Reviews

From Memory to History: Television Versions of the Twentieth Century, by Jim Cullen. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021. 226 pages. $64.95, cloth. $28.95, paper. $24.95, electronic.

Film and television have become a primary means through which many Americans encounter and thus remember their past. Audio-visual narratives are vivid, visceral, and, in current parlance, "relatable," making them often far more appealing than the textbook narratives that confront students in school classrooms. But historical storytelling by means of period television is deceptive: deliberately redolent of the past, such programs are nonetheless products of the time in which they are made, and they speak to contemporary assumptions, values, and issues. Jim Cullen's *From Memory to History* purports to demonstrate how period television "artifacts," from popular series like *The Waltons* through *Mad Men* to the critically acclaimed but less well-known *Halt and Catch Fire*, have mediated the two poles of past and present to shape the ways American audiences understand the past in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For Cullen, these shows are significant for their engagement with and vindication of an "American Dream" ideology.

Cullen discusses four historical dramas and three sitcoms in pursuit of this argument. Chapters are structured as case studies of individual series, organized in chronological order of the period depicted. In each chapter, Cullen introduces major themes, gives some historical background on the period the series depicts, and explores setting and plot points. *The Waltons*, per Cullen, has been misunderstood by recent audiences as "conservative," despite its "culturally progressive vision" and "distinctly leftist sensibility [of] the thirties" (pp. 27-28). The improbable *Hogan's Heroes*, set in a World War II-era German POW camp, demonstrated American ingenuity in the face of farcical incompetence, "serving a larger political project of consensus, foreign and domestic, at the zenith of the American century" (p. 59). The irreverence of *Hogan's Heroes* paved the way for *M*A*S*H*, a prestige production set during the Korean War that capitalized on early 1970s cultural and television industry shifts and offered "an indirect commentary on U.S. civilian life [that] affirmed one of the key features of its era: skepticism, even hostility towards institutions" (p. 71). *Mad Men*, by contrast, advertised an aspirational

American Dream of the 1960s in which desire was "legitimate, achievable, and a source of social cohesion all at once" (p. 96). *That '70s Show* was a "cheeky" and "racist" exercise in nostalgia in which the "sex jokes are crude [and] the gender politics aren't much better" (pp. 124-127), but was nonetheless "essentially benign" in its portrayal of its characters' aspirations to upward mobility (p. 129). *The Americans* was a "patriotic love song: the Cold War as a good war in which the right values and necessary actions prevailed" (p. 151). *Halt and Catch Fire* explored the "highly educated upwardly mobile white elite" of the Silicon Prairie (Texas' answer to Silicon Valley) to make "a statement about how the blend of technology, capitalism and personality fuels the engine of history" (pp. 172-183).

The strength of the book, and of particular value to students, is its conviction that historical television is an important artifact of a collective cultural past and constituent of historical memory. It also embodies the methodological principle that in order to understand the "text," one must also be aware of the historical, cultural, and industrial contexts in which it was produced. However, the close reading of the texts can miss the mark, particularly in the second half of the book. In part, the author amplifies the significance of the historical setting over the production context: with the exception of *Mad Men*, these shows aren't really telling us new things about the past, but rather are using the past to explore the issues of our time. Significantly, as Cullen documents, these settings could be—and were—easily displaced: the creators of *Hogan's Heroes* initially set the show in a minimum-security prison, but decided to capitalize on the "military invasion of television" (p. 50). Similarly, *The Americans* was inspired by mole hunts of the 1990s, but displaced onto the 1980s because the writers thought the Russian-American rivalry was no longer relevant to audiences outside of the context of the Cold War (p. 152).

Cullen's overarching argument as to the American Dream is complicated by the question of "whose" American Dream. It seems clear to me that, for the shows under discussion, the answer is the white middle class and its confrontation with its own declining fortunes over the course of the twentieth century. In agreement with Cullen, I would argue that what we learn from these "television versions of the twentieth century" is that "prosperity [became] its own form of ideology" (p. 164), ably projected into American homes by television.

Virginia Tech Heather L. Gumbert