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Statement on "Redefining Film Preservation"

I am pleased to testify to the importance of television and video preservation and to programs that assure scholars, students, and the general public ready access to television archives. Like my colleagues, I believe that the television legacy-- no less than printed material or the motion picture record-- offers a unique priceless lens into American life in the second half of the twentieth century. In the age of the moving image, an appreciation of the traditions of television and an understanding of the special qualities of televisual communication are bedrock requirements for the alert intelligence not to say the informed citizen. The Library of Congress's commitment to a national television and video preservation program and to a cooperative network of archivists and educators is thus not merely a laudable endeavor: it is an essential component and logical extension of its mandate to preserve a record of the American past. Matthew Arnold to the contrary, culture is no longer only "the best that is written and thought": it is also what we see and create on screen.

No one outside the provinces of an Amish or Hasidic community can doubt the centrality of television to American life. Reviled or beloved, vast wasteland or cultural cornucopia, TV shapes our imagination and colors our existence. The values we esteem, the myths we live by, even the leaders we elect are transmitted and mediated via television. Since 1948 or thereabouts, successive

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generations of Americans have measured their lives by shared moments beheld on the screen. And just as we experience that shared present through television, we learn our history through it-- for history is now as likely to be acquired as a visual memory as a printed one, as a retrieval of images rewound from our collective visual consciousness. We can all do the channel surfing in our heads: Frank Costello's hands nervously fidgeting during the Kefauver crime hearings, attorney Joseph Welch facing down the junior senator from Wisconsin, a perspiring Charles Van Doren feigning concentration, four indelible days in November 1963, a blizzard of combat imagery from southeast Asia, the president's men called to account before in the halls of Congress, and on and on and on to Challenger disaster, the Hill-Thomas Hearings, the war in the gulf, and, not too long ago, the murder verdict of the century.

In focusing just now on matters of obvious historical significance, I didn't mean to slight the rest of the medium's content. Momentous events aside, our encounter with television is more likely to be the daily rituals of situation comedies, talk shows, crime dramas, or sports. Yet sometimes the obscure and ephemeral persists with surprising tenacity and what seems the disposable dextrose of one era might be a nugget of gold to another. Viewed from a distance, revelations abound in the common rung of television programming: the racial and ethnic shadings of 1950s America in *Amos and Andy* and *Molly*, the gender dynamics in any one of a dozen ripe sitcoms from *Ossie and Harriet* to *Roseanne*, and the national insecurities expressed in crime melodramas such as

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Dragnet or NYPD Blue. In honesty, one might be forced to concede the daunting possibility that The Jerry Springer Show might reveal as much about the 1990s as 60 Minutes. In short, though some discrimination is well nigh unavoidable given the vast quantity of material in the TV culture bank, an open ended selection process might best capture the wide net and permissive arena that is television-- an admissions policy that accepts all genres and embraces the low with the high. After all, we've learned those terms have a way of turning on their heads with time, as anyone knows who has partaken of the genius-- is there a better word for it?-- of Lucille Ball, Jackie Gleason, or Ernie Kovacs.

If the defense of television as an art and the arguments for its impact as a social influence are familiar enough, its role in the classroom as a historical document might be less well known. In this sense, I thought it might be useful to discuss one example of how as a teacher of American history and culture, TV comes into play. Being a cultural historian, I teach courses in the full range of Americanist material, from the sermons of John Winthrop on through to the glories of classical Hollywood cinema. A couple of years ago I took over a class entitled "Television and American Culture" given out of the American Studies Department at Brandeis University. From the billing at least, it might seem to be the kind of offering designed to give lazy undergraduates a gut and conservative critics of the academy the conniptions. But in tracing a half century of American life via television, I-- and most of my students, I really believe-- found the material rich, complex, and

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demanding: the death of presidents, the immediacy of war, the Constitution in action. The chronology alone tracks a whole range of cultural transformations, many impossible to imagine without the influence--salutary and baleful-- of television. Would the civil rights movement have finally penetrated the American conscience without television? Would crime and illegitimacy have exploded without the commercial drumbeat of self-gratification and instant gratification? Surely, these are subjects and questions to be pondered in an undergraduate education.

Yet in mastering the history of television and of obtaining the material for the class, I found myself stymied again and again. Unlike virtually any other subject one can teach, in which ready access to illustrative material and landmark texts is a given, the television coded and propelled history of America is maddeningly intangible and unchronicled. Further, television moments are just that-- discreet and irreplaceable pieces of time. If you are teaching the Army-McCarthy hearings, the assassination of JFK, or the Tet Offensive, access to the contemporaneous images (as broadcast at the time, not as recontextualized and re-edited in retrospective archival documentaries) is simply essential. To be sure, the VCR has helped enormously as has the proliferation of cable options, such as A&E, C-SPAN, and the History Channel. Moreover, in my experience the networks and individual television producers have been generous in making their materials available. But let's be real: the networks are businesses whose main clients are their in-house production teams. Scholars of the medium

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naturally fall well outside their job description. For a specific example, take an event like the Cuban Missile crisis, surely a moment in American history worth reclaiming in undergraduate classrooms. An essential part of teaching that moment is JFK's address on October 22, 1962 in which he used television to deliver an ultimatum to the Soviets and to inform the American people of the gravity of the crisis. It is certainly the most bracing presidential address ever given on television. We remember it; our students don't. Where do you find it-- unedited and in its entirety, as it was delivered? How can you get a copy of it to show to your class? Moreover, what substitution can you make? Again, unlike literature where one can choose from a range of likely books when teaching, say, the American renaissance, or even film, where any individual western, musical, or film noir can stand in for the genre, TV can accept no substitute. Could you teach the Cuban Missile Crisis without having seen JFK's speech and screening it-- maybe, but you can't teach it as well, as vividly, as powerfully. Ironically, and despite whatever the future holds for VHS (which will likely go the way of the 8-track tape with the onset of the digital video disk), even as videotape has become an ever more cost efficient and user friendly teaching tool, the availability of materials to obtain scholarly expertise and assist pedagogy remains both expensive and elusive. This is especially true of the landmark broadcasts of the early television era, which were preserved haphazardly on kinescope if at all. In some cases, the visual record of events from 1946-1960 may be more clouded and less

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retrievable than events before that era (which were preserved on newsreel film) or after it (recorded on videotape).

There is another consideration that might be calculated in the video mix, one that has special resonance for media historians. Once a fresh insight, it is now a stale cliché to observe that in an image-obsessed world the boundaries between reality and the image have converged, that reality, as Susan Sontag put it, "has come to seem more and more like what we are shown on cameras." Yet even for Sontag, a critic with a preternatural sense for the next fashion curve, the photographic reproduction of reality possessed an unbreakable link to the original. "The picture distorts," Sontag wrote in 1977, "but there is always the presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture."

That presumption no longer holds. Today the technology of photofabrication, in videotape and cinema no less than the still picture, has outpaced the ability of the spectator to detect it. The tell-tale indicators of tampering by which a discerning eye could always perceive alterations in the photographic image-- the difference in film grain, the visible lines in airbrushing, the mismatch of lighting and background-- have been wiped clean by imaging technologies. Through the magic of seamless matching, "morphing," computer graphics, and digital editing techniques, the integrity and veracity of any moving image, perhaps the whole notion of documentary cinema, has been called into question

Whether as cause or consequence, a shift in philosophical outlook has paralleled the technology revolution. Beginning in the

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late 1960s and blossoming full blown by the mid-1970s, poststructuralism, reader response theory, and the sundry continental theories that came to dominate critical thought in the American university system set a relativist tone in which man (or method) became the measure of all things. The field of cinema and television studies embraced the European imports with special fervor. Without slogging through either side of the neo-con versus de-con culture wars, two observations seem pertinent: first, that in some quarters the pursuit of objective historical truth came to seem a fool's errand; and second, that moving image technologies have abetted the trend. Together, the technological revolution in photo-fabrication and the philosophical culture wars over truth and history present a challenge for those who want to screen-- not screen out-- the past. Already the conflation of the real and the cooked up is a staple of documentary parodies ("the mockumentary"), a recreation of documentary form and a studied desecration of the archival record. As with reality-based television, the mockumentary looks like the real thing but it deploys its imitative talents to distance ironically, not involve emotionally, media-wise and history-smart spectators. The form is epitomized by Woody Allen's trailblazing Zelig (1983), which masterfully inserts the present day comedian into the newsreel record of the 1920s and 1930s.

Mockumentary technique reached its apotheosis with the blockbuster Forrest Gump (1994), which paced its newsreel and video vignettes chronologically within an otherwise traditional character study. In Forrest Gump, as in Zelig, the blend of archival footage,

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Hollywood cinema, and the insertion of the one into the other was openly fallacious as history even as it was visibly persuasive as cinema. Technically, the sudden and unbidden appearance of Forrest in touchstone moments from the 1960s and 1970s, such as George Wallace standing at the doorway of the University of Alabama or John Lennon chatting on The Dick Cavett Show, is as near to visual perfection as Hollywood can muster. Fortunately, though, the conceit is an open secret: we recognize actor Tom Hanks cavorting impossibly with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon and appreciate the technical dexterity of the filmmaking. In Zelig and Forrest Gump spectators are presumed to be in on the joke even as they marvel at the stylistic mimicry and FX legerdemain.

In the hands of other filmmakers, however, the effects is less amusing and benign. Oliver Stone's JFK is only the most controversial example of what can be done with a seamless matching of the televisual archival record and motion picture fantasy. It perfected a new kind of docu-dramatic technique that might be dubbed the speculative reenactment. The speculative reenactment renders an historical event that might have happened but which, in the experience of watching the film, can only be perceived as an historical event that did happen. In the terms of verbal grammar, the subjunctive state is experienced on film as the emphatic state. Throughout such films, the movement from dramatic reenactment (of a real event), to archival footage (recording a real event), to speculative drama (an event that might have happened, or might not have) is imperceptible and unlabeled. In this light, historians and



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archivists have an even greater stake-- and responsibility-- in maintaining the integrity of the motion picture and television past.

In sum, if the historian's job of work is to evoke and intrepret the past, then television must be part of the material at hand. The psychologist Karl Jung remarked that "myth is the history you don't have to taught in school." Can anyone doubt that our modern mythmakers are on, and around, television, that television is like the atmosphere-- sometimes invigorating, sometimes oppressive, but always there. In a famous warning, Edward R. Murrow once ruminated on the potential of television-- that it was an appliance that might teach and illuminate but otherwise it "was merely lights and shadows in a box." I think we know it is always much more, but whatever it is it must be before our eyes-- to study, to interpret, to delight in. As the preeminent custodian of our national heritage, The Library of Congress should commit itself aggressively to the task of preserving these vivid and irreplaceable documents.