

Introduction

MURDER BY THE BOOK

I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading
labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and would
somehow involve the stars.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”

Reading Columbo

In “Make Me a Perfect Murder” (7:3; Feb. 25, 1978), our eponymous hero is investigating the murder of a television network executive. His work brings him to the production facilities, where he is trained in, among other instruments, the technical director’s console. When he sits down at the board with the technician to discuss the production of live television, the techie first asks after the neck brace that he is wearing at the time; that conversational strategy—not getting directly to the point, rather like the spinning of a wheel—is a specialty of the lieutenant’s, of course, and he responds in kind, detailing what a number of medical professionals have suggested is the cause of his neck problem. Then, looking at the series of monitors in front of him, he asks, “All these screens—for just one show?” Turning on one screen, the technician announces, “That’s a line monitor; that’s what’s going on the air.” He turns on another: “The preview monitor is what the director wants up next.” And, as he turns on the four screens below at once, he says, “And those are what the four cameras see.”

The detective marvels at what he sees: “All these beautiful machines, all these buttons to push. I know it costs millions and I know everybody works very hard. But . . . to me it looks like fun.” The technician confesses that it is fun and then, in response to Columbo’s question, confirms that Miss Freestone (the killer and Columbo’s primary suspect) does indeed understand the technology. At that, the technician leaves Columbo alone at the board, and thus begins a two-minute sequence in which the detective plays with the machines. Rather than working with the images available from the four cameras, however, he plays abstract shapes that dance to musical accompaniment—starting with a simple rendition of his signature tune “This Old Man,” which becomes increasingly symphonic. Like the discussion of the neck brace, this is another tangent, if a purely audiovisual one. It’s a scene, too, that demonstrates the detective’s attention and delight. And it invokes attention and delight in the viewer: patience in light of a visual tangent which becomes another sort of amusement, a multiplied focus on simultaneous elements, and an affection for the detective’s own simple pleasure.

This scene, with its multiple screens that the detective looks across, its demand for patient attention, and its invitation to delight in what we see as well, also functions for me as a model for reading the series itself and television overall. As a kind of microcosm of this interpretative method, the original format of *Columbo* is itself indicative of the ways in which the series—and television as a whole, whether in the heyday of the broadcast era or in the increasingly digital universe of exhibition and reception—presents plentitude and possibility, logic and serendipity as part of its structural design. Those multiple screens before Columbo’s very eyes might stand in for a series of texts (a range of episodes of *Columbo* itself; or perhaps *Columbo* alongside other series during its original airing on Sunday nights; or maybe the Sunday night schedule on NBC: what’s on now and what’s coming up next; or, five decades later, a subheading of suggestions on a subscription platform). Set alongside one another, they invite intertextual analysis. And as representative of a practice of interpreting the series itself, I’d argue that *Columbo*, too, invites us to read between various texts: various episodes of the series, this and other series, the series and various films, the series and memoirs or board games or tie-in novels, and so on. At



I.1. "All these buttons to push" ("Make Me a Perfect Murder," 7:3; Feb. 25, 1978)



I.2. This is what the camera sees ("Make Me a Perfect Murder," 7:3; Feb. 25, 1978)

the same time, while the detective sits in the director's chair, learning about the production of live broadcast television, I'd suggest that this sequence invites us to recognize that an intertextual reading is also a *contextual* reading—that is, it enables us to understand *Columbo* within the historical moment during which it was made, across a range of contexts that informs its production.

And, in fact, the multiple monitors, or squares, of the scene in “Make Me a Perfect Murder” visually mark a form of reading that is also part of the design of the original broadcast context of the series as a whole, as part of its weekly mystery “wheel series,” a mode of programming that rotates between regular series within the same time slot. The wheel itself is a neat mechanism. Individual spokes are connected to a larger whole: spin it, and you'll likely land in a different place time after time. Such a process enables us to find serendipitous connections between things. In fact, it's not unlike watching television in real time: “change the channel” at any time of day, and it's like a spin of a wheel. Hence, as one turns a dial, hits a button, or scans a touchscreen, almost instantaneously a viewer can make connections across series, networks, even historical periods: one instance, or one television text, inevitably informs another. For me, watching *Columbo* is always an invitation to look across many screens at once: even as I attend to this singular text, I am making a series of connections to others, much like the lieutenant's own process of detection. Circles and squares. Serendipity and logic. Their coexistence is possible in the plentitude of television itself and the complex mode of viewing that it demands.

Reading Television, Intertextually

The premise of this book might seem quite simple: the television series *Columbo* trains us as detectives of television. However, as Umberto Eco, himself a fan of *Columbo*, claims, “If you want to use television for teaching somebody something, you have first to teach somebody how to use television.”¹ After all, television itself is not that simple, and to learn either about it or from it, “detecting” television requires a particular kind of attention.² Such attentiveness is born out of what we might also understand as distraction, for one's attention to television is always

an attention to more than one thing at once: for instance, we multiply rather than divide our attention to both form and content together, but we are also always exposed, and perhaps even predisposed, to the range of simultaneous possibilities that television offers, whether from the multitude of viewing options at any one moment to the movement between different kinds of successive segments from moment to moment. Though one could claim that US commercial broadcast or cable television—of which the series was and still is a part—can be easily broken down into its central modus operandi *to sell*, I'd like here to imagine television also as a form that is full of narrative, epistemological, and temporal possibilities through its literal simultaneous play of texts at any and every hour and its accumulation of content (as well as form) over several decades. It offers, in effect, a complex technology of reading for its viewers and its analysts: that is, television—no matter what sort of screen or platform we use to watch it today—provides a mechanism for continuously reading across and between the variety of content that we see before us. Imagine for a moment turning on the television set and a “set-top box” such as Roku or AppleTV: what we see is an amalgam of series and films we have watched across channels and streaming platforms, alongside others that are recommended to us based on prior viewing habits. Here, then, algorithms read viewers themselves, reaffirming and expanding the reach of an intertextual system.³

Much foundational work in television studies in the 1970s and 1980s sought to define television as an ideological and textual system. Based on analyses of commercial broadcast television—the dominant delivery system of this period in the United States—critical work emerging at this time considered the complex textual rhythms of television and its economic, psychic, and ideological effects on its viewers. Structurally, critics focused both on the ubiquitous “flow” of television, which integrated disparate segments over blocks of time (narrative or news programs, ads, network announcements, and so on), and on the very segmentation of television textuality.⁴ For instance, published alongside one another in the same pages of the Summer 1984 issue of *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, key contributions to the field by Nick Browne and Beverle Houston centered, respectively, on the demarcation of television textuality and its promise of plentitude—two sides of the same

coin. In “The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text,” Browne defines three elements of televisual textuality: the text, supertext, and megatext. The text is a singular entity, such as a program like *Columbo*. The supertext “consists of the particular program and all the introductory and interstitial materials—chiefly announcements and ads—considered in its specific position in the schedule.”⁵ The megatext, then, “consists of everything that has appeared on television.”⁶ Houston’s “Viewing Television: The Metapsychology of Endless Consumption” is a psychoanalytically grounded investigation of television’s basic contradiction: the promise of endless textual flow, blocked by interruptions that leave viewers in a state of endless desire and an endless lack of satisfaction. Describing these complex rhythms of desire, Houston writes, “Of television we say: I always want it as I have never had it.”⁷ *Columbo* himself and *Columbo* fans might identify this desire as that for “just one more thing.”

My study of *Columbo* is in great part grounded in its “supertext” and “megatext,” yet rather than connecting it to “everything that has appeared on television,” I’m interested in tracing a constellation of textual relations with the series at the center. This approach links my work to critics like Browne, Houston, and many others who employed intertextual methods of analysis that were at once capacious and focused as they drew on the plentitude of both television’s supertext and megatext. As Mimi White argues in “Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television,” televisual structure demands such an interpretive method. Her essay thus begins: “The continuity and multiplicity of texts that comprise the medium of American television present the critic-analyst with a complex, multiform body of material. To analyze requires an operation of segmentation, fragmentation isolating a discrete sequence from the course of the flow of television programming according to a critical principle of pertinence.”⁸ Homing in on particular sequences of flow, such as an hour of morning or prime-time television, critics delineated this concept through examples gathered from television “supertext” sequences—themselves indicative of the tension between “flow” and “segment”—in order to explore the effects of television’s intertextuality.⁹ In her book-length study of children’s media, *Playing with Power*

in *Movies, Television, and Video Games*, Marsha Kinder defines this approach: “In contemporary media studies, intertextuality has come to mean that any individual text (whether an artwork like a movie or novel, or a more commonplace text like a newspaper article, billboard, or casual verbal remark) is part of a larger cultural discourse and therefore must be read in relationship to other texts and their diverse textual strategies and ideological assumptions.”¹⁰ Such potential relationships abound in *Columbo*. One simple example is apparent in the season 2 episode “A Stitch in Crime,” which stars Leonard Nimoy as the murderer, Dr. Mayfield; Will Geer as his would-be victim, Dr. Hiedeman; and Anne Francis as one of his actual victims. Nimoy and Geer play characters consistent with their roles in *Star Trek* and *The Waltons*, respectively. Drawing on his turn as the Vulcan Spock, who doesn’t experience human emotion, Nimoy plays a seemingly emotionless surgeon (albeit more calculating than Spock), while Geer plays a kindlier doctor, akin to his contemporaneous role on *The Waltons*. In short, the cold and logical Mr. Spock is up against the warm and loving Grandpa. And the nurse who initially investigates Dr. Mayfield’s murderous scheme is played by Francis, who helmed *Honey West* as a private detective. Here the intertextual connections serve as a kind of continuity of our understanding of each of the actors’ roles, rewarding the attentive viewer for what might at first just seem to be a practice of “endless consumption.”

But that consumption is not always, nor need it be, the only aim of viewing television. Following White and others, Hamid Naficy sees intertextual analysis as an essential analytical means of responding to the complexity of television textuality. As he notes, “Defining the television text . . . has proven to be a problem largely because it is such a multipurpose, polyvalent, and amorphous text.”¹¹ Employing a similar method of analysis to White and Kinder, Naficy attempts to “problematize flow” as a parallel to his critique of television’s production of normative social values. At the same time, he considers how resonances running across textual segments within a larger television sequence can produce readings that subvert the dominant paradigms that singular texts might attempt to reinforce. Like Houston, Naficy also recognizes tensions that emerge through an intertextual format, noting that complementary and contradictory resonances may occur simultaneously—erecting

and dismantling central cultural beliefs.¹² Such is the approach of scholar Herman Gray, whose essay “Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream” was published the same year as Naficy’s work. Employing a similar method in his critical interpretation of examples of television’s “supertext,” Gray argues that “representations make sense in terms of their intertextuality between and within programs”; hence, in his analysis of fictional and nonfictional programming, Gray suggests that “television representations of black life in the late 1980s cannot be read in isolation but rather should be read in terms of their relationship to other television texts.”¹³ Simply put, the relationship Gray describes here between television texts reveals television as both a textual and a historical-cultural system; understanding television texts, therefore, yields an understanding beyond their narrative purviews.

As the above cases demonstrate, again and again scholars considered television as a polyvalent system, which was formally organized, at once divided and multiplied by time and segments. Drawing on Eco’s claims above, I contend that television’s organizing principles teach us how to use television, and, arguably, our “use”—whether we are critics, scholars, students, or everyday viewers—is itself a kind of understanding. Watching television, in other words, is replete with acts of recognition, whether that incites tension or builds continuity. And that recognition—with its attendant tension and continuity—is not only of different texts or performances, but also of television as a textual, technological, economic, and ideological system. In “Crossing Wavelengths,” White emphasizes that televisual structure is a self-referential system, as it embraces its “self-perpetuation as a medium.”¹⁴ Considering a series of examples of the “cross-pollination” of television in which characters from one program appear on others, either directly in a nightly lineup, across nights on a specific network, or simply within singular cameo appearances, White argues that the “all-encompassing self-referentiality of commercial television as the world of television’s fictions is brought together as parts of a larger, continuous imaginary world.”¹⁵ Arguably, the form of intertextual “reading” White and others describe has become so naturalized that most viewers are barely conscious of it. Take another example that bears its own connection to the last I offered, also evident of the ways in which television stars seemingly glide between personas

on our screens yet leave traces behind in their wake. That is, when William Shatner appears in a commercial for Priceline in the twenty-first century—or as a “bad” actor on *Columbo* in the mid-1970s—we likely still see *Star Trek*’s Captain Kirk of the 1960s (who, of course, returned again and again in the *Star Trek* movie franchise), so that our perception of this “character” he now plays is forever informed by his signature role. And even if we don’t know him as Kirk, the logic of television still inscribes the character that Shatner has become through a series of embedded references: the neatness of his attire, the clarity of his voice, the command of his manner, the barely disguised mirth on his face. Whether we “know” him or not, we likely know we are supposed to. The rhetorical question television implicitly and continuously asks, after all, is “Aren’t you clever?” The “you” it addresses and the “we” who watch forever occupy this position as knowing viewers.

Taking an example even closer to home, Peter Falk appears in comedic detective films in the late 1970s, and we think of him simultaneously as “Sam Diamond” or “Lou Peckinpugh” and as Lieutenant Columbo. He returns to the small screen a decade later in the reboot of *Columbo* and he carries some of the traces of this parody with him, so that now “Columbo” plays Columbo.¹⁶ Television depends on this multivalent element of actors to keep viewers watching over time, attentive. Of course, such an observation is hardly new in thinking about film or television or celebrity stardom. Still, not merely bound to character or actor crossovers, these kinds of interconnections are enabled by the very form of television, perhaps even more so than they are by film. This possibility doesn’t go away as people increasingly watch “television” off the set itself; in fact, it’s almost infinitely multiplied as we toggle between platforms and, within platforms, between a multitude of texts (some potentially “live,” others dropped on schedule, and most recorded long ago). After all, as Sheila Murphy argues in *How Television Invented New Media*, “television establishes our expectations about media and technology, and it is through television that many people have learned how to be media users and individuals.”¹⁷ In its simultaneous “broadcast” and reception of multiple texts at once, I’d argue—that is, in the nearly unlimited access we have to television texts on cable, on DVD, and streaming online—television invites its viewers to always participate in

a form of networked thinking. We are not simply watching detectives on-screen but potentially becoming detectives of the medium itself.

Television's Infinite Dimensions

Kinder, Naficy, and White, along with others such as John Fiske, drew on Bulgarian-French literary theorist Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, which—implicitly demonstrating the very practice of this theory itself—was drawn from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. I want briefly to turn to Kristeva here, not merely as a (quasi) originating site of theoretical production but also for some neat coincidental references she and Bakhtin include in their work. Given her structuralist-linguistic roots, Kristeva develops an understanding by first boiling language down to its basic elements, starting with the word *intertextuality*, which she saw as the “intersection of textual surfaces.”¹⁸ To read intertextually, furthered Kristeva, is to read “at least double.”¹⁹ Two key notions of such double, or “ambivalent,” readings are embedded in this concept. For one, “the writer can use another's word, giving it a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had. The result is a word with two significations: it becomes *ambivalent*.”²⁰ In her emphasis on the practice of language (“discourse”), Kristeva points to another central issue: “The term *ambivalence* implies the insertion of history (society) into a text and of this text into history; for the writer they are one and the same.”²¹ In other words, the nascence of intertextuality as a system and method for reading is necessarily linked to social, cultural, and historical contexts. This understanding is vital to a study of television, in which not only is the “text” never only one thing, but it is also always delivered through formal, institutional, ideological, and cultural contexts. Such textual multiplicity is also multidimensional, Kristeva argued, drawing on Bakhtin's key terms. Defining his notion of the “carnavalesque,” which itself drew on Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* (one of the sources for *Columbo*), she notes that it is where “language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions.”²² Such simultaneity and multidimensionality give way to the “potential infinity” of carnivalesque discourse.²³ Indeed, as she concludes her essay, Kristeva argues, “If there is a model for poetic language, it no longer involves lines or surfaces, but rather, *space* and *infinity*.”²⁴

Twenty-five years before Kristeva's definition of intertextuality and only seven years before the emergence of US television in 1948, Jorge Luis Borges penned "The Garden of Forking Paths." The narrator of this short story describes his ancestor Ts'ui Pên's dual obsession: the production of a novel with nearly countless characters and "a maze in which all men would become lost."²⁵ Amid his own byzantine journey of treachery, the narrator comes upon Dr. Stephen Albert, who reveals his ancestor's secret: the novel and the maze were one and the same. Explains Albert, "He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time."²⁶ Borges might well have imagined libraries as his labyrinths; and though the one he oversaw, the National Library of Argentina, had a finite number of books during his tenure—numbering about 900,000, which, as Borges wrote, "perhaps . . . seems more than a million"—one might suggest that the works housed together were a model for "space and infinity."²⁷ Taking this notion a step further, I'd like to imagine that Borges describes and demonstrates, in works such as "The Garden of Forking Paths," textual forms that seem like models for television—or at least for reading television: "a labyrinth of labyrinths."

As other scholars have also declared, I recognize that the design of television—with its own growing "networks" that are divergent, convergent, and parallel—makes for a challenging object of study, demanding that we define carefully our parameters of study, our objects of analysis. Whereas, as I've noted, foundational work in the field of television studies frequently focused on television as a textual *system*, much of the work that has followed in its wake over the past twenty-odd years has turned to singular texts, or series, whether in individual volumes such as those in the very series of which this book is a part, in chapters of anthologies devoted to particular programs, or in collections that showcase multiple series through essays dedicated to individual examples.²⁸ My own approach is to bridge these critical tendencies and eras—albeit with some additions, distinctions, and permutations—in order to see *Columbo* as a series that enables us to understand television as both a textual and historical system that, no matter what form of delivery or reception, is

at heart intertextual. Indeed, my intention here is to narrow the focus (on the series *Columbo*) in order to enable an intertextual analysis and perform a process of interconnected thinking.

To further define my particular practice of intertextual analysis, let me first return to the image of a wheel. *Columbo* remains at the center, and from it I am mapping relations outward, like various parallel and at times overlapping spokes. Such spokes include, for example, the work of actors (not only Falk but also various guest stars); the work of the creators Levinson and Link; and a sampling of other television series and films. Other vectors that stretch beyond the series are enabled by the historical context of the series' production, emerging media forms, and television as a medium, then and now. As I've said, as a medium, television itself is inherently intertextual, which is in part based on its temporal structure, characterized by present, past, and future. In other words, its temporal makeup includes simultaneity of access to multiple texts at once as well as its coexistence with viewers, or what Jane Feuer terms its "liveness" and what Vivian Sobchack would call its "presence"; its role as an archive of television and film history, which is particularly prevalent in streaming platforms but was already in place via rerun culture; and its state of anticipation, articulated through announcements of what's on next, whether flowing through a chronological schedule on cable television or in the near-instant playing of sequential episodes on streaming platforms like Netflix or YouTube.²⁹ Of course, television's intertextual organization is also a result of its operating machinery; just take a glance at a device like an iPad with a series of streaming apps set alongside one another in their own individual frames. These various subscription services are not so unlike broadcast networks or cable channels, and indeed some of the apps are invariably based on networks and channels (PBS, Paramount+, Max, and so on). Further, the fact that viewers so frequently have multiple devices on which to watch television, even if they deny that it is, in fact, "television" that they're viewing, is a reproduction of television's already "polyvalent" textuality.³⁰ Viewers may even use these devices simultaneously, whether as a mechanism to "make any room your TV room," and therefore to ensure that "the television" is always on no matter where they are, or to glance between texts in a state of distracted yet interwoven attention.³¹

Ultimately, I believe looking at *Columbo* opens, rather than fore-closes, investigative possibilities. That opening, which at times during my work has felt infinite, is possible through a broad accumulation of research, which links the *Columbo* movies, series, and reboot to a “dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times,” which I begin to summarize in the section to follow. And I would argue that, in his predilection for tangents, Columbo’s own investigative process is not unlike Borges’s byzantine vision, modeling imaginative processes of association, processes that I follow in turn.

Learning with the Lieutenant

As I’ve suggested, *Columbo* is a series that provides delight in knowing—whether that’s the knowledge of the crime itself as well as the fact that our detective will always catch the killer, or the cultural knowledge that Lt. Columbo accrues in each episode and therefore shares with us. I shall now trace some preoccupations through the series’ narrative structure and by what elements it’s commonly known, further developing its place in the context of television as a medium. First and foremost, its narrative form sets up the audience’s own knowledge of events before the detective himself comes to know them. The plot structure of each episode is based loosely on *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky’s nineteenth-century novel that begins with the criminal and the crime—the arrogant Raskolnikov who commits murder largely to see if he can get away with it—well before the detective, Porfiry Petrovich, comes on the scene to solve it. In the case of the novel, of course, Petrovich’s appearance at the crime scene is the reader’s first meeting with the officer, so we don’t know immediately what he knows; moreover, we don’t know at first that Petrovich’s seeming ignorance is merely a guise.³² In the case of *Columbo*, the audience catches on to this trick of the lieutenant’s through the repeated televisual episodic formula, so, in essence, it’s the murderer who is the last to know how clever our detective really is. Having witnessed the murder ourselves, as an audience we are already presented with the evidence of the crime; what follows is our observation of how the detective uncovers the evidence to match what we (and, apparently, he) already know.

Indeed, as part of the series' formula, Columbo appears to know who the killer is almost immediately upon meeting them. In "Troubled Waters" (4:4; Feb. 9, 1975), he seems to recognize the murderer even before the crime is committed; in a twist on the usual structure, the first person we see on-screen is the detective, running to get on a vacation cruise ship, and he nearly bumps into the man who will shortly thereafter kill his blackmailing former lover. "Candidate for Crime" (3:3; Nov. 4, 1973) begins the same way, with Columbo seeing the murderer, a senatorial candidate, as he walks through the police station. And at the end of "Murder under Glass" (7:2; Jan. 30, 1978), an episode from the final season whose function appears to be to remark implicitly on the conventions of the series, the murderer and food critic Paul Gerard (Louis Jourdan) asks, "When did you first suspect me?" The lieutenant answers, "As it happens, sir, about two minutes after I met you." Sometimes it's even sooner (but otherwise never as soon as in "Troubled Waters") and sometimes a bit later, but it's never too long; after all, the murderer in this series is almost always the most arrogant person on the scene, the one who is certain they have gotten away with it, the one who has answers to all of the detective's questions. In fact, this element of the formula is also based in *Crime and Punishment's* Raskolnikov, whose belief in his own superiority over others enables him to commit murder. Though this belief is usually not explicitly stated by the killers of *Columbo*, it is an implicit motivation for their crimes.

The first regular episode of *Columbo*, "Murder by the Book," is, in many ways, a blueprint for the faithful audience's own preoccupations with the series to come and the series' preoccupations and narrative conventions that ultimately fascinate all of us. Most obviously, it is the story of a partnership in crime: the murderer and his victim are together the cowriters of a series of mystery novels featuring "Mrs. Melville," an older woman not unlike Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. But it also begets our own partnership with a series—and its eponymous detective—that will last seven years in its initial run and decades beyond in both its syndication and its reboot. An instance of the creation of the prolific writing team Richard Levinson and William Link, starring three-time guest star Jack Cassidy, scripted by television producer-to-be Steven Bochco, and directed by future Hollywood magnate Steven Spielberg, this episode is

at once rife with self-reflexive references and with elements that predict its historical significance to come. With its nods and winks—one of the first cowritten Mrs. Melville novels is entitled *Prescription: Murder*, the very title of the *Columbo* stage play and pilot—it's no wonder that many viewers facetiously asked which of Link or Levinson was the murderer and which was the murdered.³³

In essence, the episode goes like this: as one writer, Jim Ferris (Martin Milner), wishes to dissolve the partnership, the other, Ken Franklin (Jack Cassidy), plots his murder.³⁴ After all, Franklin can't afford to lose the wealth he's garnered as part of a best-selling team. He takes Ferris to his vacation house by a lake, where he suggests Ferris call his wife to claim he's still at the office. While Ferris is on the phone, Franklin shoots him, essentially establishing his own alibi, as Ferris has told his wife he is still in Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter, Columbo first encounters Franklin at the duo's writing office, where he is investigating the disappearance of Ferris, particularly because his wife reported hearing the sounds of the gunshot over the phone. At the office, Franklin offers the detective a stack of mystery novels by the team to peruse, suggesting the detective might learn from their Mrs. Melville. Columbo also travels to Franklin's lake house, where he wonders about the cost of vacation living. He travels, too, to the widow's home, where he spontaneously whips up an omelet (the secret is not to add milk, he reveals) and keeps her company as he questions her about her husband's writing habits.³⁵ Thus, this episode establishes several conventions that will come to preoccupy the series as a whole: the implication that the killer's intelligence is superior to the lieutenant's, an ongoing emphasis on class difference, the role of communications technology as alibi, an implicit and sometimes self-reflexive obsession with plotting, and the demonstration of the detective's character traits we come to know with affection.

Key to the detective's traits is his own fascination with learning. The detective's expertise is superficially humbler than that of the killers he tracks. Not only do these killers, then, repeatedly not recognize his investigative prowess, but nearly every episode also requires that the detective educate himself about something, particularly in relation to the killer's own field of expertise (such as a cultural commodity like wine

or a technological gadget like a VCR) or in relation to money matters (the cost of a tailored suit or a new pair of shoes). An episode in season 5, “A Matter of Honor” (5:4; Feb. 1, 1976), explicitly spells out the logic of the series. The setting is Mexico, and the detective’s field of study becomes bullfighting, as the killer is a famous matador (played by Ricardo Montalván) who murders his best friend rather than being exposed as a coward.³⁶ Around halfway through the episode, the police chief, Commandante Sanchez (played by Pedro Armendáriz Jr.), with whom Columbo has been working, greets the detective as he’s reading up on bullfighting. “Learning anything?” he asks. Answers the lieutenant: “I have to learn something, since I didn’t know anything to start with.”³⁷ This is a definitive moment for the series, for, as I’ve suggested, *Columbo* is a series that is about *knowing*—or the process of coming-to-know—whether about crime detection, television, or cultural forms. But it is also a series that was and is *known*. It is known, first and foremost, for its eponymous character and for its narrative format, which gives way to a particular pace, dialogue style, and aesthetic. And it’s certainly known, as I’ll come to discuss, for its class consciousness—the class conflict designated between the killer and the working-class cop, set within Los Angeles and its cultural environs.

Central to its plot structure and dialogue, the detective confirms what he knows in part through conversations with the killers.³⁸ These conversations set the pace—the “plodding” of the plot—for each episode. The lieutenant offers the killers those questions about the case he cannot seem to answer himself, and it’s the murderers who hypothesize, usually offering an alternate scenario than that which they plotted. (The innocents almost never have an answer to such conundrums.) In part, this hypothesizing certainly makes sense, as several cases involve people in the business of murder or of manipulation (the latter involving both mind and body). These killers include plotters of fictional murders, like writers or publishers of detective fiction, a television producer, and a television actor who plays a detective, as well as a pop psychologist, a body-building expert, a makeup maven, and even a magician. Indeed, the very first murderer, recall, is a psychologist, to whom the first Columbo (Burt Freed) queries whether he should pursue therapy: “I think I’m too suspicious. I don’t trust people.” And he goes on to offer

the particular case in point to demonstrate his mistrust. In all these situations, when Columbo brings a dilemma to one of these suspects, he's speaking with an "expert": thus, in "Try and Catch Me" (7:1; Nov. 21, 1977), after the popular mystery writer Abigail Mitchell (Ruth Gordon) catches her breath after "learning" of her nephew's murder, she tells her assistant she doesn't have time to rest because she has "work to do with Lieutenant Columbo."³⁹

The conversational formula of the series and its eponymous detective applies to all the suspects, not just the "experts." Indeed, the conversations might appear to function as a "talking cure"; surely, they do ultimately induce the guilt of the criminal. The killers want to speak—either in an attempt, presumably, to throw attention off of themselves in offering an alternate scenario or, more than likely, in order to flaunt what they believe is their superior intelligence over the hapless detective. By season 6, "The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case" (6:3; May 22, 1977) is an episode explicitly about intelligence and analysis, in which one Mensa-like club member has killed another in order to cover up his crimes of embezzlement. In the final scene, as the detective reels in the killer, Oliver Brandt (Theodore Bikel), Columbo offers a pretense of his own misunderstanding of the crime. When he explains his solution of how the killer covered his crime with an alibi, creating a highly complex mechanism to fake a series of gunshots, he emphasizes that "the killer is a very intelligent man." Since Columbo gets the setup for the mechanism "wrong," Brandt grows insistent upon proving his own superior intelligence both over the detective and his fellow members of the Mensa-like club. He corrects Columbo suddenly in order to demonstrate the exact process by which he created the shots that designed his alibi, shouting "The man who conceived all this—you've made him out to be a bumbling ass!" while the image cuts to reveal Columbo slyly smiling. The image cuts again to Brandt moving quickly around the room to restore the conditions of the alibi: "No, this is what he would have done!" We watch in slow motion as the mechanism works to fire the shots. He victoriously repeats "There!" as Columbo again smiles, having caught him not in the actual act, of course, but in the perfect reenactment.

Though key, these conversational games, which often spell out the motive, are only part of the detective's investigative process. The crime is



1.3. A murderer's hubris ("The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case," 6:3; May 22, 1977)



1.4. The detective's "gotcha" ("The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case," 6:3; May 22, 1977)



1.5. A murderer's realization ("The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case," 6:3; May 22, 1977)

ultimately solved when Columbo can detect the “means” (which hinges on the ultimate clue) or when he can reveal the “opportunity” (which inevitably hinges on time) for the crime.⁴⁰ Those are the questions, after all, that most beg proof and that are mostly varied over the course of the series’ run, for the motive, too, is part of the show’s formula. Tracing a clue is not unlike the performance of a magic trick—or the unveiling of one—and it’s certainly what the climax of the plot depends on. Indeed, the series was known as much for the originality of these clues as for the novelty of its form; the audience might have guessed at what would trip up the murderer in the commission of the crime, but more often than not the detective’s eventual solution comes as a neat trick. The case of “Suitable for Framing” (1:4; Nov. 17, 1971) is definitive of the lieutenant’s own sleight of hand: hence, the reveal that the fingerprints on a pair of stolen Degas etchings are not the killer’s (for the killer wore gloves to cover his crime) but rather those of Columbo himself. He further remarks on this sort of handiwork in “Murder under Glass,” when he stops the murderer, Gerard, from drinking a poisoned glass of wine meant for the detective: “You switched the openers again, but I switched the glasses.” And as he takes the poisoned glass back from Gerard, he announces, “That’s what they call proof.”

Up Next, on Columbo

The form as well as the content of this book is driven by *Columbo* as a complex if repetitive text and by the context of its original production, reception, and exhibition. Perhaps mirroring syndication, rerun, and algorithmic structures, certain favorite episodes of mine will pop up again and again, whereas others may merely play a supporting role. My turn to particular episodes also aids me in considering the series’ roots, its circulation and proliferation, and its branches that spread into what at first glance might seem to be insignificant connections but which reveal both the complexity and even dependability of television’s intertextual nature. In other words, to understand television in both its new and old permutations is to recognize the connections that it produces and allows: through programming structures, nightly lineups, or home pages of subscription streaming services; through stars and guest stars;

through the series' creators and teams of writers; and most certainly through the world it reflected time and again over the course of its run. Along with an analysis of these textual and intertextual associations, this book is also a contextual study, however humble, of some key historical developments in television production and reception technologies. But the roots of these analytical and historical inquiries, of course, are ever grounded in *Columbo* itself.

To aid in my intertextual analysis of the text and context of the series, my work is informed by academic fields based in film and media studies, ranging from research in television studies, production studies, and star studies, as well as by affect theory and other arenas of cultural and textual studies. At times I draw explicitly on popular intellectual and analytical models of the era in which the series originally aired, including studies of psychology, media, and even paranoia. Finally, my intertextual investigation also builds from a range of archival materials, including memoirs, interviews, oral histories, original and revised scripts, and contemporaneous reviews and critiques. But, like other Spin-Offs volumes, my study is primarily driven by the central series itself. As I've suggested, this drive entails setting *Columbo* in conversation with other television series and films that I see as part of its substantial textual orbit. Furthermore, based on the interconnect-edness and even the repetition of the figure of the series' detective, the organization of this volume also speaks to the very structure of television itself. After all, television is organized by both repetition and interruption; and interruptions themselves, whether subplots or commercials, are as central to the mission of television as its narrative programming.

The chapters that follow alternate between two points of focus. The odd-numbered chapters trace the history of Peter Falk's work, including the development of the most famous and most long-term character he played. Given the detective's persistent returns, one chapter will not be sufficient attention to him; instead, he will repeatedly return in the odd-numbered shorter chapters throughout the book, allowing me to pivot to "just one more thing" regarding Falk's long career and the ways in which it was forever bound to the lieutenant. These chapters are also largely structured chronologically, which enables me to interweave a historical narrative with intertextual analysis. The even-numbered chap-

ters, therefore, trace other key figures and key thematics of the series, which also allow for an intertwining of historical context and analytic speculation.

Chapter 1 begins with Falk's work that preceded his tenure on *Columbo*. Attending to his appearances in both film and television, I draw out some of those characteristics that became the foundation of his performance as the detective. The chapter that follows focuses in a parallel way on the two cocreators of the series, Richard Levinson and William Link. Here, too, I consider their roots as writers that lend themselves to the development of arguably their most well-known production, though I primarily focus on their writing for made-for-television and theatrical films during the initial run of the series, as much of that work depended on a similar logic present in *Columbo*. Together, grounded in origins and subsequent histories, these first two chapters set up the focus of chapter 3 on the main character himself, particularly attending to his (and the series') concerns with class and the distinctions that emerge between the detective and the killers he investigates. Chapter 4 shifts to the actors who played the detective's foils, especially those who made multiple appearances through the series' original run. My focus on guest stars is a particularly intertextual one, for it is grounded in part in the field of star studies and in part through the linkages between 1970s television and various eras of US film production (namely, classical Hollywood, particularly of the 1940s and 1950s, and "New Hollywood," which roughly spanned 1968 to 1975). Subsequently, as a companion to the chapter on guest stars, chapter 5 centers on Falk's involvement with New American Cinema writer/director/actor John Cassavetes, which largely took place during the run of the series. My approach in this chapter is not only to design an intertextual study of their work together but also to sketch a biography of the friendship between them and with costar Ben Gazzara. The remaining chapters attend to technological forms within the series and the primary technological form that made the series possible in the first place: television itself. Hence, chapter 6 is largely a textual study of the series via its own obsession with new technologies; though *Columbo* was by no means the only television series to explore changing technologies, it is one of the only to highlight these technologies through a quasi-pedagogical lens, as the detective himself



1.6. Evidence of time ("Negative Reaction," 4:2; Oct. 6, 1974)

is repeatedly schooled in them. Chapter 7 considers Falk's final years on television and in film in relation to the eponymous character he played, with an emphasis on the modifications of the original character and series. My epilogue is offered, briefly, as a means to reflect on the life and afterlife of Lt. Columbo and the series that made him.

As this structure shows, I am driven by the methods of decipherment displayed by the series itself, based on tangents, associations, and quotidian details. If television has taught me one primary method of analysis, it's one that is based on association. In his essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," Carlo Ginzburg traces serendipitous parallels between historical contemporaries, which are themselves parallel to my own work here: an art historian (Giovanni Morelli), psychoanalyst (Sigmund Freud), and detective (Sherlock Holmes). Relaying these historical coincidences, Ginzburg makes a case for the reading of "discarded information" and "marginal data."⁴¹ Such is the stock-in-trade of the psychoanalyst and the detective; it is also the method of the television viewer and scholar. In Ginzburg's words, I am designing an evidentiary

and conjectural paradigm: like the detective before me, my own method of analysis entails the “systematic gathering” of “small insights.”⁴² Employing the “flexible rigor” such paradigms allow, I am reading through signs and associations, linking up texts and contexts, and interweaving figures and feelings.⁴³

Indeed, in order to define my approach to *Columbo* and to television as a medium, I can't help but think of a seemingly incidental detail in “Negative Reaction” (4:2; Oct. 6, 1974), where these various elements converge. *Columbo* appears at the scene of the murder, which had previously been staged for a photograph to document a kidnapping. He stands at the fireplace, traces his finger over an object atop the mantle, and stares at the dust that's been transferred to his finger. He then stares at an electric clock, runs his finger over it, and finds it's clean. Dust and no dust, both linked to time: this moment is definitive of *Columbo's* quotidian detection and of television's simultaneous temporalities. Evidence is all around us, it seems to say. In the case of television, we just need to know how to see it.