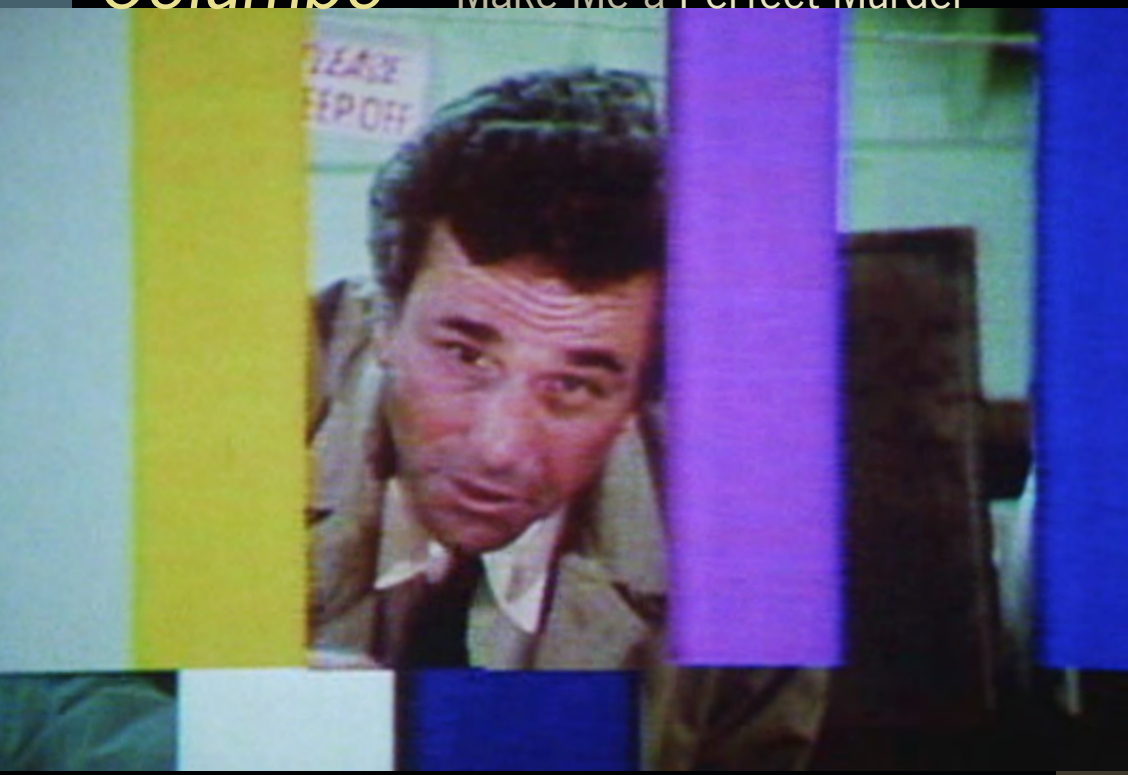
Columbo Make Me a Perfect Murder



AMELIE HASTIE

Columbo

A production of the Console-ing Passions book series
Edited by Lynn Spigel and Racquel J. Gates

Columbo

Make Me a Perfect Murder

AMELIE HASTIE

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this one's for me

Contents

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If I have forgotten anyone, please imagine me scratching my head and rummaging around in my pockets for a pen, and forgive me.

Prologue

HUMBLE ORIGINS AND DOGGED RETURNS

If there's one thing worse than a television lady who thinks she knows everything, it's a television lady who knows everything.
—The "Technical Director" in "Make Me a Perfect Murder"

Columbo essentially premiered on television three times. Given the eponymous detective's signature line, "just one more thing," these repeated returns seem oddly appropriate. Its first iteration was a 1960 "live" teleplay written by Richard Levinson and William Link entitled "Enough Rope," which appeared as part of *The Chevy Mystery Show* (July 31, 1960).[1] It starred Burt Freed as the detective Lt. Columbo, a New York City working-class police officer up against a wealthy psychologist who has killed his wife. The plot goes as follows: Dr. Roy Flemming (Richard Carlson) and his wife, Claire (played to shrill effect by Barbara Stuart), are preparing to embark on a vacation to Canada, but the doctor strangles his wife and stages a robbery to cover his crime. He enlists one of his patients, who is also his paramour, to play the role of his wife at the airport and on the plane; they stage a fight before the flight takes off, and she leaves in a huff, to ensure that the "wife" is witnessed as having returned home when the husband is already on his way to Canada. Thus, the alibi and timing of the wife's murder appear to be established, and the doctor disposes of the "stolen" property from their New York apartment while away in order to maintain the ruse. When

he returns home, Lt. Columbo is on the scene, and the episode proceeds as the detective attempts to prove how the psychiatrist covered his crime. This structure—whereby the crime is committed at the beginning, and the detective needs only to prove what we, the audience, and seemingly he already know—is the model that (nearly) all future iterations will follow.

Levinson and Link rewrote "Enough Rope" to become a theatrical play called *Prescription: Murder*. It premiered in San Francisco on January 20, 1962, with Joseph Cotten as the murderer, Agnes Moorehead as his victim, and Thomas Mitchell as Lieutenant Columbo. After a successful run, Levinson and Link adapted the play in turn as a made-for-television movie on NBC in 1968 now starring Peter Falk in the lead role and with the same title as the play. In this iteration, *Prescription: Murder* (0:0; Feb. 20, 1968), the setting had moved to Los Angeles, with the vacation/alibi now pertaining to Mexico.[2] Aside from the change in locales, the plot was basically the same as the original teleplay, but the character of the detective himself was further developed in both the play and the subsequent adaptation into a made-for-television movie. Indeed, the context of the murderer's profession—psychiatry—enables this development, as both the detective and the murderer comment on his personality, fleshing him out into the character we will come to know over the run of the series.[3]

After the successful airing of *Prescription: Murder*, NBC invited creators Levinson and Link to produce a regular television series, but, at the time, Peter Falk was uninterested in headlining another TV show; he not only had recently played the titular character in *Trials of O'Brien* for a single season in 1965–66, but also had begun a collaborative relationship with John Cassavetes after working with him in the film *Husbands* (released in 1970). NBC thus developed a "wheel" series to accommodate the creators and the actor, as it was a format that rotated between different regular programs, each appearing for varying numbers of episodes. The network based the format on similar successes such as *The Name of the Game* (running from 1968 to 1971, it rotated between characters who all worked in the same publishing house), *The Bold Ones* (running from 1969 to 1973, it had four subseries in rotation, each focused on a different occupation), and *Four in One*

(running from 1970 to 1971, it was even more varied than its precursors by occupation and genre). The network's new incarnation was *The NBC Mystery Movie*, which aired Sunday nights and included the additional mystery series *McMillan & Wife* and *McCloud* (the latter of which had previously been part of *Four in One*) and later expanded to another iteration on Wednesday nights.

Columbo thus premiered, yet again, in March 1971 with the now-pilot episode "Ransom for a Dead Man" (0:1; March 1, 1971; written and produced by Dean Hargrove); it then began its regular season as part of *The NBC Mystery Movie* in September of the same year with the episode "Murder by the Book" (1:1; Sept. 15, 1971). It ran as part of the NBC lineup for seven seasons. The most successful of all the series in rotation, it regularly made the no. 1 spot in ratings, earning Falk three Emmy Awards (in 1972, 1975, and 1976) and the writing team one (for "Death Lends a Hand" [1:2; Oct. 6, 1971]).[4] It also won a series of other Emmy Awards for cinematography, editing, and guest appearances, as well as the award for Outstanding Limited Series in 1974, and it received a regular slew of nominations for its entire original run. The series won a Golden Globe for Best Drama in 1973, and Falk won the Golden Globe for Best TV Actor the same year.[5] During this highly successful run, between three and eight original episodes were broadcast each year of its seven seasons, with a total of forty-four episodes overall.

During the first few years on the air, the series helped to launch and foster the careers of a number of significant television writers and directors. Before going on to create his own successful crime and legal series like *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law*, *Murder One*, and *NYPD Blue*, Steven Bochco penned seven episodes, including "Murder by the Book," which was directed by Steven Spielberg, a Universal regular at the time; Bochco was also employed as the story editor for the first season. Stephen J. Cannell worked on the series early on before he created his own series (*The Rockford Files*, featuring another charming 1970s detective), as did Dean Hargrove (the showrunner for several seasons, who later created US cozies like *Father Dowling Mysteries* and *Matlock*), Roland Kibbee (who executive-produced alongside Hargrove for most of seasons 3 and 4), and Peter S. Fischer (who cocreated *Murder, She Wrote* with Levinson and Link and went on to executive-produce the Angela Lans-

bury series).[6] Some of the writers were already television veterans, such as Hargrove, Kibbee, and Jackson Gillis, the latter of whom was also a longtime writer of *Perry Mason*. Many of the formative writers of the first several years had moved on to various other projects by the final two seasons, though the series did showcase the directorial work of semiregular Patrick McGoohan in the fifth season and future filmmaker Jonathan Demme in the last season.[7] These final two seasons demonstrate, then, both another beginning and its multiple endings. In fact, the chaotic "Last Salute to the Commodore" (5:6; May 2, 1976), directed by McGoohan in the fifth season, was originally slated to be the last episode, concluding with the lieutenant in a small boat in the Los Angeles harbor, rowing away from the scene of both the crime and his solution. The actual final episode of its original run, "The Conspirators" (7:5; May 13, 1978), reorients that previous ending in grander scope: here the detective remains on land while hailing a ship through the Coast Guard before it can disappear with the murder weapon on board.

Complicating its beginnings and its endings, *Columbo* and "Columbo" have reappeared in various forms since the original series. In 1989 *Columbo* was back on television, this time on ABC, as an ongoing but irregular two-hour movie series; between its first showing in 1989 and 2003, twenty-four new episodes ran, with Falk as a primary producer. Richard Levinson had passed away in 1987, and William Link was a supervising producer only for nine episodes, until 1990, when Falk largely took the reins. While five episodes of this reboot were penned by original writers for the series, overall the production team of the original was not intact; therefore, while it followed the basic formula, it was largely driven by the character rather than the narrative and visual style, with much of the authority on set coming from Falk himself. Two final reappearances of the detective as a crime solver followed: in 2010, Link published a collection of stories of new mysteries for the detective at the same time that the original play, *Prescription: Murder*, enjoyed a revival. And in countless other television series—such as *Monk*, when a character played by Gena Rowlands compares Adrian Monk to the lieutenant, or Hallmark's *Flower Shop Mysteries*, when the

amateur sleuth Abby Knight (Brooke Shields) makes a brief distinction between bingeing *Columbo* and *Murder, She Wrote* (two series that regularly reran on the Hallmark Movies & Mysteries Channel, after all)—the character is invoked time and time again. In 2023, the series *Pokerface* was introduced, and was widely recognized as an homage to *Columbo* and other 1970s series. And Columbo's influence has spread beyond television: the "Columbo technique" became a mode of police and psychiatric training.[8]

Given the local networks that have broadcast it over time, in syndication both in the United States and throughout the globe, the series has appeared on more channels than one can count. It was the first US series to air in China after an embargo on importation of American television was lifted, and it was said to be Queen Elizabeth's favorite series in the 1970s. Since the 1990s, it has also been a staple of cable channels such as A&E, Bravo, COZI, the Hallmark Movies & Mysteries Channel, ME, and Sundance. In the twenty-first century, it has appeared on various streaming platforms from Netflix to IMDb/Amazon/Freevee to YouTube to NBC's Peacock channel. Attesting to the series' and the star's international popularity, upon Peter Falk's death in 2011, obituaries were printed all over the world.[9] In 2021, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the first full season, *Columbo* appeared again in the news in the form of tributes and nostalgic references.[10]

The very nature of *Columbo*'s run between 1960 and 2003 signals not just its popularity but also its tenacity; through its repeated returns to television, the series itself operated not unlike its own lead. As the detective invariably uttered "just one more thing" to the murderers at the precise moment they thought they were rid of him, this phrase could also describe the series' unwillingness to go away. But not that we would want it to: the rumpled detective and the easygoing narrative format—revealing to the audience the killer from the start, so that our own work is mainly to *watch*, reveling in the solution that we already know is coming—offer us a level of both comfort and satisfaction as viewers. In fact, essentially knowing the outcome from the beginning enables one to watch each episode over and again, as we are never just watching for the "whodunit." The series, like its lead character, makes

for easy company, and opportunities to view it across cable television and streaming platforms make for easy access.

More than perhaps any other television series in my life—and, believe me, there have been many—*Columbo* has proved to be my most steadfast companion. When I was a young kid in the 1970s, my family regularly watched three television series as a unit: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Bob Newhart Show* on Saturday nights and, on Sundays, *The NBC Mystery Movie*. As with the majority of American viewers of the program, *Columbo* was my favorite. Taking a page from the detective himself, I am dogged in my returns to the series. As a viewer over decades, my experience with the series is a means of telling my own history (where I lived, with whom, and even what couch I owned), and it's also a means of telling a history of changing televisual access and technological forms. Thus, when I moved to New York City after college, my roommate and I happily discovered it in syndication on Sunday afternoons on the local WWOR station. As a graduate student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I watched it regularly on the A&E cable network, sometimes daily. When I moved to Santa Cruz, California, I would look for it on Bravo and the Hallmark Channel in the first decade of the twentieth century. And when I went east to Massachusetts ten years later, I found it on the streaming platforms Netflix, YouTube, IMDb, and Peacock. Even more specific instances and devices—old and new—are linked to this series for me. The episode entitled "A Stitch in Crime" (2:6; Feb. 11, 1973) was one of the first two recordings I made when I got TiVo in November 2004. I bought my first video iPod principally to transfer episodes of the series to take with me to Paris in 2008 (where I also found DVDs of its various seasons at the Les Halles media library in 2009). Driving across the country in the summer of 2013, I landed in a motel in Columbia, Missouri: after a particularly arduous day, I found an episode waiting for me on the ME network when I flipped on the television. The persistent appearance of a series like *Columbo* across both new and old media is itself suggestive of the ways in which the medium has and hasn't entirely transformed, even if, increasingly, new devices and new means of viewing enable viewers to deny that they are, in fact, watching "television."

Inevitably, when I first learned about the opportunity to write an academic book on the series, I was eager to put all of my own viewing

history to work. But "*Columbo* and work" also seems a funny sort of combination, given the love I've had for the show since I was so very young. At the same time, I am the first to insist that we write about those things that move us—those things that we care deeply about—while also maintaining an investigatory eye. Not uncoincidentally, for me the very ability to analyze the series and television as an intertextual system comes from *Columbo* itself. And this is, perhaps, partly why I love it.

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 *con*textual 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 Peckinpaugh" 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 "carnivalesque," 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 forecloses, 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 Montalbán) 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

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

I.4. The detective's "gotcha" ("The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case," 6:3; May 22, 1977)

I.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 interconnectedness 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

I.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.

Notes

Prologue

1. A writers' strike occurred during the first six months of 1960, though conditionally writers could produce work for live television, which led Levinson and Link to develop the teleplay for "Enough Rope." A *Hollywood Reporter* review of the first production for *The Chevy Mystery Show* described it—and I quote verbatim—as "a live mystery show, or 'live' on tape or whatever" (Powers, "The Chevy Mystery Show," 9). With many thanks to Mark Quigley for this archival gem.

2. I use the same indicators for all episodes, noting season, episode number within season, and original airdate. For the reboot, which I will discuss in the final section, I shift just to dates, as the episodes were ultimately not part of a regular season but were effectively made-for-television movies, like the first two iterations ("Enough Rope" and *Prescription: Murder*).

3. In the play, Columbo asks Flemming to take him on as a patient: "I seem to bother people. I make them nervous. Maybe you can tell me why." And he goes on, "My wife says I ought to have it looked into. So I told her I know a psychiatrist. And I figure if I come to you, say once a week, we could get it ironed out." He worries, in fact, that he's "too suspicious." See Link and Levinson, *Prescription: Murder*, 53–54.

4. The year Levinson and Link won the Emmy for "Death Lends a Hand," all of the three writing nominations were for *Columbo*.

5. Interestingly, it was *McMillan and Wife* that *TV Guide* claimed was the "most anticipated" of the series, but it neither racked up the awards nor has had the long life and afterlife of Falk's show.

6. Dean Hargrove wrote and produced the pilot, but Universal asked Levinson and Link to return for the first season. After a year with *McCloud*, Hargrove,

who was under contract as a writer/producer with Universal, came on as executive producer in the second season.

7. The change in writing and directing staff might have been related to the fact that the fifth season was intended to be the last.

8. William Link discusses this phenomenon in an interview: "William Link Interview Part 5 of 9," Television Academy, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/william-link?clip=116592#topic-clips.

9. For instance, the French television guide *TéléPouch* ran both a former interview with his wife, Shera Danese, as well as a tribute (Ragaine, "Adieu, Columbo"). The "TV magazine" of *Le Figaro* ran a similar homage, with a photo spread (Galiero, "Columbo").

10. See, for instance, Curran, "Why the World Still Loves 1970s Detective Show *Columbo*." Also note the UCLA Film and Television Archive's virtual screening of "Enough Rope" on April 1, 2021, curated by Mark Quigley, the John H. Mitchell Television Archivist: https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/events/2021/04/01/chevy-mystery-show-enough-rope.

Introduction

1. Eco, "Can Television Teach?," 15.

2. Interestingly, another academic volume about the series was published after I initially completed my own; it is entitled *Columbo: Paying Attention 24/7* (by David Martin-Jones).

3. To answer the question "Is Netflix television?," Sarah Arnold considers how the delivery platform is not like "linear television," yet she also notes that it is situated "within the same institutional landscape of television [which] makes it a competitor with television industries for television viewers" ("Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy," 50). Her analysis goes on to focus on the "datafication of audiences," as she considers the ways that Netflix (like other streaming platforms) utilizes algorithms to understand viewers' preferences and behaviors, in order to better target content to them. Doing so is a means, also, of eliminating viewers' agency or control—an argument that many fans of streaming platforms have made about "linear" television.

4. For these divergent but related approaches, see R. Williams, *Television*, originally published in 1974, as well as Ellis, *Visible Fictions*, originally published in 1982.

5. Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television Super(Text)," 176.

6. Browne, "The Political Economy of the Television Super(Text)," 177.

7. Houston, "Viewing Television," 184.

8. White, "Crossing Wavelengths," 51.

9. For another example, see Flitterman-Lewis, "The Real Soap Operas."

10. Kinder, *Playing with Power*, 2. Like Mimi White, in her 1985 essay "Television Genres: Intertextuality," Kinder traces the development of genre through intertextual methods and connections. As White puts it, "The study of genre involves systematized familiarity"; "rules" and recognition are therefore developed across a series of texts ("Television Genres," 41). Kinder's analysis considers in particular how children are cognitively trained through television's "familiarity" in order to "gain an entrance into a system of reading narrating" for both paradigms and the generation of new combinations (*Playing with Power*, 41). This comprehension of textual design, moreover, Kinder argues, goes hand in hand with a kind of ideological reasoning, especially as it involves an understanding of the subsequent "rules" guiding gendered roles and distinctions.

11. Naficy, "Television Intertextuality," 42.

12. Naficy, "Television Intertextuality," 46.

13. Gray, "Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream," 378. Moving between fiction and nonfiction programming, Gray emphasizes that those "assumptions that organize our understanding of black middle class success and under class failure are expressed and reinforced in the formal organization of television programming" (384).

14. White, "Crossing Wavelengths," 52.

15. White, "Crossing Wavelengths," 56.

16. Importantly, intertextuality is a much broader category than self-reflexivity. And, as I'll go on to note, parody is just one manifestation of self-reflexivity. With the exception of the analysis of the reboot of the series, its ancillary texts, and a couple of episodes, such as "Fade in to Murder," I'm taking an intertextual approach in a direction beyond parody.

17. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 80. She goes on, "Today, television's channels, networks, tubes, program guides, and more are all part of a media logic used both by those who make and distribute old and new media and those who use it" (81).

18. "Each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 36, 37).

19. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 37.

20. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 43.

21. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 39, emphasis added.

22. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 48.

23. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 49, phrase drawn from David Hilbert.

24. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 58.

25. Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 54.

26. Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," 54.

27. Borges, "Blindness," 116.

28. Such a focus can be limiting, especially when it's confined to "new" television series in order to update anthologies or remain "current" in the offering of volumes. For a critique of this phenomenon, see Hastie, "The Epistemological Stakes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."

29. See Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television," and Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen."

30. The claim that watching a streaming platform like Netflix or Hulu is categorically different from "watching television" seems akin to HBO's past tagline: "It's not TV—it's HBO." Such claims follow a similar kind of value judgment to that which Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine ascribe to varying forms of contemporary television criticism: "We argue that it is a mistake to accept naively that television has grown better over the years, even while such a discourse is intensifying within popular, industrial, and scholarly sites. In contrast, we argue that it is primarily cultural elites (including journalists, popular critics, TV creators and executives, and media scholars) who have intensified the legitimation of television by investing the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return" (*Legitimating Television*, 7).

31. See Tryon, "'Make Any Room Your TV Room.'"

32. Levinson and Link also acknowledge the works of Austin Freeman and G. K. Chesterton as inspiration for the structure of the inverted detective story (Levinson and Link, *Stay Tuned*, 88, 93).

33. Moreover, the portrait of Mrs. Melville will later reappear as background artwork in "The Bye-Bye Sky High I.Q. Murder Case."

34. The alliteration of their names—Ferris and Franklin—are also neat parallels to Levinson and Link. Even more specifically, the F is nearly an inversion of an L.

35. Franklin also commits a second murder, when he is blackmailed by a shop owner by the lake regarding the first murder.

36. This is one of the only episodes of the original run in which the murderer doesn't directly kill for money ("Try and Catch Me" is another).

37. Of course, this isn't the only time he uses such a phrase. In "Negative Reaction," he responds to a pawnshop dealer, who teaches him about cameras, "You learn something new every day."

38. A consideration of conversational formats is part of the focus of Christyne Berzsenyi's 2021 volume *Columbo: A Rhetoric of Inquiry with*

Resistant Responders, which was published after the completion of my manuscript.

39. The victim was not a blood relation, as the killer repeatedly states. He was married to her beloved niece, and she killed him because she believed he was responsible for her niece's death.

40. As I'll discuss in a later chapter, this emphasis on time could also be neatly connected to another analytic work circulating in the cultural zeitgeist at the time: Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*.

41. Ginzburg, "Clues," 101.

42. Ginzburg, "Clues," 115.

43. Ginzburg insists on "flexible rigor" for conjectural paradigms, reveling in the seeming contradiction-in-terms ("Clues," 114).

1. Mapping the Detective

Epigraph: William Link quotes Peter Falk in an interview: "William Link Interview Part 5 of 9," Television Academy, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/william-link?clip=116592#topic-clips.

1. In a neat coincidence, at one point Fresco uses the phrase "any port in a storm," which will become an episode title on *Columbo* a few years later. Thanks to my research assistant Sam Hood for that insight!

2. Falk, *Just One More Thing*, 108.

3. See Falk, *Just One More Thing*, 51. Interestingly, in the original run of *Columbo* his glass eye is never mentioned, and, in fact, he was filmed in such a way as to minimize our recognition of it. In the reboot, however, the detective makes mention of it himself in "A Trace of Murder" when he quips to another character who has offered to help him out, "Three eyes are better than one!"

4. Falk would also continue to work in theater. In fact, he starred on Broadway with Lee Grant, the villain for the *Columbo* pilot "Ransom for a Dead Man," in Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Ave*. in 1971.

5. Levinson and Link, *Stay Tuned*, 92.

6. A similar warmth and tenacity, moreover, could be ascribed to the two other detectives penned by Levinson and Link in the 1970s: Harry Tenafly and Ellery Queen.

2. Best-Selling Mystery Team

1. Levinson and Link discuss this move in a 1984 recorded conversation for a Writers Guild Foundation workshop on collaboration. Recording is archived at the Writers Guild Foundation (WGF).