American Network Series of the 1980s
A two-day conference organized by Claire Cornillon and Sarah Hatchuel
Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, February 21-22, 2019

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1 This was a follow-up conference to the one-day symposium on American Network Series of the 1950s-1970s, organized by Claire Cornillon and Dennis Tredy in 2018. This series of conference was backed by GUEST, a research group on television series. Its aim is to stimulate research on American television series of the past, notably in order to better contextualize the contemporary series that receive more attention in television and media history. The conference on the 1980s was thus aimed to pursue venues opened by Todd Gitlin’s Inside Prime Time (2000[1983]), Jane Feuer’s Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism (1995) and Robert J. Thompson’s Television’s Second Golden Age (1997). Groundbreaking shows including Cheers (NBC, 1982-1993), Dynasty (ABC, 1981-1989), Hill Street Blues (NBC, 1981-1987), L.A. Law (NBC, 1986-1994), Miami Vice (NBC, 1984-1990), thirtysomething (ABC, 1987-1991) and V (NBC, 1983-1984), were examined alongside works that have received less academic attention.

2 The first day kicked off with two talks on ABC’s prestige mini-series. In “Robert Mitchum vs Hitler: apogée et mort de la min-série historique épique au cours des 1980s,” Marjolaine Boutet (Université Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens) looked at how the two big-budget WWII historical epics Winds of War (1983) and War and Remembrance (1988-1989) evinced the end of ABC’s dominance of the American networks in the 1980s; she then explored the strategies used to “Americanize” the representation of the Shoah in both mini-series and touched on their influence on later works like Schindler’s List (Steven Spielberg, 1993). Sarah Hatchuel’s (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3) “Négociations narratives, éthiques et idéologiques de la mini-série: le cas de Masada (ABC, 1981)” interrogated the ambiguous spectatorial terms of a mini-series that invites Americans to side with the zealots rather than with the Roman Empire; she then emphasized how the mini-series reflexively announces its reluctance to end in the
dialogue, an end it will choose to ellipticize, thus calling into question the mini-series’ very raison d’être.

3 The three afternoon talks dealt with gender politics in series. In “Quand les networks renoncent aux « tits and ass »: vers une déréification du corps féminin?,” Benjamin Campion (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3) analyzed the credits of four 1980s crime series—*Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980-1988), *The Fall Guy* (ABC, 1981-1986), *Miami Vice* and *Hunter* (NBC, 1984-1991)—in order to counter Gitlin’s claim that the networks were increasingly reluctant to fetishize the female body. Conversely, Stéphane Sawas (Inalco, Cerlom, Paris), in “There’s more than one kind of man! Hommes et masculinités dans *Dynastie* (ABC, 1981-1989),” suggested that the presence of an openly gay character, Steven, not only opposed the hegemony of the heterosexual male patriarch, Blake Carrington, but contaminated the representation of masculinity throughout the serial, fetishizing male bodies and proposing alternative models of masculinity. Finally, in “Masculinité et technologie dans les séries américaines des années 1980,” Jules Sandeau (Université Boreaux Montaigne), examined the relationship between masculinity and technology in the post-Vietnam context whereby military discourses increasingly emphasized the technological; thus, in shows like *Airwolf* (CBS, 1984-1986), *Knight Rider* (NBC, 1982-1986) and *MacGyver* (ABC, 1985-1992), the hero’s masculinity is safeguarded through his mastery of feminized machines and computers, but it is also redefined according to the terms of a more sensitive New Man.

4 Friday opened with Julie Richard’s (Université Picardie Jules Verne) talk “Les séries de network des années 1980: un nouveau statut pour la peine capitale,” which examined how the increasing use of the death penalty in the 1970s and 1980s is reflected in crime series such as *Miami Vice*, *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-1994) and *In the Heat of the Night* (NBC, 1988-1992; CBS, 1992-1995), where capital punishment is discussed and, by the end of the decade, even depicted (for instance in S2E11 of *In the Heat of the Night*). In “A Working-class Hero is Something to Be . . . Except in a Sitcom: Interrogating the Ideological Structures of the American Sitcom in *Married ... with Children* (Fox, 1986-1997),” David Roche (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) examined the political potential of working-class protagonist Al Bundy in the overall context of American sitcoms from the 1950s to the late 1980s, inscribing Fox’s anti-Cosby Show in the legacy of *The Life of Riley* (NBC, 1953-1958) and especially *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979). By paying particular attention to the Labor Day episode “We’ll Follow the Sun” (S5E1), he argued that Bundy’s failure to fully live out the role of working-class hero is tied to the ideological structures of the sitcom genre which had become resolutely middle-class in the Reagan years. Vincent Souladié (Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès), in “I’m nobody. Who are you? Voix générationnelle et voix poétique dans *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987-1991),” used the character of Gary Shepherd as an entry point into the groundbreaking serial, which deploys an aesthetics of the banal that relies largely on dialogue and gestures more characteristic of independent cinema. In “Coach Is His Nickname and Misunderstanding Deixis Is His Game: *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1985),” Virginie Iché (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3), examined how the bartender’s misunderstandings of deixis (such as you, we, this, that) contribute to distinguish from the other characters and making him a part of the group and the sitcom’s comedy dynamics.

5 In “TV Series in the Reagan Era: The Case of *V* (1983) and *V The Final Battle* (1984),” Donna Andrélolé (Université Grenoble Stendhal) attempted to reassess the politics of
the show. Initially conceived as an affirmation of US patriotism, and relying on two conservative tropes (including the invasion narratives of the 1950s), the franchise’s nonetheless has more progressive tendencies, including the female villain Diana, a discussion on abortion and echoes of resistance in Vietnam and Central America. Finally, in “Diurnal and Nocturnal Cityscapes in Miami Vice,” Jean Du Verger (Université de Franche-Comté, Besançon), emphasized the sophisticated aesthetics of the ground-breaking crime show, and especially how its visual treatment of the city of Miami was indebted to noir and neo-noir and Brian DePalma’s recent remake of Scarface (1983) and nonetheless fairly realistic sociologically speaking.

6 To be continued in 2020 . . . with American Network Series of the 1990s.

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AUTHORS

DAVID ROCHE

Professeur
Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès
mudrockca@gmail.com

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