THE LACANIAN TRILOGY AND THE TELEVISION IMAGE

Sue Scheibler
To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin

... television may itself be seen as a postmodernist phenomenon, and its obliteration of hitherto sacrosanct boundaries, such as those between “fiction” and “reality” or between the space of the viewing-subject and that within the TV screen.

E. Ann Kaplan

Television structures a very different relationship between the imaginary and symbolic, between a dream of wholeness and the lack that motors it. Institutionally and formally, television insists upon the repetitive reformulation of desire.

Beverle Houston

One of the characteristics of the postmodern is the effacement of boundaries combined with an erasure of history. As categories collapse, so too do the terms of “past”, “present”, and “future.” Varying styles, modes, fashions are combined in strange and unusual ways in the attempt not to create the new as much as to parody and point up the fashions of the old.

In the attempt to negotiate a variety of styles, history is also effaced in the postmodernist phenomenon. Historical categories no longer seem to apply and historical events take on strange and unusual readings. History becomes a memory, a spectacle, an object to be seized in a moment then re-formed or re-remembered in an manner that allows it to be contained. So it is that the Real of history is first filtered through the mechanisms of the Symbolic which “interprets, symbolizes, articulates, and universalizes both the experiential and the concrete which, paradoxically, it has already shaped contextually”\(^1\) and is then translated into the Imaginary in the desire to create and recreate a sense of wholeness even as the gap of the real is covered over.

The Real lies as an abyss between, over, and around the relationship between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Characterized by chaos and contradiction, it marks the absence which must be made into presence. “The precedence of the Real in the Lacanian scheme, as the point of the subject’s confrontation with an endlessly retreat-

As reality recedes before the subject, the subject defines him/herself in terms of a missing object which must be reclaimed. “It is the loss of the object and the relation of the subject to this loss—the knots which the subject gets into in its attempts to elide or replace it—that Lacan terms the structure of desire.”\(^2\) Desire is then structured by the abyss of the missing Real, the uncontainable and uncontrollable Real.

The absence of the Real is covered over through representation. “In other words, the desire to perceive similitude where there was yet scarcely a discernible image speaks to the imperative of finding a surrogate with which to cover over the absent real.”\(^3\) The surrogate becomes the representation of reality, that which is constructed to stand in for, to replace, to replenish the absent Real. And thus we have the pleasure of cinema with its promised images of the real which stand in for the Real, mitigating a position between the Imaginary and Symbolic relations confronting and confronted by the ego.

Consciousness of the real is replaced by faith in an absolute and natural order of things that transcends the contradictions of history, the market economy, and sexual politics. By keeping frag-
lution of lack, a seizure of ontological plenitude, even as it resolves the issues of the Symbolic, providing final and irrevocable meaning to the constant sliding of signifiers, offering a knotting point, an epistemological resting point.

In cinema this play occurs in the play of presence and absence which organizes the cinematic image. Yet the Imaginary satisfaction is penetrated by flashes of the Real, often mitigated by the Symbolic even as they are soon smoothed over by the mechanisms of the Imaginary.

During these intrusions of the real, the cinematic image allows itself to perform itself, drawing attention to the spectacle which is its apparatus. Even as it promises a sense of wholeness, it reveals its own lack, its own absence at the moment it performs the materiality of its presence. I would argue that these documentary moments offer to the spectator the spectacle of the play of presence and absence, in which the spectator, sitting helplessly by, observes the attempt by the apparatus to cover its own lack even as it is revealed in a game of cinematic fort/da. Thus, the spectator, already positioned as voyeur, is assaulted by the exhibitionism of the cinematic apparatus performing at the height of its documentary arrogance. The excess of the signified, unattainable as it is, spills over, contaminating the signifier even as it pretends to its status as signified.

If this is true for moments within mainstream narrative cinema, how much more is it true for documentary/non-fiction films? If the so-called documentary moments in fictional texts work to reveal even as they smooth over the irruption of the real, then how do documentary films per se, that is films that are premised upon some revelation of, disclosure of reality/history constitute this cinematic fort/da by which the film seeks to negotiate the play of presence and absence even as it structures an Imaginary moment on the threshold of the Symbolic? Documentary forms not only document some construction of history/the social but also some aspect of their own history/ construction, of their own Imaginary. As a documentary performs its dance between the Imaginary of the cinematic moment and the Symbolic of its plea for the

Faith in a natural order of things creates in turn a belief in the possibility of a transcendental subject. The signified of metaphysics turns upon a proposition of faith, a religious fervor that desires a plenitude of being as well as Being itself, that is a certitude both ontological and epistemological. The crisis of metaphysics is a crisis of faith is a crisis of representation. Or one can say the entire realm in reverse—the crisis of representation is a crisis of faith is a crisis of metaphysics. The ontological need is that of a stable center, the transcendental subject. The epistemological is that of the assurance of mastery through knowing. “Humankind’s common desire is for a stable center, and for the assurance of mastery through knowing.”

At heart then is the desire for the Real which will in some way satisfy the Imaginary, the movement towards and into wholeness, the reso-
articulation and universalization of experience, its slide between the two becomes a dance upon the lip of the abyss which is the Real.

And what of the instance when the two play together, when the desire for the Imaginary wholeness embodied by fiction texts incorporates the epistemological desire of non-fiction? The inclusion of non-fiction or documentary moments in a fictional text has long been part of the practice of alternative cinema. One prime example of this is that of the Cuban cinema with films such as Memories of Underdevelopment, in which the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality functions in a political way, calling attention to the effacing of ideology characteristic of classical narrative cinema. Yet it would seem that in recent years the impact of what has been called the postmodern spirit and its effacement of (or at least shifting) boundaries and categories would work to position such combinations of fiction and non-fiction within a different political paradigm. The superficial play of styles and tones may arguably demonstrate the more recent workings of classical cinema.

If, as Kaplan argues, television may be seen as a postmodernist phenomenon, it is precisely in its extension of the obliteration of boundaries such as fiction and reality. She also states that the boundary of space between viewing-subject and image is also obliterated by the television screen.

The desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at the very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.

The acceptance of the reproduction of reality as a move to overcome its otherness, its ephemeral quality, allows of the desire to be satiated in some way by means of the objectification and miniaturization of things. If representation supplements presence, if presence is modified into a continuous and homogenized object through representation, then the representation in miniature must present the crisis of subjectivity. The desire to bring things closer works only to institute a deeper desire as the very miniaturization which makes the object containable (and consumable) reveals its lack, the absence which its representation seeks to overcome, efface, bridge.

In her article on television, "Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption," Beverle Houston argues that the characteristics marking television as a bad object are precisely those that construct it as an object of consumption and, activate structures of desire.

Its function is more directly linked to consumption which it promotes by shattering the imaginary possibility over and over, repeatedly reopening the gap of desire. Television sets up an obsessive acting-out of desire, which the spectator tries to assuage by consuming the television text itself in its unique promise.
I would argue that the miniaturization that occurs in the television image, the bringing closer to the subject the various objects of epistemological and ontological interest, functions to make the television text into an item of consumption. The destruction of the transcendental subject through the dispersal of specular mastery creates desire for what cannot be reproduced. Specular mastery is interrupted, blocked, and with it the sense of free movement essential to the workings of the transcendental. Desire then becomes linked to consumption, installed as part of the collapse of the categories associated with the imaginary workings of the cinematic image.

The miniaturization of the image destroys reality even as the medium lays claim to a liveness, a presence not fully available to cinema. In a sense, then, television begins to efface the boundaries between fiction and reality. Its plea to and promise of the Real becomes part of its structure.

Houston argues that the interruption of the flow creates the insatiable desire which leads the ego to repeatedly seek “a oneness-through-incorporation by watching more television, by consuming it itself and the objects pictured in it, as extensions or displacements of itself.” The television text is marked by disruptions and multiplicities which “structure it like a kind of barred Other, as Lacan would say, where meaning constantly slips away, eluding the ego and reinstating desire.” I would argue that the interruptions function to organize the text into palatable portions available for consumption. The imaginary wholeness of the cinematic subject is replaced by a sliding relationship between moments of imaginary plenitude and moments of symbolic activity, both of which negotiate a relationship to the real that lurks behind the television image as a structure of desire for the lost object.

For the spectator has the illusion of being in control of the “windows,” whereas in fact the desire for plenitude that keeps him/her watching is, in this case, forever deferred. The TV is seductive precisely because it speaks to a desire that is insatiable—it promises complete knowledge in some far distant and never-to-be-experienced future. TV’s strategy is to keep us endlessly consuming in the hopes of fulfilling our desire.

The attempted incorporation of the real in the form of liveness and/or history can be seen in the many forms of docudramas as well as various manifestations of news programs. The recent trend towards series such as The Reporters, or Cops would seem to point to an obsession with the ability of the apparatus to be involved with “real life” and to display it to the viewing subject.

Even fictionalized series seek to incorporate a sense of liveness and with it a paradigm of the real by, on one hand presenting itself as being filmed before a live audience, declaring as it does its roots in television history, reflecting a nostalgia for the golden days of television. On the other hand, there is the trend to incorporate serious social issues into the diegesis as well as refer-
ences to “real” television personalities. In this way, television functions to question, if not obliterate, the boundaries between fiction and reality.

One example of this would be a recent episode of the series China Beach. The episode, well publicized in both print and electronic advertising, presented a legitimization of itself as a drama of Vietnam by utilizing narrative from “real life survivors of the Vietnam conflict,” stories by nurses and doctors who has served in Vietnam and thus could validate the accuracy of the series.

The narratives were structured in a Reds-like fashion—closeups of the faces against a blank background, talking freely without benefit of an interrogator, remembering the history of the experience of serving in a hospital in Vietnam like the one in China Beach. The narratives, intercut with clips from past episodes, functioned to illustrate the history being relayed by the historical and real subjects. The fact that the clips were largely from past episodes allowed the series to legitimize itself as presenting a real look at the lives of the nurses who served in Vietnam, in answer to its many critics who cry fiction.

The anthologizing of one’s own history is not unique among television series. It has been utilized quite frequently by shows such as Family Ties, Mash, St. Elsewhere, Facts of Life, Kate and Allie to recap a season, to open a new season, to create a family photo album sense of the series. In addition, the need to legitimize one’s discourse structured several of the Mash episodes by incorporating real live Korean war correspondents as interviewers, allowing the cast/writers to air the political concerns of the series in its ultimate moments of liberal humanism.

Television’s mode of address as primarily dialogic enable such tactics to work. In the case of the China Beach episode, however, the dialogic elements were not constructed around a fictionalization of a person but by the incorporation of the real into the fictional text. The metaphysics of presence exhibited by the dialogic “we” of television positioned the viewer into a relationship with the Vietnam experience as conveyed by the eyewitness accounts. However, while the real structured the episode, being incorporated in that sense, it was not allowed to be absorbed by the fiction but remained outside, commenting upon the fiction, illustrating the fictionalized narratives. While it would seem, on first glance, that the fiction images worked to supplement the personal narrative of history, as illustration of the series being told, the stories as presence were supplemented by the representation. Once again, presence needs representation to point to its own absence—the Real is absent, chimeric. It cannot be named, conquered, controlled, or exhibited.

The text served as commentary on the reality, offering a claim to be “real,” to make the real, history, intelligible—and palatable, consumable. Television obliterates the boundaries between fiction and reality. The undiscoverable reality is reduplicated through the medium of signs. The signs provide meaning to the utterances.

History is “cannibalistic,” and meaning becomes the closed arena of conflict between the two contradictory opera-
tions: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself.13

The past action of Vietnam disguises itself as fiction, then seeks to validate itself as history by positioning itself within the historical narratives/memories of participants, eyewitnesses. The structure of the episode functions as a shifting between narrative, fiction, voice-over by testimony, fiction, commentary by testimony. For example, after a commercial break the episode resumes with a shot of the USO singer sitting beside the death bed of a soldier. He tells her to reach into his pocket where she finds a picture of herself. Cut to a closeup of a real-life USO singer who speaks of an incident when a dying soldier gave her a picture of herself. Cut to the series episode continuing as the soldier dies while she sings to him the song she sang at the show he had attended. As he dies, the camera closes in on the tear-streaked face of the hardened and cynical nurse, jaded by day after day of post-combat surgery. Cut to another testimonial, extreme close-up of weeping nurse who comments on the need to pretend as if it didn’t touch the heart. Then there is the voice-over of another person speaking of the need for perspective; the image from the series presents a glorious sunset, and the nurse and singer on the beach, discuss the recent day and the need to touch at least one soldier, to make an impact on the lives of the wounded and dying.

The entire segment was positioned in the evening’s program directly before an episode of the ABC News production Nightline. The news segment, anchored by Ted Koppel, dealt with the return to Vietnam of several veterans, all suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The veterans, an assortment of combat soldiers, doctors, and nurses, returned to Vietnam, accompanied by two therapists, as a means of confronting and hopefully overcoming the nightmares and suicidal despair plaguing them. The advertising for the segment linked it quite clearly with the China Beach episode, providing another form of legitimization for the series as well as another linkage between the fiction and reality.

The Nightline episode incorporated actual footage of the war with shots of the return visit to Vietnam and talking head interviews with Ted Koppel. The catharsis of the trip put into play the catharsis of the viewing public, confronted yet again with its past. The history of the Vietnam

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war, attached to the suffering individual, becomes palatable as the collective history is filtered into the victimization of specific individuals by not only the war experience but also by the treatment received at the hands of the American public. The fatherly figure of Ted Koppel negotiates the text and the experience, giving form to the reality and providing commentary to the experience. The episode serves to educate the viewing public about the disorder of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thus both the social and communication function is a closed circuit like a decoy which assumes the power of a myth. Faith in the existence and value of information is confirmed by that tautological proof that the system provides of itself, by reduplicating through the medium of signs, a reality that is in fact undiscoverable, chimeric. ¹⁴

The China Beach episode functions as a mirror segment. In it fiction and reality, while not precisely intermingled, perform together, operate on a common ground of mythologizing the Vietnam experience. The shift serves to illustrate the tenuous relationship between the Imaginary and Symbolic as the subject attempts to negotiate, cover over, the lost object by maintaining the illusion of presence, the denial of absence, the suturing of lack into a sense of plenitude.

The real of history is filtered through the Symbolic network of language, category, the process of naming then translated into the Imaginary wholeness of the fiction text. The connection marks the absence as an integral part of presence, revealing the supplementary nature of representation as it fills in the gaps in reality, attempting to structure the missing Real.

The television image, having lost its imaginary construction of specular mastery, structures desire in the sliding between the three terms of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real.

In this play of representation, the point of certain becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. ¹⁵

³ Ibid.
¹⁰ Houston, p. 184.
¹¹ Houston, p. 185.