

Synopsis of "Stone's War"

Ira Stone, an old Vietnam buddy of Crockett's, arrives from Nicaragua, seeking his friend's protection. He is carrying film of the shooting of a Nicaraguan priest by American combat troops, and is soon being hotly pursued by agents of the U.S. government. Indifferent, if not unbelieving, at first, Crockett reluctantly helps him out. When Stone is kidnapped by Maynard (played by G. Gordon Liddy), known to Crockett and Stone for his CIA drug running in Vietnam, the Miami Vice team is convinced that dirty deeds are afoot. Maynard is revealed as the leader of a large, semi-legitimate operation which is channelling arms and mercenaries out of Florida to the contras. In a shoot-out, Stone is killed. Maynard escapes, but Stone's film and his story are picked up by the media. That evening, however, Crockett hears the story on a radio news broadcast. The announcer reports that Sandinista troops have killed a priest. Crockett's mood turns reflective.

In the retrospective light of the recent congressional hearings, the celebrated "contra" episode of *Miami Vice* has taken on a somewhat prophetic character.

In fact, it was aired two days before Eugene Hasenfus fell from grace and into our laps as the first concrete evidence of the scandals to come. John O'Connor, TV critic of the *New York Times*, took the opportunity to suggest that, sometimes, television entertainment, in its role as the "Great Reflector," does tap the vein of the public's political awareness. O'Connor concludes his review of the show with the following:

But, just as major polls continue to find significantly muted public enthusiasm for Administration policy on Nicaragua, *Miami Vice* may have gone straight to the heart of the nation's middle-of-the-road mood. Television as the Great Reflector could be wrong, or perhaps more likely could be just about on target — at least in its entertainments — in gauging the current. (NYT, 10/19/86)

What is significant about O'Connor's otherwise turgid commentary is the parenthetical "at least in its entertainments." In fact, his review has argued, perversely perhaps, that we can expect to find more in the way of truth when television entertainment broaches political subjects than when television

newscasts cover politics. In its obsession with pursuing sociocentrality, TV entertainment often ends up with a popular agenda (not necessarily O'Connor's "middle-of-the-road mood") almost by default. In O'Connor's terms, TV news, by contrast, shapes and molds public opinion; it seldom *reflects* it.

For those of us who write and think about the nature of the relation between culture and politics, this makes, like an important distinction, to make, between shaping and reflecting, and I shall come back to it later. For the present we might ask what it is that lies behind this distinction? Above all, it speaks to what one could call the separation of TV powers, a separation which liberals especially hold sacrosanct. Increasingly we hear the liberal complaint that the "public sphere" of the network news has been eroded and infiltrated by the private sphere of entertainment. It is high time that we disabused ourselves of any nostalgic assumptions that inform this position. The more we learn from television theory about the historically generic conventions of the news broadcast, the more we learn about its generic modes of address, its practiced language of consent, and its articulation of point of view, the less we are likely to go on issuing platitudes about a news discourse on politics that was once unmediated and immune to the contagion of the entertainment codes.

More relevant to my discussion here, however, is the suggestion that the so-called erosion of television's public sphere is manifest not so much in changes in news presentation, but rather, in the fact that it is TV entertainment which increasingly broaches volatile political issues, and that the corporate fools are rushing in gladly where the politico angels fear to tread. Nowhere was this suggestion more patronizingly aired than in the recent media controversy generated by the media itself over the ABC series *Amerika* (ABC was actually shrewd enough to cover the controversy in ABC newscasts as a news event, and not in the kind of panel discussion which

usually follows "controversial" broadcasts).

The only common ground shared by all of the critics of *Amerika* was that it was *boring*. Even there, however, there was a whole gamut of interpretation, from the conventional industry point of view for whom boredom is the strongest reproach possible for a primetime TV show, to the more attenuated opinion of Flora Lewis of the *New York Times*, who floated the idea that the show's tedium was somehow a result of its association, albeit through right-wing propaganda, with left-wing totalitarian art, which we all know is profoundly boring. In an op-ed article in a Sunday issue of the *Times*, Benjamin R. Barber, searching for the anti-anti-Communist angle, found the fundamental theme of the show to have been this: we are losing our public sphere fast, and with it, we will lose any vestige of democracy that remains to us and through which we can hope to go on exercising our rights as *citizens*. Barber's comments tighten the liberal knot further. Not content with seeing the ABC entertainment division's political gymnastics as a symptomatic erosion of the public sphere, Barber finds the erosion of the public sphere thematized in the show itself.

More significant, however, is Barber's suggestion that, once formulated, in however embryonic a fashion, the producers and the writer "did their utmost to conceal this telling lesson...by burying their moral in a morass of ideological contradictions that taught quite contrary lessons." In what Barber says here we can read all of the problems and obstacles of liberal discourse about political culture. It is a discourse which wants to see politics but not the political, which wants to see ideologies but not the ideological, and, under other circumstances, which usually wants to see Culture but not the cultural.

Those who watched any of the show will know that *Amerika* was shot through with contradictions from beginning to end — this is not the time

Television:

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The Great Reproducer

and place to go into detail. Suffice it to say that those of us who think about the relation between culture and ideology would be disappointed and not a little astonished if we did not find contradictions; ideology, after all, is a morass of contradictions and hidden agendas, and the work of ideology is precisely manifest in its covert attempts to conceal. What Barber, by contrast, means by "ideological contradictions" is that *Amerika*, given the opportunity, failed to present politics as a game of single issues and clearly recognizable positions. For the political liberal like Barber, politics cannot afford to be any more or any less than *rational* and noncontradictory. Liberal discourse is the discourse of the Enlightenment which cannot brook the idea of a contradiction and which wants to be able to say: what you see is what you get. But television does not say this. Television says: what you get is what you see — because it is a medium which assumes in us a certain knowledge about its own working practices, a knowledge about its commercially limited sociocentricity, a knowledge about its own conventional fantasies of the commodity world of which it is an organ.

There are those, like Barber, who would say that the television viewer, inasmuch as he or she is a consumer of images, constitutes an impoverished definition of citizenship. The fact is, however, that for some decades now, television, and I mean all of television — not just the news — has been and increasingly will be, the only public sphere we have. A radical cultural criticism of television must start from that fact, and not simply lament it. The dream of the fully participatory *citoyen* is for others.

If the formal contradictions of *Amerika* were partially explicable by the conflict between the right-wing megafantasy that flourished at the core of the script and the mega-fantasy of profit on the part of ABC's corporate managers which irradiated its *mise en scene*, then the show itself told us almost nothing about the relation between politics and

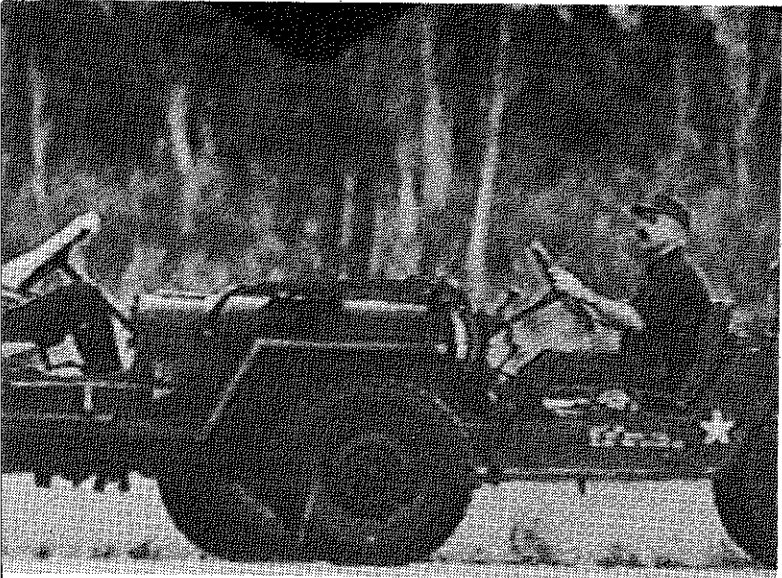


commodification. In this respect it was faithful to the hornlocked fantasy of the Cold War oppositions which it was called upon to play out.*

Nothing could be further from the fluid world of postmodern politics which *Miami Vice* inhabits, Friday evening after Friday evening. The critical prestige which *Miami Vice* has accumulated usually centers on its valorization of style or other formalistically innovative features which it has introduced to prime time TV. Less commented upon is the fact that the show, unlike any other primetime program, regularly addresses real political events, and more generally, is staged in a world which is saturated with politics: Central America, Vietnam, Cuba, Latin dictatorships, (although not the Middle East so far, to my knowledge), Greenpeace, the CIA, the KGB, the IRA, the NRA, political assassinations, left, right, and center, the death squads, corruption in government and finance banking, local and global, the politics of rape, baby running, the death penalty and third world debt, in addition to the staple of narcotics and arms trading. It is a world of North-South and not East-West politics, and therefore does not profit, in narrative terms, from the ethical certainties of the Cold War imaginary. Instead, what we have is the fast-track "rush" of multinational politics, where capital flows along trade routes with little or no respect for the ideological frontiers of global politics recognized, say, by the United Nations.

Beneath what is often represented in the show as the bewilderingly contingent map of transnational politics, there

is however the more specific, libidinal trajectory of the show. This libidinal trajectory, which is tied not only to the history of the main characters, but also to the baby boom history of the largest target audience, moves from the political innocence of the fifties and early sixties, through the hard school of Vietnam to the current shouldering of responsibility for, or policing of, U.S. involvement in Central and Latin America. In this respect, the Miami location is crucial. Aside from Miami's current geopolitical significance on the map of multinational capitalism, and its "exemplary" status as a model of postmodernist urban development and postindustrial transformation brought about through the exploitation of cheap migrant and immigrant labor, Florida, unlike any other locale in the continental U.S., can provide the kind of semi-tropical, guerrilla-like setting redolent of Vietnam and the Central American terrain to the South. Unlike any of the other mythical sites of American identity, the Middle West, the North East, the West, and even the deep South, it has no sacred meaning as an iconic site of territorial authority or legitimacy. In this respect, there is less at stake, less to lose in the way of American legitimacy in the fight against the politics of transnational vice. (It's not unlike the merely semi-legitimate status of Southern Air Transport and other elements of North's Project Democracy — not identified legitimately enough with the Washington establishment for the latter to suffer from their otherwise scandalous exposure). On the other hand, as I shall now argue, *Miami Vice* does dramatize, in its continually frustrated struggle to



with the powers they have. On the other hand, it is a look which invites passivity in the face of what is represented as the overly complex effects of transnational politics: it's not for us to understand, we often can't even tell the difference between left and right, the third world has a political logic of its own, not ours, etc.

I have written elsewhere about the problem of difference in *Miami Vice*, especially sexual difference with reference to the narrative agency of interethnic male bonding between Crockett and Tubbs (*Oxford Literary Review*, 8, 1/2, 1986). Here I want to say a few things about the politics of the commodity as it is expressed within the show itself. In its delineation of what is crime and what is not, *Miami Vice* offers distinctions between good consumerism and bad consumerism. The stool pigeons in the first season of the show, Izzy Merino, the "hispanic" hispanic, and Noogie Lamont, the "black" black (to play off the "whiter" ethnic presences respectively of Castillo and Tubbs), these stool pigeons (Noogie dropped out after the first season, Merino has a less fixed role to play) both steal and deal the exchange-values of the good commodity — specifically clothes and hi-tech merchandise. Like the small-time entrepreneur and the advertising sponsor, their crimes are "soft," and although they claim that police intervention is a "thorn in the side of free enterprise," their sanctioned, semi-legitimate function as willing informers underscores the fact that their activities are in every way continuous with the show's own proven capacity to create a high-profile consumer market out of the powerful representation of the *Miami Vice* lifestyle.

Bad consumerism is expressed in the form of what I call the transnational vice commodity, especially arms and narcotics, because, as commodities, they expose and flaunt the liquid indifference of the system of commodity exchange. Narcotics do not hide their lack of use-value, and therefore they cannot retreat behind the facade of pragmatic utility demanded of the regular market commodity. The pure pleasure or pure waste that they offer is much too demonstrably an effect of exchange-value and nothing else. In an early episode of the show we hear a Thai druglord explain that "opium is no different from tapioca or tin ore from Malaysia. It is simply a product for which there is a demand." In saying this, he is only partially correct. The consumer who wants tapioca is also likely to want other commodities, and is thus an active consumer. The narcotics consumer is

physically dependent on only one commodity, his or her buying power is wholly consumed by this one market and cannot easily be redirected to hook into and regenerate other markets. Narcotic consumption is a zero-sum game; tied to the means of destruction and not the means of production, it is immune to the liquid transfer codes of the free commodity market.

To illustrate more concretely what I mean here, I want to say a little about the issue of arms trading, not only because it is a frequent subject of *Miami Vice* investigation (Crockett is always complaining that the "arsenal of democracy" is too much like a Sears Roebuck catalogue), but also because it forms an important historical backdrop to the contra question and the involvement of arms sales to Iran, a backdrop that was barely scrutinized in the course of the recent hearings.

Marxist economists argue that the production of arms for the great European dynastic wars was a major early source of primitive accumulation of capital. By the turn of the century, we see that the arms business is far and away the most international industry in the world. The massive post-war boom in U.S. arms trading has been interpreted in two ways. For presidents like Nixon, Ford and Reagan, the selling of arms is an orthodox extension of nineteenth-century diplomacy. In fact, it has long since replaced ideology as the most efficient and persuasive instrument of global foreign policy. And with respect to the Third World, it fulfills the logic that the acquisition of arms is a natural element of the development of the so-called developing nations. On the other hand, the post-war shift in the U.S. to a permanent arms economy has solved what Baran and Sweezy, in *Monopoly Capitalism*, call the "On What?" question of monopoly capitalism. The State, in order to stave off periods of economic depression, needed a stable commodity on which it could spend its money. Soon the whole domestic economy is tied to the stability of arms production and military expenditure, and looks upon it as an automatic pump primer; as the conventional and nuclear arms industry begins to fall under the threat of global regulation, Star Wars redemptively looms up over the horizon. As for the overseas market, arms trading proves to be a godsend in times of international economic crisis, especially during the seventies boom when arms transfers increased by a dramatic 80%. During the oil crisis of 1974, the West was quite directly trading arms for oil, an agreement not without its own vicious contradictions, for Iran, in order to finance its unprecedented arms buildup, unprecedented for any country

in history, had to increase revenue for the oil. It was in the mid-seventies that the alarmingly vicious contradictions of the ethical nerve of the Senate Commission on arms trading policy, which was now "out of control," the US was selling state-of-the-art arms to Iran and, under Ford, were more technologically advanced than those supplied by President Carter's administration. What he called "the most important element of this policy very near the ground and well lived anyway."

By this time, arms trading had become an essential element of the multi-national economy, which is to say that it was stripping away its ethical content. It occupies a position that of the slave trade, absolutely essential to the economies of Europe. The contradictions about the arms-trade scandal have threatened an old complaint that the world ought not to be measured in terms. They have failed to question the commodity nature of weapons of destruction. In fact, Carter's Southern humanist position represents an untimely assumption that arms are intrinsically evil. The taken the Salvation Army position that arms are weapons used against empires. Finally succeeded in a much the new Cold War. Jihad has in common with fundamentalism.

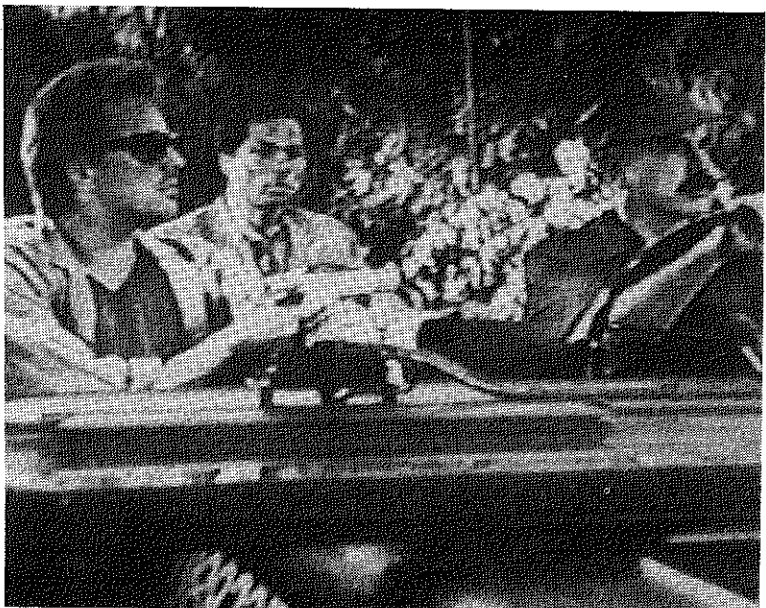
In what respect is the commodity different? Mandel, the production of permanent arms economy, third and new categories of account of reproduction, add the category of the means of destruction. Existing categories of production and consumption, respectively. Unlike the arms commodity, produce the material elements of production (in fact, it threatens them altogether), nor is commodity interchangeable with consumer goods. The then, is a specific feature Mandel calls "late capitalism." In respect there would be Mandel for my claim a kinds of consumerism represented in the discourse

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assert the legitimacy of local, or territorial justice, some of the contradictions which mediate local and global features of the new political map drawn by multinational capitalism.

In this respect, O'Connor's comments about the concluding scene of the contra episode are a sorry misreading of the significance of Sonny Crockett's response to a radio news broadcast which he perceives as Washington disinformation; O'Connor writes that "Crockett looked off sadly into the distance in a moment of introspection that is rare in this action series." Such moments are not at all rare in *Miami Vice*: in fact, it is quite common for episodes to end with this kind of generic Crockett look. Neither is it a moment of introspection that is represented. What is inscribed on Crockett's face is a radical indifference: the indifference of a more global ethics to his own attempts to legislate locally. On the one hand, Crockett's look elicits sympathy by signifying the inadequate reach of his limited authority as a law enforcement officer: the police are truly up against it, they can only do so much



in history, had to increase oil prices to raise revenue for these arms. However, it was in the mid-seventies that this alarmingly vicious circle began to touch the ethical nerve of Congress. In 1976, a Senate Commission reported that Iran arms trading policy, initiated by Nixon was now "out of control." In fact, the US was selling state of the art arms to Iran and, under Ford, to Israel, which were more technologically advanced than those supplied to the US army. President Carter's attempts to rectify what he called "the moral bankruptcy" of this policy very nearly failed to get off the ground and was brutally short-lived anyway.

By this time, arms trading is a "natural" element of the multinational economy, which is to say that it has succeeded in stripping away its ethical accompaniment. It occupies a position not unlike that of the slave trade, once considered absolutely essential to the free trade economies of Europe. Recent meditations about the arms-for-hostages scandal have threatened to revive the old complaint that the worth of humans ought not to be measured in commodity terms. They have failed, by and large, to question the *commodity* status of weapons of destruction. Symptomatically, Carter's Southern Churches humanist position rested upon the untimely assumption that arms sales are intrinsically evil. Reaganism has taken the Salvation Army world-view that arms are weapons of God to be used against empires of evil, and has finally succeeded in showing how much the new Cold War American jihad has in common with Shiite fundamentalism.

In what respect is the transnational vice commodity different? For Ernest Mandel, the production of weapons in a permanent arms economy constitutes a third and new category to add to Marx's account of *reproduction*. Mandel would add the category of the production of the means of destruction to Marx's existing categories of the means of production and consumer goods respectively. Unlike consumer goods, the arms commodity does not reproduce the material elements of production (in fact, it threatens to destroy them altogether), nor is the arms commodity interchangeable with consumer goods. The arms economy, then, is a specific feature of what Mandel calls "late capitalism." In this respect there would be some support in Mandel for my claim about the different kinds of consumerism that are represented in the discourse of *Miami Vice*.

But this in itself cannot tell us much more about the way in which the ideological realm of consumerism is engaged in a popular television show.

For Mandel's account of reproduction is a strictly classical one, and so it is limited to demonstrating only how the economic mode of production is reproduced, with or without the help of political and ideological processes outside of production. What we need is a larger account of the process of social reproduction, one which shows how the political and the ideological are constantly being reproduced, in addition to the economic. It is within such an account of social reproduction that the analysis of television can come into its own, for it is there, increasingly, that our politics and much of our social experience is lived in the form of consumption.

This brings us back, believe it or not, to John O'Connor, and the distinction which I earlier pointed to in this article; the distinction between TV (entertainment TV) as the Great Reflector and TV (TV News) as the Definer and Shaper of popular opinion and thought. It should be clear that both of these processes, reflection and definition, are part and parcel of the process of reproduction itself. In fact, to distinguish between the two, as O'Connor is led to do, is, in itself, a way of reproducing an ideological distinction that lies not only at the heart of mainstream television criticism, liberal or otherwise, but also in the demarcations of the corporate television industry, traditionally divided between news and entertainment. What difference would it have made for O'Connor to have written about the contra episode of *Miami Vice*? That TV had once again shown itself to be the Great Reproducer? What would he be saying to the readers of the *Times* that television takes no pains to conceal anyway, since its corporate-industrial needs and demands are so explicitly a part of the structure of broadcasting that they can often enter into the diegetic discourse of a show? On the one hand, the question is both facile and banal, for it asks something of the *New York Times* that it would not ask of network television itself. On the other hand, it is a question that television criticism, as it increasingly approaches a level of theoretical maturity, must examine.

It is a question, moreover, that is already dramatized each week on *Miami Vice* in the contradictory spectacle of these \$350-a-week middle-class cops who possess the achieved consumption levels of the great movers and shakers of the transnational vice world while conspicuously lacking their awesome consumer buying power. This contradiction haunts these moments when Crockett is asked to make a pitch for the customary Reaganite version of Jeffersonian anti-Federalist discourse against protectionism and interventionism. Derided by a Florida

redneck, in an earlier episode, for his lack of patriotism in driving a fancy Italian car, Crockett responds, "I buy what I feel like buying," which of course he cannot do.

More important, the ending of the contra episode reproduces another ideological staple, the division of labor between our political lives as working, public citizens, and as leisured, private consumers. At the end of the contra episode, when Crockett hears the disinformation on a radio news report, he is decidedly off duty; in fact, he is fishing, a time-honored locus for the pensive, white male. In the European aristocratic tradition of fishing, we are used to images of great statesman pondering over the affairs of state while casting their line into the fast flowing river of History (usually in Scotland, a privileged Romantic site of history). The image of Crockett's fisherman is a more innocently populist one, linking Huckleberry Finn and Ernest Hemingway, if not Minnesota's Walter Mondale, and in Crockett's case, he is casting his line from the St. Vitus into the Miami harbor against the backdrop of the city's monuments to capital, which he is always promising to police with righteous rigor: one of his erstwhile threats to Wall Street is that it his duty to "rock the boat until it sinks."

However, it is as a passenger on the ship of state and not as a watchful coastguard that he responds to the news broadcast. It is as a private citizen, and thus with all of the passivity required of that position that he responds to the betrayal and impoverishment of his more ethically circumscribed position as a representative of an empowered public sphere.** And, in a final twist, it is through the disinformation produced through the auspices of none other than a news broadcast that he and we are asked to learn the lesson that O'Connor and the *Times* headline as "Real World Impinges on Miami Vice."

Andrew Ross teaches English at Princeton. He is the author of The Failure of Modernism (1986), and is currently completing a book about intellectuals and popular culture.

*It is no surprise that George Kennan, chief author of *The Cold War Imaginary*, was moved to write a letter of protest (also published in the *Times* (1/5/87) about ABC's lack of concern for Soviet-American relations.

** This division between public on-duty and private off-duty roles helps the show to safely negotiate many of its most salient contradictions that crop up from week to week, most notably in the sexual lives of Crockett and Tubbs. More generally, this division generically structures the way in which cop shows manage to represent the links between coercion and consent, never one without the other.

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