

## **Looking at Men: 1980s Middlebrow TV and Visual Culture**

**Mareike Jenner (Anglia Ruskin University)**

### **Abstract**

#### **Abstract: Looking at Men: 1980s Middlebrow TV and Visual Culture**

This article explores middlebrow culture on early 1980s television and the narrative structures and visual politics employed. The focus lies on *Remington Steele* (NBC, 1982-7) and *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980-8) as two middlebrow TV series that emphasise the male lead and link in with shifts in the visual culture of the era. Both series function within frameworks of middlebrow TV and visually focus on their male heroes' bodies.

The article analyses the term middlebrow in 1980s television and develops this concept more by exploring narrative structure and what Horace Newcomb (1985) has termed the 'cumulative narrative'. The article then moves on to discuss the visual framing of the male lead as directed by an assumed heterosexual female gaze. In the course of this, it examines the parameters of the televisual image and the conditions that frame objectification on television. Due to the focus on a heterosexual female gaze, middlebrow television becomes strongly linked with women's culture. This allows for conclusions surrounding the construction of the middlebrow, masculinity, and early 1980s television culture. Exploring this cultural politics, and thus revealing a cultural hierarchy, is deemed important here, as it allows for an analysis of the role of nostalgia, both in 1980s and more contemporary television cultures going forward.

### **6-8 Keywords**

1980s Television, Middlebrow, Television Culture, Objectification, Tom Selleck, Pierce Brosnan, Masculinity, Narrative Structure, Magnum, P.I., Remington Steele

### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Mareike Jenner is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research is focused on contemporary television, television genre and streaming. Her edited collection *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies* was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021. Her previous work includes the monographs *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (Palgrave, 2018) and *American Detective Dramas* (Palgrave, 2015).

Contact: Anglia Ruskin University, East Road, CB 1 1PT, Cambridge

Email: Mareike.jenner@aru.ac.uk

**ORCHID IDENTIFIER** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1674-4376>

This article aims to understand what constituted ‘middlebrow’ television in early 1980s US TV by looking specifically at *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-88) and *Remington Steele* (1983-87) and both series roles in constituting middlebrow television and the visual politics of the era. The interest in 1980s TV is due to the role its cultural politics and hierarchies play in contemporary nostalgic imaginings of the era, pointing to its relevance in contemporary television studies. Further, the 1980s marks a moment when niche television in the United States becomes increasingly important, dividing programmes more explicitly into the highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. Whereas differentiation into a cultural hierarchy is as old as the medium itself, the increasing targeting of niche markets makes this issue a much more pertinent part of television culture. Early 1980s US TV, and especially the 1982-83 season when *Remington Steele* premiered, marked also a moment when seeing women in leading roles in prime time detective drama became normalised with series ranging from *Cagney & Lacey* (1981-98) to *Scarecrow and Mrs King* (1983-87) while the backlash against feminism didn’t dominate schedules, yet (see D’Acci 1994). This leads to an embrace of women’s culture, which includes a focus on the male object and an objectifying gaze directed towards the male. In 1980 and increasingly throughout the original run of *Magnum, P.I.*, this means a centralisation of the male title hero but also showcasing a general attitude that emphasises emotional bonds with his (male) friends over promiscuity or chauvinism. The normalisation of female culture and women’s work on televisual screens combined with the objectifying gaze geared towards the male star leads to a particular blend of women’s culture as middlebrow culture: not delegitimated by default as much 1980s television was, but also not marking a moment of innovation, due to the reliance on the supposedly ‘cheap’ spectacle of sex.

What is visible is a shift in prime time programming, which reformulates a (white, heterosexual) male sex symbol for a specific (heterosexual) female televisual gaze. This will

be analysed in this article via two detective dramas, *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele*. Both series are detective dramas that centre visually on their male leads. Thomas Magnum, played by Tom Selleck, is a private investigator in O'ahu who lives on the property of a former client, Robin Masters (who remains invisible throughout the eight seasons). Magnum also has access to Masters' car, a new Ferrari, as well as expensive camera equipment and a well-stocked wine cellar. This is guarded by the Majordomo, Higgins (John Hillermann) and his two dogs. One recurring feature of the series is Magnum evading or tricking Higgins to gain access. Yet, they develop a deep, possibly even queer (Haralovich 1991), relationship, which is also extended through Magnum's fellow Vietnam Vets Rick (Larry Manetti) and T.C. (Roger E. Moseley). War serves as device to frame a deep emotional bond between the four, Higgins having served in the British military in WW II and various colonial campaigns.

*Remington Steele* deals with private investigator Laura Holt (Stefanie Zimbalist) who forms her own detective agency. Faced with the sexism of clients, she invents a male superior, called Remington Steele. One day, a nameless stranger, played by Pierce Brosnan, appears and takes the imaginary Remington's place. Laura and Brosnan's Remington are obviously attracted to each other, and even quickly consider themselves in a romantic relationship (however ill defined). In conversations, both, Laura and Remington emphasise the aspect of fantasy in their relationship: Laura regularly describes how she imagined Remington Steele to be, with Remington clearly trying to live up to her imagination. Pierce Brosnan, stunning in three-piece suits, appears as a physical manifestation of Laura's fantasy. His main narrative function throughout the series is that of object of romantic fantasy, his shirt increasingly more unbuttoned as the seasons progress. *Remington Steele* highlights the factor of heterosexual female fantasy, but both series develop a visual emphasis on the male hero as sex symbol.

This article starts by exploring issues of what establishes the ‘middlebrow’ in the specific moment and context of early 1980s television. The series are circumscribed by a medium that is still broadly delegitimated, and scholarly criticism (and thus, academic legitimation) in the field of television studies only just beginning. In a second step, it outlines the narrative politics of the middlebrow series discussed here, drawing predominantly on Horace Newcomb’s idea of the cumulative narrative (1985). In a last step, the article analyses the visual politics in *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* to explore the televisuality of middlebrow series of the 1980s. This includes a textual analysis of the visual politics surrounding objectification of men to elucidate the cultural positioning of the text. Thus, the article explores the series as an example of middlebrow culture in early 1980s TV, along with its gendered and aesthetic politics.

### **Middlebrow TV**

From the 1980s onwards, academic accounts of some series do exist that can serve to clarify cultural hierarchies and how aesthetic, political, or thematic innovation was judged.

Importantly, 1980s television operates in an era when the medium was understood as delegitimated by default as mass culture, still labouring under past assumptions about ‘Least Objectionable Programming’ (Marc and Thompson 2005). John Fiske avoids locating individual series in a ‘hierarchy’ of culture. In the early years of television studies, this approach serves to avoid the trap of de-valuing television by default, and thus, justifying it as an object of study. At the time, this was necessary to establish television studies, its methodologies, and its object of study, as legitimate. And yet, this also serves to render cultural hierarchies invisible. What we consume and the cultural value attached to it clearly matters and can signal cultural positioning (see Newman and Levine 2012). There are a broad range of studies that analyse representations of class on television (see, for example, Feuer

1995: 43-60 or Lemke and Schniedermann 2016). There are also many audience studies that aim to understand how audiences relate to television, often especially in regards to culturally devalued series like soaps (see, for example, Brunsdon 1990, Press 1991). Thus, class is well researched and authors like Charlotte Brunsdon in the British tradition or Newcomb in the American one certainly grapple with the way different shows fit within cultural hierarchies. While class was a dominant topic in 1980s and 1990s debates in the field, and remains so, there are a broad range of approaches to it, and debates surrounding what cultural value is and how television contributes to ideas of what constitutes it can sometimes move in the background. In parts, this is because this value is something we often understand ‘instinctively’, as it is part of a social habitus. This article locates cultural value by understanding the audience that is targeted and how this is allocated within a cultural hierarchy. This audience is not necessarily the same as the class cultures represented or even accurately reflects who watches. In contemporary television, cost of access can be a good indicator for target audience: for example, *The Wire* (HBO 2002-8) often shows abject poverty, and characters unlikely to be able to afford a TV, let alone an expensive subscription to cable network HBO, giving some clues about target audience. Yet, cable television was still finding its voice (and funding) in the early 1980s, meaning that *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* were broadcast on free-to-air television in the United States, costing ‘only’ the television set to access it.

In 1983, John J. O’Connor wrote in the *New York Times* in a review of *Remington Steele*:

NBC might seem these days to be trapped between the programming high road, with series such as ‘Hill Street Blues’ and ‘Cheers,’ and the exploitative low road, with violent concoctions like ‘The A-Team.’ But in fact, the network is beginning to look strongest in the crucial middle

ground of its schedule, most notably with a stylish private-eye series entitled 'Remington Steele.' Currently shown on Tuesdays at 9 P.M., immediately following 'The A-Team,' this MTM Enterprises production is frequently witty and it features what surely must be the most attractive couple on television's entertainment menu. (1983)

As interesting as the broader context of its scheduling is, what particularly stands out is the word 'middle ground' to describe *Remington Steele*. O'Connor plays to the targeting of female audiences by the series, which stands in clear difference to other series on offer on NBC. However, the use of examples like *Hill Street Blues* and *The A-Team* also suggests a positioning of all three series in cultural terms.

In the literature of the era, *Hill Street Blues* is unequivocally celebrated as 'quality' TV. It is discussed by Steve Jenkins in Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi's edited collection *MTM 'Quality' Television* in 1984. Robert J. Thompson discusses it in some detail in *Television's Second Golden Age* (1996) and Todd Gitlin explores its production culture in *Inside Prime Time* (2000). Jenkins opens his analysis:

Anyone writing about *Hill Street Blues* has to confront the idea that this series is 'different'. This is not simply a matter of the supposed singular nature of this cop show against others – its intersection with soap opera, its realism, its mix of drama and comedy, its more complex narrative strategies – but of the ways in which it is talked and written about, and of the image of the series which emerges. And this image relates not only to *Hill Street* itself, but to the ways in which a wider image of television is constructed. (Jenkins 1984: 183)

This wider image relates, of course, to the medium where the artistic heights of *Hill Street Blues* are unexpected. Thus, he highlights the series' aesthetic style and narrative structure as not just 'different', but superior to other television. This is not the place to explore how the series established itself as 'quality' TV, but its supposed difference points to the way 'normal' or middlebrow television was perceived: resistant to aesthetic and narrative innovation.

O'Connor positions *The A-Team* as an opposite or 'other' to *Hill Street Blues*, suggesting a location low on the cultural hierarchy of television. *The A-Team* is remarkably unstable in shooting locations, though they seem to be limited to studio sets and the landscapes surrounding Los Angeles. Other than *Hill Street Blues*, the series is relatively conventional in its camera work. The stories told and the visual spectacles of the series are repetitive. One inviting feature of the series is clearly its structural predictability. Its visual spectacles lie in the violence the team exerts to protect their clients. Fiske (1992) argues that the series is predominantly concerned with establishing the masculinity of its main cast, often in relation to 'others' in need of protection, such as (usually white) women, children or 'weak' men unable to protect women and children, often due to age (very old or very young). Thus, moral lines are clearly drawn. The series aims to be politically 'neutral', often ignoring real political circumstances in favour of its focus on aggressive masculinity and its supposed superiority. This even extends to a season 2 episode (aired in 1983, a few months after O'Connor's review was published), 'Diamonds 'n Dust', set in apartheid-era South Africa, in which the dark-skinned Black B.A.'s (Mr. T) presence is treated as entirely unremarkable while he himself (and the rest of the team) appear ignorant. As Fiske puts it in *Television Culture*:

Shows like *The A-Team*, which cater for largely male audiences, have less need to produce a double text that allows for oppositional or resistive meanings to be circulated. Their texts are structured to produce greater



narrative and ideological closure, and there is little evidence that this closure needs to be resisted by a significant number of audience groups.

The more typical reading strategy is likely to be one of negotiation, as male subcultures, situated differently in the social system, seek to accommodate their social situation with the dominant ideology.

Masculine texts appear to be less polysemic than feminine ones because masculinity's relationship to patriarchy is less resistive than femininity's.

(2010 [1987]: 200)

Fiske's understanding of 'female' and 'male' narrative structures is highly problematic but also reflective of television culture in 1987, when television itself was highly gendered.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the observation that *The A-Team* allows for fewer polysemic readings than series with more complex narrative structures is important to understand the series' positioning within a cultural hierarchy: not challenging dominant ideology, even (re)producing a normative version of masculinity. Fiske avoids assignations in a cultural hierarchy, but the closing off of subversive reading positions signals the series' cultural positioning.

In the above quote from the *New York Times*, O'Connor uses the words 'middle ground' in order to describe *Remington Steele* as occupying a cultural space between the high-brow 'quality' TV of the era and the more 'low-brow'. This cultural space is described with a variety of terms and analogies. For example, Newcomb describes *Magnum, P.I.* as a show that 'has not done as well in the coastal cities as in middle America' (1985: 23) to describe its

---

<sup>1</sup> Fiske asserts that soap structures are gendered as 'female' largely because the genre most strongly associated with the structure (soaps) target a female audience. Meanwhile, the narrative structure of most programmes targeting men favour narrative closure. Even at the time, many of these binaries were dissolved, as the example of *Remington Steele* shows.

cultural positioning, invoking a geographical ‘middle’ to use as code for a cultural one. The term middlebrow emerges in relation to a mid-twentieth-century American literary debate. The term describes the work of authors like Earnest Hemingway or Harper Lee, who described their own work with the term ‘middlebrow’, but who are now considered part of high-brow culture. This highlights how much the term was instrumentalised by these authors to describe their literature as ‘new’ and even ‘revolutionary’. More commonly today, the term is used to describe the ‘middle’ or ‘middle-ground’ between high culture and low culture. ‘Quality’ judgements, of course, shift. While the aesthetic innovations of *Hill Street Blues* remain undoubted, its cultural politics are viewed on different terms. Gitlin (2000: 281-88) outlines how a storyline in the pilot was protested by feminists at the time, as it saw a policeman suggesting to a woman that her husband sleeping with her daughter was her own fault for not ‘providing’ enough sex. Such criticisms would likely be given more of a voice in the post-#MeToo era, impacting more severely on the series’ status as ‘quality’ TV. Similarly, the series’ negotiation (or, often, lack thereof) of racism would likely be understood on different terms today. Such shifts in cultural attitudes makes the cultural politics and hierarchies of the past not always obvious. As Feuer notes: ‘The judgement of quality is always situated. That is to say, somebody makes the judgement from some aesthetic or political or moral position’ (2007: 145). Those who make those judgements are positioned highly on a hierarchy of power themselves and, as Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman (2012) note, include critics, academics, and journalists. In *Seeing Through the Eighties* (1995) Feuer herself notes that in the 1980s, the ‘yuppie demographic’, the ‘quality demographic’ of the day, was largely positioned as the audience favoured and courted by advertising. Thus, their judgement and taste became central to defining what ‘quality’ television is. And yet, she judges this audience too small and fickle to constitute a broad audience common for network TV, making *Hill Street Blues* a series that can attract a mass audience while receiving critical accolades from cultural elites. This points to the importance of middlebrow TV to attract

audiences and advertisers. Yet, because societies are always in flux, the tastes and values of gatekeepers and a broad mass audience change. So do the industrial dynamics of television. 'Quality' judgements can also shift for long-running series, as their aesthetics and narrative structures become normalised and even replicated, potentially making it difficult to understand cultural hierarchies of the past.

The middlebrow is often defined in the negative: neither high nor low culture. Not having ambitions towards the highbrow or failing at fulfilling criteria, but also not produced with a 'lowest common denominator' in mind. Janet Radway, in her work on the Book-of-the-Month Club, outlines:

The category of the lowbrow was [in 1926, when the club was founded] understood to include all cultural objects that were generated through corporately organized mode of production, including moving pictures, radio programs, and pulp novels. The space of the middlebrow was occupied by products that supposedly hid the same machine-tooled uniformity behind the self-consciously worked mask of culture. (1997: 221)

Adjustments have been made since then, many films are now venerated as high culture, many made in the era of the standardized production culture of the Hollywood studio system. Further, more and more television has been included in the category of highbrow culture that supposedly evades the traps of mass production. Feuer (1995: 34-60) points out that what she terms 'yuppie television', television representing yuppie culture, was syndicated for re-runs by Lifetime which, due to the cost of cable access, targeted a small audience with disposable income. While mass production is still inherent in this, it also shows that the niche targeting common for cable TV allows television to present itself less as mass production. However,

this automatically puts the work produced by the ‘big three’ into the lower rungs of culture. And yet, series from *Hill Street Blues* to *L.A. Law* (1986-94) to *Moonlighting* (1985-89) still achieve ‘quality’ status, predominantly through veneration by the ‘gatekeepers’ of culture. This veneration, however, creates a discourse in which the processes of mass production are hidden. The reproduction of studio sets and ideological closure can serve to make these more visible in the lowbrow. For middlebrow TV, the narrative cumulation and visual politics in series like *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele*, as discussed below, helps to hide mass production.

One element that emerges is that middlebrow culture in the 1980s is often women’s culture, though what seems to be implicit is that ‘women’s culture’ is usually white, middle-class, and heterosexual women’s culture. According to Julie D’Acci, the major change on US TV appears to be the prime time scheduling: while much of television aimed at women would previously be placed in the context of daytime television to attract housewives, the 1980s saw more prime time television targeted at women. This was done in the form of prime time soaps or prime time series directed at women featuring women in the workplace while even series featuring male leads had to find ways to address women.<sup>2</sup> Julie D’Acci positions *Remington Steele* within a broader effort by US network broadcasters and advertisers to attract ‘working women’s market’ from the late 1970s onwards:

Recognizing the importance of the ‘women’s audience’ to its own economic health, and given the demonstrable successes of other media in

---

<sup>2</sup> As Linda Mizejewski notes, taking a wider view at women detectives and looking at literature as well as television, 1982 was a year when ‘the woman investigator was emerging as a character *aimed* at women readers and audiences, a character made possible by the women’s movement of the previous decade’ (2004: 62, italics in the original).

attracting women as consumers, the television industry badly ‘wanted in’ on the working women’s market in the late 1970s and 1980s. Two other factors contributed to TV’s pursuit of this particular audience. First, the influx of women into the labor market was causing a drop in network daytime viewership; and second, with the massive changes beginning to take place in the industry, the commercial networks were starting to lose a noticeable share of their prime-time audience to cable. (1994: 71)

Sandy Flitterman (1985) writes in relation to *Magnum, P.I.*, a ratings hit little critical attention has been paid to, that it employs textual strategies that suggest it is aimed at female audiences, as explored later. As Sue Turnbull remarks:

In seeking to understand why *Magnum P.I.* has received such little critical attention when compared with the critical attention paid to *Hill Street Blues*, it may be salutary to note that television perceived to be targeted at a female audience [...] has tended to be critically undervalued and overlooked. (Turnbull 2014: 79)

Of course, this statement is a bit generalising as series like *Moonlighting*, heavily influenced by the rom-com genre, or *Cagney & Lacey*, have been widely discussed within TV studies. However, compared to the feminist themes of *Cagney & Lacey*, or the creative and stylistic innovations of *Moonlighting* (see Thompson 1996, D’Acci 1994, Mizejewski 2004), *Remington Steele* and *Magnum, P.I.* are both decidedly middlebrow. *Remington Steele*’s feminism is somewhat ‘softened’ and often ambiguous and it remains politically and stylistically unprovocative and ‘mainstream’. The commodity fetishism of *Magnum, P.I.*, its subtle shifts to narrative structure (as discussed below) and its focus on masculinity serve to create the impression that the series remains relatively ‘conventional’ in its mode of address,

mainly capturing a male audience. Yet, as Feuer shows in *Seeing through the Eighties* (1995), it is often the ‘mainstream’ that helps us understand the ideological and political developments of an era.

What is important is to understand that the entry of texts targeting women (by whatever means) into middlebrow culture represents progress. No longer relegated to broadly delegitimised daytime television, but also not innovative enough to gain the ‘quality’ label, *Remington Steele* and *Magnum, P.I.* both represent entry into the ‘normality’ of television. Neither a powerful woman nor an objectified man (as discussed later) manages to challenge the status quo in a way that represents innovation. And yet, both series challenge the existing patriarchal hegemony of television.

### **Storytelling and Middlebrow Television**

In terms of narrative structure *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* both share the cumulative narrative as structure. Newcomb argues in relation to *Magnum, P.I.*:

Its creators have established and refined a new television form that stands between the traditional self-contained episodic forms and the open-ended serials. Call it the ‘cumulative narrative’. One episode’s events can greatly affect later events, but they’re seldom directly tied together. Each week’s program is distinct, yet each is grafted onto the body of the series, it’s characters pasts. (1985: 24)

This is distinct from the model of series and serial usually deployed in television studies in the way it describes an in-between space or spectrum. In 1986, Feuer describes television narrative as ‘working against logical notions of causality and closure’ (1986: 102). She then moves on to outline ‘the episodic series’ and ‘the continuing serial’. The adjectives ‘episodic’

and ‘continuing’ clarify the structures Feuer refers to here by emphasising what often comes down to the kind of narrative closure expected from each form: either narrative closure and a return to the status quo established at the beginning of the episode or a more open ending, often emphasised through the use of cliffhangers. As the cumulative narrative shows, however, those two forms cannot be understood as a binary, but rather as ends of a spectrum, which includes the more fluid, story-arc driven flexi-narrative (Nelson 1997), or the more contemporary complex narrative (Rothmund 2013, Mittell 2015).

The cumulative narrative is rare in today’s environment of flexi-narratives and narrative complexity where technology allows for greater serial memory.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that this is not an important shift in prime time television, especially in middlebrow television. As Newcomb notes, the change in narrative structure from closed-off episodes as in *The A-Team* is relatively subtle and not visible to casual viewers, unlike the major changes *Hill Street Blues* makes. And yet, *Magnum, P.I.* highlights how series memory is developed by disseminating information about all recurring characters, which may become important later on. The central love story in *Remington Steele* follows a similar pattern, with the relationship developing in different directions over the four seasons. Due to the supposed ‘triviality’ of women’s culture, romance narratives in particular, the change in narrative structure may become devalued and cement an impression that this narrative structure is decidedly tied to middlebrow TV.

This model of storytelling is important insofar as it signals a shift in the narrative structures of middlebrow television. It also suggests a difference to the supposed narrative and ideological closure in both series, as information shared in previous episodes can become

---

<sup>3</sup> Since revisiting series has become easier through DVD box sets, catch-up TV and streaming, series have developed a greater series memory.

important later on. Yet, the cumulative narrative remains relatively close on a spectrum of narrative structures to the established series format while the flexi-narrative linked to high-brow television makes more sweeping changes.

### **Male Bodies, 1980s Television and the Televisual Gaze**

An important shift in 1980s middlebrow TV is the positioning of the male body. Male sex symbols were hardly new to the medium and the shipping and objectification of, for example, the detectives of the 1970s series *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79), by fan communities was hardly unknown (see Stevens 2021). And yet, 1980s television puts the male body more on display, pushing objectification of white heterosexual men from *Miami Vice*'s (1984-89) Don Johnson to *Magnum P.I.*'s Tom Selleck or *Remington Steele*'s Pierce Brosnan.<sup>4</sup> In early 1980s US TV, *Magnum, P.I.*, preceding many of the films and television series that highlight male bodies, can be seen as setting this tone. As much as what Susan Jeffords (1994) describes as the 'hard body' type dominates 1980s action cinema, many films central to this development were not released until the mid-to-late 1980s. For example, the first film in the *Rambo* series, *First Blood* (Kotchoff, 1982), came out in 1982, with the second instalment, *Rambo: First Blood II* (Cosmatos, 1985) which heavily emphasises the now much more muscly body of Sylvester Stallone, not released until 1985. This does not mean that this muscly body type does not influence the visual style of later seasons of *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele*, but both also had already established their style by the mid-1980s, cast their male leads, and only ran until early 1988 and 1987, respectively.

---

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that BIPOC men are not part of this changed politics of objectification. However, due to different historical discourses, this often happens under different conditions.



Theorists writing in the 1980s often discuss the dominance of the ‘hunk’, Newcomb (1985: 23) even referring to *Magnum, P.I.* as a ‘hunk show’, implying a broader genre of series where men are objectified. Fiske (1987: 244-62) evaluates the idea of the hunk in soap operas, arguing that the role of the figure is ultimately destabilising to patriarchal culture. With the move of daytime soap operas to prime time, the figure of the hunk, or objectified, often shirtless, male became much more common in middlebrow TV. This includes series like *Magnum, P.I.* or *Remington Steele*, but elements of this are also visible in the character of Face (Dirk Benedict) in *The A-Team* or Victor Isbecki (Martin Kove) in *Cagney & Lacey*. As his name suggests, Face’s main function is seducing and conning women, yet, in typical televisual terms of the close-up, through his face, and only in secondary terms through his body. Isbecki, meanwhile, announces his status by appearing shirtless in the opening credits. Yet, while the figure of the hunk is not uncommon, the centralisation of the objectified male and the female heterosexual gaze is particularly highlighted in series like *Remington Steele* and, in different ways, *Magnum, P.I.* In both cases, it is not just the male body, which is important to the objectification, it is also the face, emphasised through close-up and the intimacy of the screen.

Before going into the specific ways both series shift gaze structures towards the objectified male, it is, perhaps, prudent to say that this is never an ‘inversion’ of Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze in cinema (1975). First of all, the televisual image is conceived as much less imposing than cinema, due to the size of the apparatus. Secondly, televisual aesthetics have developed to highlight the close-up of the face, again, often due to the smaller screen. However, this constructs a sense of ‘intimacy’, which is reinforced by the television’s position in the home. Further, in *Visible Fictions*, John Ellis describes television as a technology viewers glance at, rather than gaze at, in light of all the distractions in the home (2002: 50). John Caldwell (1995) questions this, arguing that though some viewers may

glance at some programmes, others may be completely immersed. At any rate, considering the size of the television set and the potential distractions in the home, the aesthetic and narrative strategies employed by television are decidedly different from those of cinema. Thus, Mulvey's exploration of the male gaze seems insufficient to analyse the politics of objectification of men on 1980s television.

The 1980s saw an unprecedented change in the visual aesthetics of television in the context of the diverse pressures put on US network channels by cable channels and the far reach of VCR technology. *Remington Steele*'s aesthetics still are heavily indebted to what Caldwell (1995) terms the 'anti-stylishness' of 1970s television. As in many series, *Remington Steele* does sometimes feature extraordinary images, despite an overall comparatively uninteresting aesthetics. For example, a scene in 'Steele Belted' features a remarkable shot of an arm of a dead body hanging out of a car boot, shot from below with the majority of the frame dominated by a clear blue sky, then with various witnesses, and finally Remington, Laura and Murphy (James Read) leaning over it (see Figure 1 and 2). The dominant colour scheme of *Remington Steele* is light grey, red, and brown. Sets are decidedly scarce: in the offices of the detective agency, there are no book shelves, no clutter on desks or anywhere else. As the series moves further into the 1980s, the aesthetics become more varied. Later seasons include an increasing amount of location shots, unfamiliar from other series. Season 2 starts off rather spectacularly in Mexico ('Steele Away With Me'), several episodes of Season 3 are set in some more exotic locales in southern Europe ('Steele at it', 'Maltese Steele', 'Puzzled Steele') and Season 4 travels to the United Kingdom ('Steele Searching').



Figure 1 from "Steele Belted"



Figure 2 from "Steele Belted"



Figure 3 from "Steele Searching"



Figure 4 from "Love Among the Steele"

In its visual politics, *Remington Steele* may be most easily compared to *Charlie's Angels* (1976-81). Male and female objectification are always framed by significantly different power structures and positions in a capitalist system. However, what both series have in common is an overall relatively uninteresting aesthetics and a focus on objectification of its stars. Thus, from a position of analysing the aesthetics of mainstream television, the comparison may not be entirely inappropriate. As Caldwell notes in his critique of 1970s television style:

If freeway chases, fetishized tools, and weapons were not enough, wet T-shirt jiggle scenes with buxom starlets a la *Charlie's Angels*, could be pulled in front of the camera as filler, even in hour-long police dramas. In the homogenous, studio-bound style of the 1970s dramatic telefilm,

‘stunning visuals’ frequently meant placing loaded objects and libidinous bodies in front of the disinterested 35mm camera. Stylistic excess during this period had more to do with softcore fashion posing and automotive product photography than it did with painterly or expressionistic control over the image. (1995: Kindle location 994)

In light of D’Acci’s argument surrounding the need to attract the ‘working women’s market’, it seems prudent to suggest that producers would re-structure the visuals of a hit series like *Charlie’s Angels* and essentially perform a ‘gender swap’: the visual spectacle, at least to some extent, of *Remington Steele* is the title character himself. Nothing makes this clearer than scenes in ‘Steele at It’ and ‘Steele Blushing’ when he emerges in a wet shirt from the ocean or a lake, performing his own ‘jiggle scene’ (see Figure 3 and 4). And yet, this inversion is hardly complete.

Because of televisual aesthetics, much objectification happens in close-ups. This is particularly visible in *Magnum P.I.* It is hardly accidental that Selleck’s moustache has become such an iconic feature of the title character. The visual focus is often on Magnum’s face, the moustache working less as a measure to hide his features, but to emphasize them. His eyes become framed by moustache and eyebrows, Selleck drawing extra attention to them with inviting smiles or with his mobile brows and forehead. The moustache even serves as framing device in close-ups marking a horizontal line that divides the screen in a 2/3 - 1/3 ratio. Thus, while his body is important, his face is at least equally so (see Figure 5). The visual emphasis on the face in close-up also means an emphasis on emotion and the character displays traits that are designed to build an emotional, ‘intimate’ connection with the viewer. Magnum is constructed as a somewhat roguish romantic hero, kind and understanding,

traumatised by the Vietnam war. The narrative focus of the majority of episodes of *Magnum, P.I.* is on homosocial bonding between Magnum and his friends rather than romantic conquests. As Flitterman argues, when looking at Magnum, the character is more than object of the gaze or spectacle. He is also marked by a range of desirable characteristics (not always in line with heteronormative gender binaries), which she describes as ‘emotional depth’ (1985, 4).

In the pilot episode of *Remington Steele*, before Brosnan’s character assumes the role of the title character, Laura describes her imaginary superior as ‘the most generous, understanding, supportive man I could imagine’ (‘Licence to Steele’) thus stating the criteria Remington is measured against in the future. The spectacle in *Remington Steele* is both visual and narrative: on the one hand, it is Brosnan’s body, particularly his face. On the other hand, spectacle also lies in moments of romance, maybe even romantic fantasy in moments when Laura and Remington flirt, kiss, or fight like a classic screwball couple (see Figure 4). There is some mystery and moral ambiguity surrounding the character, but in his behaviour towards Laura he displays mostly desirable traits, again displaying what Flitterman describes as ‘emotional depth’. Pierce Brosnan does not fit easily into common concepts of masculinity in 1980s American popular culture. Future James Bond Brosnan only puts on muscles late in the series and never to the extent of the action heroes of the mid- to late 1980s. He is slim and the series often highlights that he is not athletic, particularly compared to Laura (‘Lofty Steele’, ‘Second Base Steele’, ‘Steele in the Running’). This stands in sharp contrast to Magnum who is frequently shown swimming, surfing, or running. In the first season, Brosnan usually wears designer suits, but as the series (and contemporary fashion) moves on, more and more of his chest is exposed by shirts that become less buttoned with each season. Yet, the suits also mark a contrast to Magnum’s muscle shirts and swim suits. In the episode ‘Kapu’, Magnum is shot and nursed back to health (and subsequently held) by an indigenous island community on the

small island Kapu. Magnum spends several scenes lying in bed, covered in a sheet with most of his chest exposed (see Figure 6, 7). The teaser for the episode shows these images, rather redundantly, twice. He later tries to escape the island wearing a white cotton shirt and white linen trousers, but the next scene, having returned to the island, shows him having cut off the sleeves of the shirt (showing off his arms) and the trouser legs (showing off his thighs and calves). His shirt is also more loosely buttoned, showing off his muscular chest and ample chest hair (see Figure 8).



Figure 5 from “The Woman on the Beach”



Figure 7 from “Kapu”



Figure 6 from “Kapu”



Figure 8 from “Kapu”

Men like Magnum are always decidedly (white) American. They sport American accents, but they also stand in for American values and use their bodies as tools to fight for these values. Remington Steele is decidedly British and his masculinity follows the suave, slick precedent of the different James Bonds at this point. But Remington Steele is a Bond with smoothed edges: not the lone hero who beds woman after woman, but monogamous

romantic hero who enjoys a long-standing equal partnership with a woman. He even describes himself as 'domesticated' ('Steele Away With Me'). It could be argued that, where Bond is constructed as an ideal of masculinity for men to strive for, Remington Steele is constructed as heterosexual female fantasy. Stefanie Jones points out that Brosnan's Bond later even serves to revise concepts of masculinity associated with previous Bond incarnations:

Newspaper features on the press conference where Brosnan was introduced sometimes play on the idea of him as a 'new man' in many senses of the word both as a new man to the role and as a symbol of the male type sympathetic to the gains of feminism. (2012: 178)

With Brosnan predominantly known for his role in *Remington Steele* at this point, it can be suggested that the idea of the star as example of the 'new man', respectful of women without losing his sexual appeal, is rooted in the TV series (though his Bond films construct this idea themselves). Brosnan as Remington is smooth and sophisticated without seeming superior or arrogant, capable of fighting his adversaries without messing up his hair or designer suit, witty and able to intellectually challenge Laura without talking down to her, and comfortable with her as his superior without trying to push her into a role as wife and mother. 'Steele Away With Me' features music that draws on the Bond theme throughout, a feature frequently repeated throughout season 2. Slapstick elements are played up throughout the double episode and the series is rarely this obvious about the way Steele can be read as a parody of Bond. The physical comedy also highlights his status as hero within a screwball couple, willing to make fun of himself. Pierce Brosnan as Remington Steele, thus, represents a masculinity on display, a face and, increasingly, a body to be looked at (to use Mulvey's terms), who represents a mysterious (albeit white) 'foreignness', but also presents a range of desirable qualities. In short, TV's version of what women want in a male they desire.

Flitterman argues that:

The force of Magnum's image, precisely his power as spectacle, is *mobilised* in order to play off representations of masculinity against one another, to engage in a play of cultural meanings and definitions of sexuality. Far from repressing the erotics of the gaze, the structures of fascination in looking at the male body are utilised in order to permit this signifying articulation; this in itself is a decisive element in the show's popularity. It is this diversion, a significant derailing of the libidinal gaze which nonetheless depends on the maintenance of its erotic power, which generates the fascination of *Magnum, p.i.* (1985: 43, italics in the original)

Magnum's/Selleck's masculinity is, of course, different from that of Remington Steele/Brosnan. Yet, the kind of objectified masculinity displayed in *Magnum, P.I.* can be viewed as a template for the way Remington/Brosnan is constructed:

Unthreatened about his masculinity, and therefore unaffected by the need to defend it, he functions at once as identification figure and desired object. (ibid.: 45)

Similarly, the Remington/Brosnan figure is not only visually striking, but also a fully-fledged character who seems like the model for a perfect male in his constant deference to Laura. The lanky body of Pierce Brosnan in *Remington Steele* in many ways displays a different version of masculinity, in which Brosnan is often more boldly positioned as desirable object. As Mizejewski points out: 'In its wittiest reversals, the show emphasized that Remington was the 'pretty one', the head-turner, while Laura was the brains of the team' (2004: 66). Working undercover, Laura even describes Remington once as 'something pretty to wear on my arm'



(‘Steele Away With Me’) and in ‘Steele’s Gold’, another woman asks her for permission to kiss him, treating him as Laura’s property. Thus, the text emphasises its own use of Remington/Pierce Brosnan as object. In fact, the characters’ status as a man without a name and an unknown past deliberately places him as object of fantasy, a cardboard cut-out onto which the female lead (and viewers) can project her desires. In this regard, it is hardly surprising that the character is, first and foremost, constructed through Pierce Brosnan’s visual appeal.

*Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* construct a specific performativity of masculinity. Jonathan Bignell argues in relation to the later *Miami Vice* that the characters assume the commodities of the criminals they aim to capture (2009: 25). This means that they become fetishized objects themselves. While *Miami Vice* promotes commodity fetishism of a different kind, it also pushes to the foreground the performativity of masculinity in undercover work. Yet, both, *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* already focus on male characters who perform their own masquerade. Magnum assumes Robin Masters’ symbols of wealth (car, house, equipment and wine cellar). Meanwhile, Brosnan assumes the identity of the (non-existent) Remington Steele. In both cases, they perform masculinity largely based on borrowed signifiers, a masquerade *Miami Vice* later pushes further (King 1990, Bignell 2009, Lyons 2010).

Thus, *Magnum, P.I.* and *Remington Steele* both represent different ways televisual aesthetics emphasise the male body on 1980s television. Importantly, both series function as representatives of early 1980s middlebrow television. This is significant as the changed visual focus on the male hero suggests a targeting of a (heterosexual) female audience, highlighting the way middlebrow prime time television culture of this era was, at least partially, women’s culture.

## Conclusion

This article has explored middlebrow television, using *Remington Steele* and *Magnum, P.I.* as examples. In this, it has focussed on the gaze structures on US middlebrow TV of the era and the way the male was increasingly emphasised as sex symbol through the highlighting of both body and face. Meanwhile, the narrative increasingly emphasised what Flitterman describes as ‘emotional depth’. Importantly this is framed by the cumulative narrative and the logics of storytelling inherent in the series structure that still dominate prime time television and the cultural logics of middlebrow television.

For *Remington Steele*, its middlebrow status allows it to present a palatable version of feminism. The centrality of romance and fantasy allows it to present a somewhat ‘softened’ version of feminism. However, it also allows for the construction of Laura as ‘bearer of the look’ and active subject who objectifies Remington and treats him as object. For *Magnum, P.I.*, Magnum as object is constructed as part of a diegesis, which is dominated by men and highlights homosocial bonding, loyalty, and kindness as part of this.

Understanding middlebrow culture in the 1980s serves a variety of purposes. First of all, it provides understanding of the cultural moment, particularly as the television culture of the time was often understood in undifferentiated terms. Especially the idea of (white, heterosexual) female culture and its relationship to middlebrow television often goes under-analysed. Secondly, understanding cultural hierarchies, also in their historical positioning is important: it carries with it understanding of class culture and helps develop a more nuanced idea of the cultural politics of the past.

As a third point, in a cultural moment when so much of 1980s culture is recycled and rebooted, it helps to understand the cultural politics of the moment. While the current nostalgia for the 1980s is often driven by pop culture imagery and gadgets, rather than a more serious engagement with the era, it still helps to explore the cultural referents mobilised in

more contemporary artefacts. Linked to this, understanding these cultural politics often helps understand what today's nostalgia is *for*. For example, re-boots of *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-20) and *Magnum, P.I.* (2018-present) mobilise a version of masculinity not necessarily present in 1980s texts. This suggests that the nostalgic masculinities developed here become new constructs, rather than relying on previous cultural moments. I deliberately focused predominantly on *Remington Steele* and *Magnum, P.I.* here to clarify that this objectifying televisual gaze is hardly uncommon for 1980s TV, suggesting that the re-boots express a nostalgia for what they assume 1980s television to be, not what is displayed in the original series. Thus, the middlebrow culture explored here becomes particularly important to understanding the television culture of the 2020s, as well as of the 1980s.

## **Bibliography**

- Brunsdon, C. (1981), “‘Crossroads’: Notes on Soap Opera”, *Screen*, 22: 4, pp.32-37.
- Brunsdon, C. (1990), ‘Television: Aesthetics and Audiences’, in P. Mellencamp, P. (ed.), *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press/BFI, pp.59-72.
- Caldwell, J. T. (1995), *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American television*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Cosmatos, G.P. (1985), *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, USA: Estudios Churubusco Azteca S.A. Anabasis N.V.
- D'Acci, J. (1994), *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ellis, J. (1992), *Visible Fictions Cinema: Television: Video*, Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Feuer, J. (1986), ‘Narrative Form in American Network Television’ in C. McCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp.101-14.
- Feuer, J. (1995), *Seeing through the eighties television and Reaganism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fiske, J. (1992), ‘British Cultural Studies and Television’ in R. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled. Television and Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pp.284-35.
- Fiske, J. (1987), *Television Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Flitterman, S. (1985), ‘Thighs and Whiskers: The Fascination of “Magnum, p.i.”’, *Screen*, 26: 2, pp.42-59.

- Gitlin, T. (2008 [1983]), *Inside Prime Time*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Haralovich, M.B. (1991), “‘Champagne Taste on a Beer Budget’: Series Design and Popular Appeal of Magnum, P.I.’, *Journal of Film and Television*, 43: 1/2, pp.123-34.
- Jeffords, S. (1994), *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan era*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Jenkins, S. (1984), ‘Hill Street Blues’ in J. Feuer, P. Kerr and T. Vahimagi (eds), *MTM: ‘Quality Television’*, London: BFI. pp.183-99.
- King, S.B.. (1990), ‘Sonny’s Virtues: the Gender Negotiations of Miami Vice’, *Screen*, 31: 3, pp.181-95.
- Kotcheff, T. (1982), *First Blood*, USA: Anabasis N.V., Cinema 84, Elcajo Productions
- Lemke, S. and Schniedermann, W. (2016), *Class divisions in Serial Television*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lyons, J. (2010), *Miami Vice*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Marc, D. and Thompson, R. J. (2005). *Television in the antenna age: a concise history*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Mittell, J. (2015), *Complex TV: the Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York: New York University Press.
- Mizejewski, L. (2004), *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975), ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16: 3, pp. 6-13.

- Nelson, R. (1997), *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values, and Cultural Change*, New York, N.Y: St. Martin's Press.
- Newcomb, H. (1985), 'Magnum. The Champagne of Television?', *Channels of Communications*, June/May, pp.23-26.
- Newman, M. Z. and Levine, E.(2012), *Legitimizing Television: Media convergence and Cultural Status*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Press, A .L. (1991), *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Radway, J. A. (1997), *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*, Chapel Hill, N.C.; London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rothmund, K. (2013), *Komplexe Welten: Narrative Strategien in US-amerikanischen Fernsehserien/Complex Worlds: Narrative Strategies in US-American TV serials* , Berlin: Bertz + Fischer.
- Stevens, C. E. (2021), 'Historical Binge-Watching. Marathon Viewing on Videotape', in M. Jenner (ed.), *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 23-39.
- Thompson, R. J. (1996), *Television's Second Golden Age: from Hill Street Blues to ER*, Syracuse, N.Y. : Syracuse University Press.
- Turnbull, S. (2014), *The TV Crime Drama*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

## **Television**

*A-Team, The* (1983-87, USA: NBC)

‘Diamonds ‘n Dust’ (Season 2, Episode 1; 20 September 1983)

*Cagney & Lacey* (1981-88, USA: CBS)

*Charlie’s Angels* (1976-81, USA: ABC)

*Cheers* (1982-92, USA: NBC)

*Hawaii Five-0* (2010-20, USA: CBS)

*Hill Street Blues* (1981-87, USA: NBC)

*L.A. Law* (1986-92, USA: NBC)

*Magnum, P.I.* (1980-88, USA: CBS)

‘Kapu’ (Season Seven, Episode Nine; 26 November 1986)

*Magnum, P.I.* (2018-present, USA: CBS)

*Miami Vice* (1984-90, USA: NBC)

*Moonlighting* (1985-89, USA: ABC)

*Remington Steele* (1983-87, USA: NBC)

‘Licence to Steele’ (Season One, Episode One; 3 September 1983)

‘Steele’s Gold’ (Season One, Episode Twenty; 22 March 1984),

‘Steele Belted’ (Season One, Episode Six; 1 June 1983)

‘Steele Away With Me’ (Season Two, Episode One; 20 September 1983)

‘Love Among the Steele’ (Season Two, Episode Seven; 8 November 1983)

‘Steele at It’ (Season Three, Episode One; 25 September 1984)

‘Lofty Steele’ (Season Three, Episode Two; 2 October 1984)

‘Second Base Steele’ (Season Three, Episode Four; 23 October 1984)

‘Puzzled Steele’ (Season Three, Episode Eight; 27 November 1984)

‘Steele Searching’ (Season Four, Episode One; 24 September 1985)

‘Steele Blushing’ (Season Four, Episode Three; 22 October 1985)

‘Steele in the Running’ (Season Four, Episode Nineteen; 22 March 1986)

*Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983-87, USA: CBS)

*Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79, USA: ABC)

*Wire, The* (2002-8, USA: HBO)