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REFLECTIONS ON MAGNUM, P.I.

One of the great achievements of twentieth-century culture beams into our living rooms every Thursday night. Offered to us by the only household appliance that really cares about Western civilization, it has insinuated itself into the fabric of American society with a subtlety that would confound Iago. And Karl Marx. And Ronald Reagan. Its name is *Magnum, P.I.*

While untold copies of *Ulysses*, their pages yellowed and brittle, sit forgotten in the dark corners of bookshelves throughout the land, *Magnum, P.I.* surges through twenty million homes each week. While Godard's *La Chinoise* lures thirty-seven acolytes into a darkened, isolated chamber only to reinforce their faith, *Magnum, P.I.* addresses an impossibly disparate audience in the space where people live their lives and contest their beliefs daily. While so many texts and artifacts throughout our culture primp and preen before the mirror of art—trapped forever in a lost world in which culture is determined by Matthew Arnold, tenured faculty, and the personal ads in the *New York Review of Books*—*Magnum, P.I.* quietly forges onward through the culture as it actually exists—and changes—in the United States during the last decades of the twentieth century.

This has been a weak season (1983-84) for *Magnum, P.I.*, and still I can name at least six episodes which surpass in quality any movie nominated for an Academy Award this year. These episodes display all of the qualities that we seek in our finest motion pictures—ambiguity, attention to detail, thematic complexity, formal self-consciousness, a concern for their social and historical context. In the same season, however, *Magnum, P.I.* has dumped upon the airwaves a half-dozen miserable episodes that make *Fantasy Island* seem like Ibsen. This contradiction,

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which could never be accepted of high art, is exactly what makes television the most exciting form of popular culture. Only convention defines aesthetic quality. Only convention dictates that a work of uneven quality must be inferior. Television, like all great popular art, celebrates the expressive power of imperfection, the epiphany that lurks beneath an unraveled seam. An exploitation film like *Mandingo* may tell us more than a classic work like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about slavery in the American South. *The A-Team* may come closer than *Apocalypse Now* to understanding America's role in Vietnam. As one who took keen interest in the development of twentieth-century culture, Walter Benjamin noted: "There are many people whose idea of a dialectician is a lover of subtleties. . . . Crude thoughts, on the contrary, should be part and parcel of dialectical thinking, because they are nothing but the referral of theory into practice. . . . A thought must be crude to come into its own in action."¹

Television makes no guarantees. Each episode is an adventure. As the epitome of contemporary culture, television is an impure cultural form. Unlike forms of high art, television cannot isolate itself from the ebb and flow of social life. Produced at high speeds, without time to ensure the quality of each episode, television series prove that the so-called "culture industry" is not monolithic, but is subject to the capriciousness of human creativity. Without the luxury of time, television artists construct their work by collage, by pillaging the culture for the pieces of their construction. They exhibit their art—the television series—in our homes, not hung in stately repose on a museum wall, but unfolding within the rhythms of daily life. Television is isolated neither by space nor by time; it is inextricably woven into the environment of its reception. In many ways, the meaning of a TV series or episode emerges more as a product of its context than of any textual operations. For this reason, television is both the central cultural form of our society, transcendent in its banality, and a truly postmodernist apparition, heterogeneous to a fault. Television is a sieve through which passes the best and worst of contemporary culture. Some elements of that culture become trapped within the mesh, while others slip away. The capriciousness of this process, in which the artwork develops as the unconscious residue of living culture, makes television an exciting, unpredictable force.

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As a witty poet remarked so rightly, the mirror would do well to reflect a little more before returning our image to us.—Jacques Lacan²

When you look closely at the indignant stare of a blank television screen, you see yourself and your home reflected back. Although this mirror appears to act effortlessly, it reflects with shrewd calculation before returning our image to us. Despite our wishes, it never offers us the image that we expect. In many ways the traditional disdain for much of prime-time television occurs because television is imprudent. It refuses to deliver the image that we desire. In a medium that changes perpetually—even when the television set is switched off—nothing on television is precisely as we imagine, remember, or hope. Even series television, defined by repetition, forever plays havoc with our expectations.

The incredulity I face when I champion *Magnum, P.I.* arises from the fact that television programs depend so strongly upon their context for meaning. Both the uninitiated and the regular viewer define *Magnum, P.I.* by its relation to other television series as much as by the texts that bear its name. Since commercial television depends upon placing its texts within familiar contexts, this is an understandable phenomenon. Many people who reject the possibility that *Magnum, P.I.* is a great work immediately assume that it is simply another "beefcake" show like those that premiered in the early 1980s (*Vegas, Matt Houston*) to showcase attractive male heroes. Or they fail to distinguish the show from the remainder of television's unending supply of detective programs. Or they identify *Magnum, P.I.* with the great monolith of Hawaiian politics, *Hawaii Five-0*. To be honest, in a medium that trades on the subtle balance of similarity and difference, *Magnum, P.I.* actually does resemble those shows. But with a difference.

At first glance, it may be difficult to distinguish the difference, because television rejects our crude attempts to apply traditional critical methods. Consequently, it raises our worst fears about popular culture and democracy. (Who actually watches *The Dukes of Hazzard*, anyway?) We refuse to admit that what appears to be the impoverishment of television programming may, in fact, arise from our misrecognition of the medium, from our attempts to identify it in accordance with previous cultural forms and to define it with critical methods developed for those forms. (If a misinformed taxonomist tosses

a frog from a cliff and it crashes to the ground, must we blame the frog for failing to fly?) How simple it is to dismiss television programming to the tyranny of the masses, to corporate cynicism, to hegemonic forces, or to the decline of Western civilization. These interpretations have one common feature: a reactionary fear of a dynamic cultural process. Rather than recoil from a medium that does not reward our traditional aesthetic criteria, however, we should begin by admitting that we may be mistaken about television. In *Magnum, P.I.* we have seen the future of narrative artistry. And it exists on a nineteen-inch screen.

As the central cultural medium of our time, television enables our society to tell stories about itself. During the television age, our culture has shown a fascination for Hawaiian crime stories. Broadcast television has existed in this country for parts of five decades. In four of those decades, the medium has presented a popular Hawaiian crime series. Through close analysis of these series, we might begin to understand the elusive process of cultural change. We might see how television—as much as traditional folk tales or handicrafts—functions as expressive culture.

Hawaii, the ritual setting for each of these series, offers an American Paradise, the ultimate reward for America's obsessive westward journey. (Magnum often explicitly refers to the islands as Paradise.) But, like everything gained in the nation's western expansion, this promised land is tainted by the blood spilled to acquire and retain it. As Pearl Harbor taught us, Paradise comes only at great expense. Isolated, vulnerable, and yet unimaginably beautiful and bountiful, Hawaii is a powerful symbolic force, a perilous idyll. The image of tainted Paradise, a motif familiar to American culture, provides the motivation for setting, crime stories on the islands. By emphasizing the vigilance required to sustain even an image of utopia, these series establish a complex, mythic setting that embodies the basic contradictions of our society. While all of the shows situate themselves within this symbolic arena, they, nevertheless, articulate the Hawaiian crime form according to the demands of their contemporary context.

Between 1959 and 1963, ABC broadcast *Hawaiian Eye*, a detective series spun off from the hit series, *77 Sunset Strip*. Starring Robert Conrad, Anthony Eisley, and the queen of hardware-convention variety shows, Connie Stevens, this series offered

an image for its time: the Beat Generation meets *Dragnet* in Paradise (a combination which would be updated in the late sixties with *The Mad Squad*), *Hawaiian Eye* delivered many of the elements that make *Magnum, P.I.* a success—handsome detective, glamorous settings, beautiful women, loveable sidekicks, and crime melodrama.

From 1968 until 1980, CBS presented its version of crime in Hawaii, the longest continuously running show in television history, the redoubtable *Hawaii Five-0*. With his iconic Hawaiian-wave hairstyle, Jack Lord, along with sidekick James MacArthur, cleaned up the Hawaiian isles for twelve stern, law-and-order years. Weathering the countless social changes that occurred over its run, the Five-0 team staved off all forces that threatened to contaminate our nation's Paradise.

When the *Hawaii Five-0* ratings-tide ebbed during the late 1970s, CBS gave the series an ocean burial. Less than one year later, the network launched *Magnum, P.I.* in its place. When it premiered in December 1980, *Magnum, P.I.* entered directly into the tradition established by its predecessors. CBS designed the series specifically to fill the gap left by the cancellation of *Hawaii Five-0*. *Magnum, P.I.* utilized the expensive Hawaiian production facilities constructed by the network for *Hawaii Five-0* in the mid-seventies and, of course, incorporated the rich landscape (both actual and symbolic) of the Hawaiian islands. Clearly, the network hoped to recover the once-enormous *Hawaii Five-0* audience by inserting *Magnum, P.I.* into the legacy established by the former show. This decision represents a clear example of television's function as a culturally expressive medium. At the same time that it hoped to engage the detective tradition, CBS planned to capture a rapidly changing audience by adding a new twist to the recognized form. For those who think that television programming is monolithic, unchanging, and unresponsive to its audience, this example provides a different perspective. In direct reaction to changes in the audience (comprehended through the decline in ratings for *Hawaii Five-0*), CBS developed a unique articulation of the Hawaiian *police*.

Over the years, *Hawaii Five-0* had developed an unmistakable identity as a cultural monument. Understandably, therefore, *Magnum, P.I.* sought its own audience by immediately declaring its distance from its ancestor. Perhaps the most famous feature of the former series was the ritual conclusion that wrapped up nearly every episode. Case solved, McGarrett (Jack Lord), the

police-detective patriarch, hands over the criminal to his assistant and barks, "Book 'em, Danno." In this series, the solution to the crime is both inevitable and final. Nothing escapes the detective's determinate will. During the twelve turbulent years that the series aired, however, McGarrett's potency—the ease with which it made sense of the world and triumphed over threats to the social order—had become increasingly disturbing, nearly anachronistic.

Magnum, by contrast, is often confused and vulnerable, a detective unable to protect himself from the impinging forces of a world which he often fails to understand or to affect. Also, he is not a *police* detective, an institutional agent of social order whose work keeps him at the center of society, but a *private* detective who often treads its margins. The clearest examples of *Magnum's* difference from a detective like McGarrett appear in the episodes which have inaugurated the series during each of its four full years (1981-84). Each scripted by executive producer Donald P. Bellisario, these episodes find *Magnum* in a series of crises which repeatedly demonstrate his inability to act as the traditionally authoritative detective-hero: through ignorance, he nearly provokes an international incident and the assassination of his wife; he inadvertently causes the death of a friend and, in retaliation, murders an unarmed Soviet agent; he spends an entire episode stranded in the ocean while his buddies rally to save him; he watches helplessly while his lover shoots herself. In these remarkable episodes—the showcase episode of each new season—*Magnum, P.I.* reminds us that the historical circumstances of modern life make it impossible for a lone individual, even a detective-hero, to force the chaos of experience to submit to his will.

The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form. The extravagances and crudities of art which appear particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies—Walter Benjamin?

Despite its apparent similarity to other art forms, television is a distinctly new form which has developed during the most intense and disorienting period of change in recorded history. *Magnum P.I.* represents the zenith of the new art form. Like any

art, television has taken time to develop. Failing to realize this, the first mistake that most people make is to lump TV series into one unified mass, a never-ending episode of *I Married Joan*. Although *Magnum, P.I.* emerges from the detective series tradition, it is as different from *Dryden* or *The Untouchables* as *Ulysses* is from *Moll Flanders*. While it occasionally demonstrates the worst of television's formulaic excesses (meaningless fistfights, needless automobile crashes), *Magnum, P.I.* exhibits a narrative sophistication, a knowledge of its tradition, and a field of references that can only emerge at an advanced stage of an art form's development.

As the consummate twentieth-century art form, television is a cultural junkyard. In response to the protestations of high art, the medium defiantly asserts that no artistic text is original, that all stories emerge from the dismantled pieces of other stories. By embedding itself in a field of allusions to its tradition, *Magnum, P.I.* acknowledges its intertextuality, the fact that its stories are permeated by other stories. Throughout the series, *Magnum, P.I.* has referred to McGarrett and the men from *Hawaii Five-0* as though these special police officers still roam the islands. This sort of cross-reference between series is a traditional marketing strategy for the networks. As long ago as *Hawaiian Eye*, Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., occasionally journeyed from the world of *77 Sunset Strip* to visit his spin-off comrades on the island. It is also common for a television series to refer to other programs. But no series before *Magnum, P.I.* has ever referred to a series that no longer exists as though its characters actually inhabit the same fictional world. By recalling the former series, this unique form of reference demonstrates *Magnum, P.I.*'s peculiar concern for the historical development of its tradition.

Often, *Magnum, P.I.* quietly borrows crucial plots from previous sources, as when Magnum's wife returns mysteriously (*Casablanca*) or when Soviet agents program Magnum's pal, T. C. (Roger E. Mosley), to become an assassin (*The Manchurian Candidate*). Just as frequently, however, the show makes explicit its cultural thievery—often by allusion to other fictional detectives. After watching four Agatha Christie movies on television one night, Magnum consciously attempts to solve his next case using the deductive methods of Poirot and Miss Marple. On another episode, Magnum arrives at a costume party dressed as Dashiell Hammett, only to be faced with a Hammettesque crime. One episode features a British gentleman who, con-

vinced that he is Sherlock Holmes, repeatedly interferes with Magnum's case. The most delightful allusion, however, involves a number of episodes which feature Luther Gillis (Eugene Roche), a crusty old detective from Detroit who reluctantly joins forces with Magnum. In these episodes, Gillis shares the voice-over narration with Magnum, his terse, hard-boiled style providing a humorous counterpoint to Magnum's laid-back, self-revelatory musings. The humor that emerges from the clashing styles plays upon the viewer's recognition of the disparity between Magnum and the hard-boiled model. At the same time, the studied artificiality of Gillis' narration—its clichéd, anachronistic feel—reminds us that neither form of discourse is natural, that both are the manifestation of ever-changing narrative conventions.

Considering the monumental number of stories told on television, it is no wonder that these stories develop through formulaic repetition and the invocation of references, stereotypes, and clichés. This is necessarily the way in which popular culture works. Meaning develops according to a delicate operation of similarity and difference. In this process, a single story gains significance both through its identity with the stories that precede it and through its disruption of these stories. With such near-ritual repetition, television defines its social role. *Magnum, P.I.* stands apart from most television series because it consistently examines its function in this system.

In a 1984 episode, "Dream a Little Dream," the narrative comes to a complete halt while Magnum tells the fairy tale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" to a little girl. The girl has obviously heard the story so many times that she has memorized its every facet. Nevertheless, she hangs on each word of Magnum's version, alternately correcting his errors, applauding his variations, and prodding him along. And, although she knows the conventions well, the girl becomes genuinely frightened when the bears find Goldilocks sleeping in their beds. In this self-referential moment, the series marks its own place within the process of popular culture by identifying itself with a tradition of folk performance. It demonstrates the practice of these tales: the significance hidden within the narrator's limitless alterations, the listener's knowing suspension of disbelief toward a familiar tale. At the same time, it reminds us of the satisfaction provided by the ritual tale's ability to impose a sense of order on the world.

In *Magnum, P.I.*, however, the recognizable story offers only

fleeing satisfaction. In this episode, Magnum is interrupted before he can provide closure to the tale of Goldilocks. In voice-over narration, he elaborates with unselfconscious irony: "Goldilocks and the Three Bears' wasn't the only story left unfinished in Karen's cabin. What was nagging about it was that I hadn't the slightest idea how either of [the two stories] wrapped up. At least, though, there's always more comfort to be derived from the stories that had been wrapped up. Because even though many, many things have changed, others have remained the same. And probably always will. It's the little constants in life that are comforting." Magnum's speech is wishful thinking, a dramatic misrecognition of the events of his life. In many ways, it parallels our naive misapprehension of series television. Because closure on *Magnum, P.I.* is nearly always deferred or undermined (as in this story of Goldilocks), the sense of comfort that follows the "wrapping up" of a story forever slips away. Even though these neatly closed stories appear to be one of the reassuring "little constants in life," they are inevitably bound to "unwrap." Stories which once seemed comfortably resolved return with devastating force to unsettle the present.

By questioning the possibility of closure, *Magnum, P.I.* points toward the cultural significance of television's boundless compulsion to recycle familiar stories. The recognizable stories that permeate a series like *Magnum, P.I.*—stories coaxed from our culture—may appear stable, closed, and comforting. Their established cultural position may seem to have fixed their meaning once and for all. From this point of view, television's plundering of previous stories seems merely derivative; the series themselves appear repetitive and monotonous. They seem to be one of "the little constants in life." As Magnum's performance of "Goldilocks" reminds us, however, familiar stories are open to limitless variations—any of which may significantly alter the story's meaning. Similarly, the insertion of familiar stories into a new context—and here we return to the television's dependence upon context—often causes them to come "unwrapped." Stories that once seemed reassuringly familiar appear, on second thought, to be slightly bewildering. As they unravel, familiar stories gain new life, a new strength to provoke thought, argument, and action.

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of

art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way painting tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art—Walter Benjamin⁴

Benjamin characterized movies as the art form in which reception occurs in a state of distraction. Obviously, his description applies even more appropriately to television, a cultural form so banal that its narratives often unfold while we read the paper, wash the dishes, or feed the hamsters. Benjamin compares the movies to architecture, an art form that we inhabit and appreciate without awareness. Television, the art form of distraction, is a type of mental architecture. As it blends into our domestic environments and the rhythms of our lives, nearly unnoticeably providing our lives with a certain structure, it is the only narrative form that we inhabit.

Television does not desire rapt attention. Therefore, it has developed a narrative structure based heavily upon formulaic repetition, common cultural codes (including references, clichés, and stereotypes), and an emphasis upon narrative fragmentation rather than narrative unity. We may commonly conceive of narrative as a unified whole, but television narrative—constructed with cultural bric-a-brac and segmented by the structure of its presentation—requires that we alter these traditional notions. Composed of fragments, television narratives flash between brilliance and banality. Generally, they alternate unique passages of intense meaning with formulaic passages that require little attention, but which are necessary structurally (for instance, to bring closure at the end of an episode). The resulting text, a tempestuous collage, embodies Barthes' notion of tableau: "The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view."⁵

A *Magnum, P.I.* episode exhibits all of these characteristics but usually exalts them by stressing their fragmentation. The series often emphasizes the discord that it produces through its playful use of references. When faced with the clashing styles of Magnum and the hard-boiled Luther Gills, the series takes away Magnum's role as the single, authoritative narrator and allows both characters to act as the narrative voice. The "Dream a Little Dream" episode moves this self-examination to

the structural level by developing an extremely complex narrative structure that moves rapidly between Magnum's first case and his current case. This contrapuntal flashback structure, often used on *Magnum, P.I.*, emphasizes the fragmentation of the narrative. It stresses the disjunction of successive scenes, rather than their continuity, and marks each scene as an isolatable expressive tableau. To appreciate *Magnum, P.I.*, then, we must remain conscious of the ways in which the series acknowledges narrative fragmentation, a structure essential to television, and transforms it into an important expressive characteristic.

When *Magnum, P.I.* introduces an extremely conventional narrative fragment (especially when bringing closure to an episode), it often emphasizes the absurdity of the convention. During the "Dream a Little Dream" episode, a manic chase scene suddenly interrupts the narrative. This is a purely formulaic scene, an element tossed into the story in order to hold the attention of the *Dukes of Hazzard* fans (after all, this is an art form that must appeal to a wide audience). At the end of the chase, however, Magnum discovers that he has not had a reason to chase the man; it is a case of mistaken identity. This long red-herring chase scene, an abrupt departure from the rest of the story, may serve the narrative by demonstrating Magnum's inadequacy as a detective, but, more than anything, it cries out the absurdity of its own existence.

At the same time that *Magnum, P.I.* displays an impressive formal self-consciousness, it is also a strikingly ambitious television series. Although each episode develops around some type of detective case and makes movements toward closure, Magnum spends exceptionally little time solving crimes. The show's lack of concern for the detective formula enables it to break out of television's eternal present tense. In the late seventies, with the advent of prime-time continuing dramas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, television narrative began to develop a sense of process. Until that time, TV series narrative had been enslaved to mindless repetition in which very little changed from week to week. Programs such as *Father Knows Best* represented formula as a way of life. Following the example of daytime soap opera, prime-time television at last realized that series narrative could express a processual sense of past and future. While series like *Hill Street Blues* and *St. Elsewhere* adopted the

serial format to genre television, *Magnum, P.I.* developed a unique hybrid by injecting a sense of history into a traditional series format. While each episode is a self-contained unit, many of its narrative developments continue to resonate throughout the series.

Slowly, over the course of four years' episodes, a sense of Magnum's past has emerged to reveal a man tortured by sadness and guilt. As the historical circumstances of modern life shatter any hope for a unity or wholeness of experience, the desire for unity finds its expression in an obsession with the past and with memory, precisely in the longing to re-member one's fragmented experience of self and surroundings. Magnum struggles to create a consistent sense of self from the anguish of his past, to find some continuity among past, present, and future. To master his life he must first master his memories. The return of a lost friend from the past becomes a recurrent motif in the series. Magnum has faith in the friend because he assumes that this person has not changed, that the past can be present. But in a world in which change is the only certainty, the friend inevitably turns out to have changed irradicably—often to become a nemesis in the present. Magnum is not so much betrayed by his friends as by his desperate need to maintain the past.

Vietnam plays a crucial role in Magnum's memories. Initially, the Vietnam War might have seemed to be a topical gimmick, a novelty to distinguish the series. Over the course of time, however, it has become a vital symbolic force, and perhaps the most complex representation of the Vietnam War in popular culture. Nearly all of Magnum's most painful memories—in fact, most of his defining experiences—revolve around the war. While serving in Naval Intelligence in Vietnam, he gained his friends, Rick and T. C., and lost his wife, who was killed on the day they were to evacuate Saigon (later she returns, alive, to betray him). In fact, the memories of all the major characters affix themselves to crucial war or war-time experiences: for Magnum, Rick, and T. C., the Vietnam war; for Higgins, the British major domo, his decades of service in the British Army. The fact that the memories of these individuals are bound up within events central to social memory begins to suggest the symbolic function of the characters and the cultural function of the series. By identifying personal narratives of individual memory with social historical narratives, the series links its charac-

ters' efforts to resolve past and present with society's similar efforts. Individual memory becomes a metaphor for collective history.

The series has developed a camaraderie among the three men who shared the experience of Vietnam—including time spent in a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp—that is reminiscent of the films of Howard Hawks. But *Magnum, P.I.* does not allow itself to romanticize the experience of Vietnam, nor does it take any simple position in relation to the war. Instead, the series constantly questions the dialogue of history, fiction, and memory that constructs—and limits—our experience of events.

The 1982 season-premiere episode, "Did You See The Sunrise?," begins with Magnum watching the 1953 World War II prisoner-of-war movie, *Stalag 17*, on television. This experience triggers Magnum's flashback memory of the Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp. Coincidentally, Higgins is at the same time remembering his own experience as a World War II prisoner-of-war—in this case, by constructing a scale-model replica of the bridge on the River Kwai, the camp where he had been held. When Magnum confuses the historical events at the River Kwai camp with the 1956 movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, Higgins (for whom the events represent, neither fiction nor history, but memory) attempts to set the record straight. By this time, however, the episode has thrown into doubt the possibility of ever isolating memory, fiction, or history. Magnum's own memories of the prison camp no longer possess the authority of personal experience because the episode suggests that personal recollection cannot be separated from the potent cultural combination of history and fiction. In the attempt to apprehend reality, the independent existence of any of these three levels of discourse cannot be upheld. No single expression of the past takes precedence over the others; no single expression can stand alone. Among television series, only *Magnum, P.I.* has developed such a complex view of human understanding.

In effect, *Magnum, P.I.* has developed a Proustian fascination with the interaction of memory, history, and fiction. By refusing to privilege a solution to the detective's investigation, the show denies the validity of the explanations offered by itself and its predecessors. Instead, *Magnum, P.I.* suggests that solutions are merely stop-gap measures able only temporarily to control the fundamental chaos of life. Thomas Magnum himself is more generally concerned with sorting out his own past than with solving cases; in fact, he is an inept detective through-

out the series. The overwhelming burden of his memory, combined with his struggle to master the past, make Magnum the first tragic character on prime-time television.

NOTES

1. Quoted in, Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 15.
2. Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," in *Écrits* (New York: 1977), p. 138.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 237.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
5. Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," in *Image-Music-Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 70.