationship between Frank Furillo and Joyce Davenport, threa-

tened when Joyce was offered a job in Washington. This developed through a number of episodes and was resolved when Joyce rejected the job, and subsequently accepted Frank's marriage proposal. The popular importance of this development was signaled by reports of the wedding in such places as *TV Guide* and *The Chicago Tribune* while, on the show, Joyce's future still hung in the balance. At the end of the 1983-84 season, the Frank-Joyce relationship again became a central issue, when Joyce initiated a separation and decided to take a vacation alone in Paris. In this case no resolution was offered. Instead the uncertainty of their future as a couple served as a "cliffhanger" for the summer hiatus between programming seasons.

Similarly, one of the police operations of the 1982-83 season concerned an accident insurance fraud. The investigation culminated in a raid on a doctor's office to impound faked patient files. This coincided with officer Bobby Hill having a boil on his posterior lanced by the doctor whose office was being raided. Both stories were sub-plots running through several episodes, one a police investigation the other a comic development. At their point of conjunction in the doctor's office, police operations were secondary to the humor and embarrassment of Hill's situation, represented in the photograph taken on the spot by a black female officer recently assigned to the Hill Street precinct. This in turn contributed to a potential romance sub-plot linking Hill with the new officer. Finally, the apparent dramatic coincidence provided a humorous narrative pay-off if the viewer recalled that Bobby Hill's appointment with the doctor was made for him by Detective Larue who was involved in the police investigation and knew precisely when the raid would occur.

The ensemble nature of *Hill Street Blues* with its shifting attention and variable

hierarchies of interest derives from both the soap opera and institutional/ensemble comedy. One could conceivably describe the show as a prime time soap set in an urban police station rather than in the world of oil or wine companies; or even as an ensemble comedy which, along the lines of *M*A*S*H*, addresses serious subjects. In many crucial ways the show deviates from "classic" police and detective dramas with their usual focus on a central pair of characters, whether in a mentor-disciple relationship (*Kojak*), or as equals (*Chips*, *Cagney and Lacy*, *Simon and Simon*). Yet even these emerge, not as the organizing principle of the show but as embedded sub-structures, when narrative development focuses on the precinct teams (Hill and Wrenko, Bates and Coffey, Larue and Washington) or on Chief Furillo's dealings with individual subordinates. The central structuring principles and narrative strategies of the show cut across conventional generic categories. And crucially, the multiple generic influences or grids do not assume a fixed hierarchy or pattern, but contribute equally, if variably, to the show as a whole.

The consequent ruptures in tone and variable narrative development at the core of the show's dramatic construction account for *Hill Street* being considered a preeminently "realistic" television show. This realism is an effect of genre mixing, as the program incorporates a range of television's fictional modes: generic heterogeneity becomes the basis of realist textuality. One cannot account for the show's individual episodes or generic identity in conventional terms of consistency or unity. If *Hill Street Blues* is an exemplary case, a number of programs have followed its pattern (with variable success), including *Chicago Story*, *St. Elsewhere*, and *Bay City Blues*. In other words, *Hill Street* is not an exception to the rules of dramatic genre on television, but offers a new version of the rules according to a system of genre mixing at

the core of commercial television.⁵ Familiar categories are combined in such a manner that no single genre can adequately account for the narrative and dramatic practices of the show as a whole, while its shifts in generic register remain identifiable. In this sense an awareness of various genres and their distribution within the show is part of the experience of watching *Hill Street Blues*.

II.

An awareness of generic imitation and combination is far more extreme in late night comedy. In programs such as *Late Night with David Letterman*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *SCTV* the processes of generic derivation at work in prime time drama are conjoined with self-reflexive parody and exaggeration. The recognition and exhibition of generic precedents in these shows suggests their similarity to the genre functioning examined in relation to *Hill Street Blues*. While the programs are by no means equivalent, the terms of comparison are important. They indicate that late night comedy does not represent a break with the regular practices of television, even if it elaborates these practices in a particularly self-conscious way. Indeed these shows rely, more than most, on a general familiarity with the medium, its genres, and programs. In a sense these shows promote the ideal viewing audience for commercial television even while seemingly engaged in deconstructing conventional TV programming. Late night comedy programs aggressively mimic and undermine a range of television practices; their formats and content are determined in relation to other television shows.

The immediate reference for *Late Night* is *The Tonight Show* with its mixture of comedy, talk, and performance. Many of David Letterman's skits are versions of Johnny Carson features. For example, in

December Carson usually presents a variety of Christmas gift recommendations; the items are actual products selected because of their limited use or peculiar nature. Letterman presents a similar series of gift ideas (not only at Christmas, but also throughout the year). But in his case they are not items actually available for purchase. Rather, they are fabricated, parody versions of peculiar, limited use products. In this case the playfully derisive attitude Carson assumes with respect to consumer products is reproduced by Letterman, but is carried even further to encompass his position with regard to Carson. For all that *Late Night* is considered a "unique" and singularly silly show, it is structured according to parameters established by *The Tonight Show*, a connection reinforced by its programming slot, as the shows are aired back-to-back. David Letterman even asserts a fake history for the show, frequently referring to its origins back in the 50's to suggest a "tradition" within the world of television equivalent to *The Tonight Show*.

The relationship between the two shows assumes the form of norm and parody in which the "norm" is defined by virtue of being parodied, as Letterman expands on and exaggerates the ironic, self-conscious humor and mannerisms of Johnny Carson. This relationship provides a framework and validation for a lot of Letterman's behavior. For example, Letterman is a less consistent and skilled conversationalist than Carson, but his awkwardness in this regard can be justified or accepted as a foregrounding of the processes and difficulties involved in being a talk show host. The terms of this relationship are in turn capable of being extended, with *Late Night* subject to definition as a new norm when, for example, Joe Piscopo imitates David Letterman on a *Saturday Night Live* parody of *Late Night*; or when Carson occasionally affects a Letterman gesture or mannerism.

At the same time *The Tonight Show* is not the sole referent for *Late Night*. There are a variety of features on the show derived from other genres and programs. Letterman's tours of the city and "The Museum of the Hard to Believe" parody an array of actuality programs—*Real People*, *That's Incredible*, and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. "You Asked to Hear It Described" is an elaboration on *You Asked For It*, replacing dramatization with verbal descriptions of snowstorms, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, or winning football plays by (at least purported) members of the studio audience. In this same vein Letterman frequently plays with the relationship between the members of the studio audience and the staged show undermining the distinction between "stars" (the show host and his guests) and "regular people." In one case a woman in the worst seat in the studio was invited to sit on stage with the guests and David Letterman through the whole program.

SCTV, in its commercial network incarnation, was structured as a network on its own right, with a full range of programming including its own advertising and promotional spots. (In the fall of 1983 the program moved to Cinemax, a cable station; in this context *SCTV* presents itself as a full-service cable network.) Its self-consciousness about the institution of television extends to behind-the-scenes looks at network administrative and production problems. And because of the network's financial instability, it has experimented with a number of formats in an effort to keep solvent including an attempt to convert to a viewer-financed public station, and a sale on ads resulting in versions of newspaper classified ads for television broadcast. The programs include game shows, a soap opera, talk shows, entertainment and dramatic specials, and so forth. Within the shows, things often go awry on the air, disrupting familiar patterns of program development. Thus the good-natured chatter

between talk show host Sammy Maudlin and his Ed MacMahon-like sidekick William B. turns into a barrage of insults, as William B.'s constant laughter turns to tears; Libby Wolfson, moderator of a feminist-oriented talk show spends more time smelling her breath and armpits for hints of odor than she does conversing with guests; and the contestants on a game show prove incapable of following the rules, ringing buzzers before the questions are completed, freezing up when called on to answer, and finally delivering an obviously wrong response, until the host cancels the game out of sheer frustration.

In addition to these versions of standard television shows, *SCTV* has a range of hybrids combining, for example, rural-leisure programming with popular entertainment: hence, *Farm Film Report* and *The Fishin' Musician*. On 3-D *Firing Line* Count Floyd (host of a regular *SCTV* feature, *Monster Chiller Horror Theater*) led a discussion of a 3-D remake of *Midnight Cowboy*. His guests were two stars from the film (who appear regularly in the 3-D horror movies seen on Count Floyd's other show) and movie critic Pauline Kael. In this instance *SCTV*'s standard parody of a Saturday afternoon horror movie program was combined with the serious talk show (William F. Buckley's *Firing Line* which airs on PBS) and the movie criticism show. *SCTV* also specifies references to the television programming season. During ratings sweeps month the *SCTV* network aggressively promoted, in the words of its owner, "less art and more jiggle." This included a promotional spot for the evening news promising reports on an underwear fashion show, a strip search at a girl's school, and the bust of cathouse, along with an editorial commentary on the use of sex on television to achieve higher ratings. A show aired in November (and rerun, perhaps coincidentally, the weekend before the Chicago mayoral election) featuring elections in Melonville, the

fictional home base of the *SCTV* network. This particular program included an array of campaign advertisements and *SCTV* election coverage, with their correspondent predicting winners as soon as the polls opened.

III.

At first blush the absurdist late night treatments of commercial television seem to provide at least a relative break with conventional formats, with their critical if humorous attitude towards habitual viewing material. Even commercial sponsors are not let off the hook, with the fake, parodic advertisements regularly featured on *Late Night*, *SCTV*, as *Saturday Night Live*. These often go to extremes in their exposure and ridicule of advertising strategy, as in *Saturday Night Live*'s "Quaddafi-Look" jeans, and their version of Calvin Klein ads with Joan Rivers' portrayal of an elephantine Elizabeth Taylor touting Calvins. Within a particular show these false spots reproduce the structure of commercial television, with its constant moves to an array of mini-narratives selling products and back to the show properly speaking. In the context of *SCTV* or *Saturday Night Live*, however, one never knows for sure whether an ad will be part of the show or not. (This is not 100% true. With habitual watching one can learn to predict the distribution of real and fake ads with relative accuracy). In one instance two "real" station breaks were interrupted by a single *Saturday Night Live* fake ad; the division between program and station break was clear only to someone watching the whole run of commercials rather than running to the kitchen for a snack.

In this way these shows push program heterogeneity to an extreme, with their skits of variable length, based on a range of television genres, incorporating their own

commercials. But this is in turn the ideal structure to secure viewer attention. What more could a commercial sponsor desire than a show that encourages viewers to sit through ads because they are not at first glance distinguishable from the show itself? In fact sponsors clearly exploit potential continuities. For example when Leon Redbone was the featured musical talent on *Saturday Night Live*, the Leon Redbone Budweiser beer commercial was aired during the show. In this regard one can also consider commercials which imitate the strategies of television programs in general as well as specific shows. These include the Illinois Lotto Lottery spot imitating *Hill Street Blues*' opening roll call, and the Diet Coke ad structured like, and incorporating footage from, the *Night of 100 Stars* entertainment extravaganza.

Noel Burch has argued that the mixture of modes and levels of representation in contemporary American television reveals the degree to which alienation, de-dramatization, and heterogeneity have been instituted as the norm of dominant representational practice. He says that actuality programs—*Real People*, *That's Incredible*, and so forth—are particularly noteworthy in this respect. “[Their] distancing shifts in the status of representation which at first glance ought to make a Godard green with envy are in fact part of a brilliant strategy of disengagement, designed to place everything on the same plane of triviality, which is the general undertaking of United States television.”⁶ The practices of late night comedy programs and *Hill Street Blues* can be seen to exemplify the same trend in relation to conventional generic categories, promoting self-consciousness and heterogeneity of genre identity as a norm of television production.

Such textual strategies are in part an effect of genre development. Genres are structures regulating similarity and difference

both among texts and in viewer-text relations, a position advanced by those who study genre from the viewpoint of industry practice—maximizing profit returns, incorporating audience response, etc.—as well as by those interested in the cinematic or televisual apparatus as signifying systems and the metapsychology of spectatorship.⁷ The operation and control of this “regulation” are obviously acute in commercial television programming. The maintenance of large audiences is crucial, and there are a lot of programming slots to be filled. Because television programming is both continuous and regular (there are no gaps in the flow of programs; the same shows are aired at the same time each day or week) there is an equal demand for differentiation and repetition. As a result the process of “controlled” transformation of genre may be more accelerated on television than it is in the film industry. One can effect an apparent change by borrowing from existing, and presumably popular forms and combining them in a new configuration. This in part accounts for the initial critical response to *Hill Street Blues* as a particularly innovative show. But in light of the tenuous and overlapping terms of classification prevalent in current generic divisions, the whole notion and definition of genre in television may be open to reinvestigation.

The tendency to cut across and combine established generic categories results in textual disruptions within the context of individual programs. Yet while the unity of conventional genres is undermined, current television practices institutionalize new norms for realism and coherence in terms of textual and representational heterogeneity. This can be seen to support the institution of commercial television as a whole in at least two ways: 1) as outlined by Noel Burch, everything on television is construed according to the same standard of disinterest or distanced bemusement;⁸ 2) the shifts and ruptures within

shows reproduce the shifts from program to commercials and thereby promote viewing habits which maintain audience attention through commercial breaks. These support functions in turn suggest that ideological pressures may underlie the practices discussed above. Further analysis and research along these lines can contribute to an understanding of the relationship between television's modes of textuality and programming practices on the one hand, and the ideology of the institution of commercial television on the other.

Notes

¹ For example see the discussion of crime/police/detective shows in Cary Bazalgette, "Reagan and Carter, Kojak and Crocker, Batman and Robin?" *Screen Education*, n. 20 (Autumn 1976), especially pp. 54-58.

² Raymond Williams discusses what he calls the drama-documentary in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 72-74. Though he does not elaborate its connection to historical narrative, he argues that this particular mixed form "may prove to be one of the most significant innovations in our contemporary culture."

³ The whole question of parody and promotion in relation to issues of genre definition and the case of *The Winds of War* was also posed by Steve Martin's comedy special *The Winds of Whoopee*, broadcast on NBC during the premier episode of the ABC mini-series. While the content of the comedy show bore no relation to *The Winds of War*, its title and promotional tag—"Twelve years in the making"—exploited the massive publicity campaign for the mini-series. The week before both shows aired, Steve Martin played this out to the limit as a guest on *The Tonight Show*, discussing his years of labor on the special and criticizing ABC for stealing his title and running their show opposite his. Meanwhile Ali McGraw, one of the stars of *The Winds of War*, was one of Johnny Carson's guests on *The Tonight Show* the same night as Steve Martin.

⁴ Bazalgette, pp. 57-58.

⁵ Todd Gitlin discusses industry decision making practices in *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). A whole chapter, "The Triumph of the Synthetic: Spinoffs, Copies, Recombinant Culture," is devoted to industry executives' reliance on the security of familiar forms in generating new shows. "The

logic of maximizing the quick payoff has produced that very Hollywood hybrid, the recombinant form, which assumes that selected features of recent hits can be spliced together to make a eugenic success. If *M*A*S*H* and *Holiday on Ice* are both winners, why not army surgeons on skates? In this world without deep tradition, 'why not?' is the recurrent question. The result is the absurd industrialization of mannerism, which is the industry's characteristic style." (p. 64) However Gitlin concentrates on the mentality of decision making rather than the textual processes and effects at stake in industry practices.

⁶ Noel Burch, "Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits," *Screen* 23,2 (July/August 1982), p. 32.

⁷ For example see Tom Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), especially chapters 1 and 2; and Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

⁸ Burch, pp. 32-33.

(continued from page 63)

³⁰These ideas were presented in an unpublished paper by Mary Beth Haralovich at a UCLA NEH Seminar on "Television: Form and Function" directed by Nick Browne during summer 1984.

³¹Teresa De Lauretis, "Dream of a Woman," in *Cinema and Language*, edited by Stephen Heath and Patricia Mellencamp, (University Publications of America, AFI, 1983), p. 32; also in her *Alice Doesn't*.

³²Philip Rosen, "Subject Formation and Social Formation," in *Cinema and Language*, p. 174.

³³Rosen, p. 175. Rosen's comment [p. 176] is especially reinforcing: "Current theories of the subject inevitably fragmented in language and representation make necessary a consideration of the determinative force of the appearance of the coherent subject in its various historical manifestations. This still leads to an examination of discourse, of systems of representations, as they posit subjects, but from the viewpoint of analysis of the social formation."