

CHAPTER 1

Blueprint for Murder

This chapter establishes the context for the analysis in the chapters which follow. It begins by exploring *Columbo*'s genesis, twice. Firstly, by briefly rehearsing the well-known story of the show's development as a concept, its initial iterations on small screen and stage, and its production by Universal for NBC. Then, secondly, an alternative version of this story is offered, or rather, more context is provided that paints the usual story in a slightly different light. This is done by situating the show's commissioning in the broader context of some of the US television industry's chief concerns of the late 1960s and 1970s: around feature-length made-for-television films; the level of investment felt to be appropriate for them; the eschewal of violent content; and target audience demographics (including ratings, market shares, and advertisements). This new perspective on the oft-told story is informed by historical sources and makes it possible to both acknowledge the importance of *Columbo*'s origins in the work of Richard Levinson and William Link, and yet to also realise it as a product of the industrial conditions within which its commissioning was possible. The issues covered indicate the shifting societal terrain which the industry was integrally connected to (and reacting to) in its decision-making, and how *Columbo* meshes neatly with the agendas of the era. Together, then, these two different 'takes' on *Columbo*'s emergence offer a new ground upon which to build a different kind of analysis focusing on attention.

Following on from this, the book's argument is situated in relation to existing scholarly fields in which the issue of attention has been of growing interest over the past several decades. What is key, it is argued, is that whilst interdisciplinary areas like film-philosophy are now increasingly growing interested in attention, due regard should be paid to the much longer heritage of examining the topic of attention in Television Studies. This existing body of work can greatly inform the analysis of how *Columbo* reveals the late twentieth-century's shaping of attention, a process in which it was, as a television show, integral.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a transition towards the chief concerns of the next, regarding how *Columbo* works to attract and shape the viewer's attention. This is done by exploring how *Columbo*'s 'inconsistent' narrative world throws up challenges to some of the seminal theories which define cult television, due to its very specific way of appealing to its loyal fans. These challenges to our understanding of how cult television programmes usually 'work' reveal much about the memory game that *Columbo* encourages us to play: a game designed to hone our attention, which is detailed in depth in Chapter 2.

Columbo's Genesis I: The Oft-told Story

The story of *Columbo*'s genesis typically charts the progress from its origins in literary inspirations to theatrical and televisual originals, and two pilots, before the series proper began (Levinson and Link 1981a, 1981b; Dawidziak 1988, [1988] 2019; Catz 2016). Although the march of time has rendered many original sources out of print (including interviews with Levinson and Link), numerous fan-maintained online sites keep this history alive. This story usually focuses on the show's writers and its commissioning, often drawing on the aforementioned interviews with Levinson and Link published in the early 1980s (including Levinson and Link 1981a; Dawidziak 1988, [1988] 2019). As this story is not difficult to access, a brief summary is all that is needed. Then an alternative perspective can be offered which considers the emergence of *Columbo* within the shifting landscape of the US television industry of the time. This latter approach can flesh out the usual tale in a manner which, without detracting from the undoubted artistic genius involved in the show's creation, nevertheless provides a more multidimensional sense of *Columbo*.

Columbo was officially created in 1971, when Universal convinced NBC that they should produce a rotating, three-show formula, the *NBC Mystery Movie*. This 'wheel' concept, which had previously been attempted in the 1960s (Perry 1983: xiii; Snauffer 2006: 65–67), alternated a different detective show weekly. Initially this wheel was formed of an existing show *McCloud* (1970–1977), *McMillan & Wife*, starring Rock Hudson (1971–1977), and *Columbo* (Levinson and Link 1981b: 27). *Columbo* the character, however, existed long before this.

Columbo's creators, Levinson and Link, were long-time friends and collaborators from Philadelphia. They wrote together from junior high school through to college at the University of Pennsylvania (Levinson and Link 1981a: 9–11; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 15). As they grew up they graduated from homemade radio plays, musical comedies and private eye

novels to short stories in *Playboy* and television scripts (Levinson and Link 1981a: 10–13). They wrote for *The Fugitive* (1963–1967), *Dr Kildare* (1961–1966), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968), *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1962) and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (1962–1965). They also created the show *Mannix* (1967–1975) which played for eight seasons on CBS. During this same period, dividing their time between California and New York to take advantage of opportunities to write for both television and theatre, they penned the successful play *Prescription: Murder*. It featured the detective Columbo, originally played by Thomas Mitchell, and toured the USA and Canada for twenty-five weeks (Levinson and Link 1981a: 15–16; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 21). In fact, the character Columbo had been created earlier, in a former version of the same story, in a script entitled ‘Enough Rope’ which aired as part of the *Chevy Mystery Show* (1960). The very first Columbo, then, was played by Bert Freed on television (Levinson and Link 1981a: 86; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 20).

Prescription: Murder was the script which Levinson and Link pitched to Universal, who were looking for longer-form television shows, and which became the first *Columbo* pilot. It initially attracted the attention of Don Siegel, as possible producer, before being passed to Richard Irving. Irving suggested the location be Los Angeles, and that Peter Falk play Columbo. Ultimately the pilot, which aired in February 1968 starred Falk, albeit because neither of Levinson and Link’s preferred actors – Lee J. Cobb or Bing Crosby – were available. It received successful reviews and ratings and not long afterwards the writing duo signed for Universal (Levinson and Link 1981a: 17–19). After a second pilot, ‘Ransom for a Dead Man’ in March 1971 (a Levinson and Link story, scripted by Dean Hargrove, directed by Irving just like the first pilot), a series based on the two pilots was part of Universal’s pitch to NBC which garnered Universal the *Mystery Movie* wheel (Levinson and Link 1981a: 86–87).

The first series of *Columbo* was produced in an incredibly short time. This was due to Falk’s diary commitment to act in Neil Simon’s play *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* commencing rehearsals that September (five months from *Columbo* receiving the green light) (Levinson and Link 1981b: 27). Numerous difficulties were faced. Although Steven Bochco was quickly secured as story editor – because producer Irving felt that such a dialogue-oriented show required his talents (Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 43) – very few writers wanted to participate. From a screening for sixty freelance writers, only two showed any interest. In addition, NBC were unimpressed with *Columbo*’s unorthodox elements: the late appearance of the star in each episode, the emphasis on dialogue over action, the lack of possible romance due to the spoken presence of Mrs Columbo, or

at least the lack of a young, handsome sidekick. There were also running struggles for control between perfectionist Falk and Levinson and Link (Levinson and Link 1981b: 66; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 44). Miraculously, as the legend goes, the first series of seven episodes was created in the time they had.

The NBC *Mystery Movie* format, with its Henri Mancini-composed theme, its wonderful stars of stage and screen, and its array of beautiful extras, was a success. In 1972 it moved from Wednesday nights to Sundays at primetime, as the NBC *Sunday Mystery Movie* (8.30–10 pm). Over the years, shows from the wheel which attracted significant audience figures, including *Columbo*, were extended from a ninety minute to a two-hour run (allowing for more commercials [Perry 1983: xiv; Snauffer 2006: 72]). Some were later taken from the wheel to stand alone (for example *Quincy, M.E.* [1976–1983]). In 1977 the NBC *Mystery Movie* wheel came to an end. The 1976–1977 season saw the number of *Columbo* episodes reduced due to Falk's other acting commitments (Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 263). Five *Columbo* specials were produced in 1978 but a decade's hiatus then followed before its return in 1989 with ABC, with Falk as a producer. This rebooted period saw three (shorter) series, and then single episodes running until 2003. Across the decades, which included changes to a huge number of personnel (Levinson and Link departed after series one, as did Bochco), Falk provided the show's continuity on- and off-screen.

So ends what might be considered the usual version of the oft-told story, or at least the version which focuses very specifically on the show's television origins. A more literature-oriented version can also be found, which tends to dig further into the background of the show's creators, as follows.

The deeper origins of *Columbo*, indicative of Levinson's and Link's love of literature, explain the show's 'inverted' formula, in which the viewer witnesses the murder then enjoys seeing the detective figure it out retrospectively. This formula can be traced to the English author R. Austin Freeman, especially the 1912 short story collection, *The Singing Bone* (Levinson and Link 1981b: 27; Freeman [1912] 2011). Here the idea that the behaviour of the murderer gives them away early on to the observant detective is evident, even if the attention which *Columbo* gives to interrogating his suspects is not.

Accordingly, the distinction is commonly made between a 'whodunnit' (e.g. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries) and a 'howdunnit' (Freeman's Dr Thorndyke adventures), to indicate that *Columbo* is the latter. *Columbo* himself describes one case as a 'howhedidit' ('*Columbo Goes to College*' [1990]). Freeman, though, preferred to think of his stories as unfolding how the detective came to realise what has happened. Not quite

a ‘howdunnit’, then, but: ‘how was the discovery achieved?’ ([1912] 2011: iii) The most accurate description of Columbo’s formula, accordingly, is somewhere between ‘howshegonnafigureitout’, if we follow Freeman, and, as Mark Dawidziak notes, ‘howzhegonnacatchhim’ ([1988] 2019: 28).

Yet, it is questionable whether Freeman provides the most accurate literary precedent for *Columbo*, either in terms of narrative structure or character. After all, television crime drama emerges from what Sue Turnbull describes as the ‘primordial soup’ of its various origins in literature, theatre, radio and cinema (2014: 42). Likewise, *Columbo*’s originary influences are legion. Levinson and Link themselves note that they wanted to pay their ‘respects’ to writers they had read when young, including Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr and Agatha Christie (Levinson and Link 1981b: 27). Unsurprisingly, then, *Columbo* follows a classical detective format in other respects, being an, as it were, ‘transplanted’ country house mystery (Levinson and Link 1981b: 27; Turnbull 2014: 25). This is a practice which continues today with the mansions of Bel Air and Beverly Hills that featured in *Columbo* being replaced with, for example, the idyllic (fictional) Caribbean island of Saint Marie in *Death in Paradise* (2011–). It is a generic trait of the country house mystery, after all, for a detective (perhaps complete with cigar like Carr’s Dr Gideon Fell) to arrive and solve a puzzling murder committed amongst the rich and powerful. Moreover, Levinson and Link indicate that Columbo’s character was also inspired by G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown, and Porfiry Petrovich from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) (Levinson and Link 1981b: 66), precursors which will become key in later chapters. For now, though, so ends the more literature-focused version of the oft-told story.

The question arises of why this story is so often told in this way? Jane M. Shattuc helpfully observes the drawbacks in thinking which typically lead to its repetition in this format:

Seemingly, we need an inspired source to make sense of American television. Commercial producers consider themselves ‘creators’ as they continually speak of holding onto their ‘original idea.’ But one might wonder: why should this be the case? American television is mass-produced; a series of stages serve as the assembly line where workers put together a similar product weekly with the production of over 200 like-products in the case of a successful series. This process is organised along rationalised lines, with as many as 300 people having some influence over the production of one program. So why do we need to have the agency of an individual, a source, or a creator to understand television? (2010: 142)

Taking up Shattuc’s closing question in the rhetorical manner in which it is posed, the usual narrative describing *Columbo*’s creation seems very much

a product of this kind of thinking. Such thinking is very specifically of its time, which was also *Columbo's* time. As Shattuc notes, it was in the late 1970s that the idea of the producer as a creator emerged. Hence the examples she gives include famous writer-producers like Steven Bochco and Michael Mann (Shattuc 2010: 144). The emergence of this idea within the industry coincided with a certain type of narrative in 'magazines, newspapers, and academic books in the United States', of "'man-and-his-work" criticism' (2010: 144). Critics isolated 'TV "heroes" fighting for the originality of their vision over the network's constant drive for profit. Meaning was no longer the result of only a program (a product), a network, or a star, there was now a maker' (2010: 144). Coinciding as it does with the explanations given by writer-producers Levinson and Link in the early 1980s as to the show's genesis, this discourse may explain why *Columbo's* particular oft-told narrative of origin has always held such sway.

For example, part of the *Columbo* chapter of Levinson's and Link's book, *Stay Tuned*, was published as an article in *American Film*. Both appeared in 1981 (Levinson and Link 1981a, 1981b). The full title given to the article was: 'How We Created Columbo – And How He Nearly Killed Us' (1981b: 27). This is followed by a prominent heading, before the text commences, which states: 'It was a detective series with a twist – no mayhem, no chases. What went on behind the scenes was another story – one that exposes the inner workings of network television' (1981b: 27). As expected, then, what follows in the article is an exposé of a seemingly valiant struggle between art and commerce. This is undoubtedly a true story, but the way it is framed is as per Shattuc's incisive critique. The story which is told is one of how an artistic vision struggled, and ultimately won out, against seeming 'compromise' (the realities of working in the industry, in essence), on the way to its emergence in commercial form (as a television show). These challenges are precisely those usually stated in the oft-told story, namely: most of the possible writers were not interested in participating due to the unusual narrative structure; the network executives did not appreciate the artistic vision and felt the star should appear earlier, not have a wife (so he could be romantically involved), but should have a regular work 'family' or at least an attractive sidekick, and that there would be more action and less talking; Levinson and Link had to threaten to quit to maintain their vision against such proposed changes; the overly controlling star Falk threatened to wreak havoc with the already too-tight schedule; and that they had to hide their scripts and dailies from Falk to protect the integrity of their stories.

Shattuc's work also reminds us that the persistence of this particular narrative of an against-the-odds origin was a feature of the emergence,

around this same historical moment, of the discipline of Film and Television Studies in the university sector (at least in the USA and the UK). Scholars of these popular cultural forms often emphasised exceptional individuals (e.g. the film director as *auteur*) as they sought to legitimise their emerging subjects within elite establishments uncertain of the merits of popular forms. Hence the recourse to the Romantic ideal of the solo artist or maverick author at odds with the system (which seems to so compellingly ‘explain’ how *Columbo* emerged), which can be crafted by focusing first and foremost on its creators (Shattuc 2010: 144–145).

With this in mind, what the usual narrative of *Columbo*’s genesis evidently needs is a degree of rebalancing. The next section of this chapter will shed new light on this story, rendering it richer in implication for its socio-historical context. Without detracting from the undoubted genius and hard work of Levinson and Link, if we shift focus away from the authors, with the *broader* industrial landscape in mind (Feuer 1984: 6–7), what other factors may have played a role in the commissioning and development of *Columbo* at that specific moment?

***Columbo*’s Genesis II: The Role of the Broader Industrial Context**

Commercial television by the era of *Columbo* had become a medium for the delivery of ads (Feuer 1984: 2). As Levinson and Link pithily put it, ‘the purpose of American television is to deliver an audience to an advertiser at the lowest cost per thousand. That’s the American system of network television’ (1983a: 26). *Columbo* emerged during a shift from broadcasting (aiming for the largest possible audience) to narrowcasting (targeting shows at specific niche demographics to provide focused delivery of adverts). This meant that television’s potential to construct cultural consensus, as per the network era when most people were tuning into the same shows, instead became refined to a ‘particular network and its typical audience member rather than . . . society in general’ (Lotz 2007b: 40).

Exploring the emergence of *Columbo*, then, is to flash back to the peak of the network era (which spanned approximately 1950–1980) when television was still predominantly a fixed domestic medium around which the family might congregate (Lotz 2007b: 9–12; see also Spigel 2004). This was still the time of television as ‘cultural hearth’, as opposed to what is now the case, an ‘electronic newsstand’ (with television following a publishing model to target specifically identified demographics) (Lotz 2007b: 5). By the late 1960s when *Columbo* emerged an average US household was already consuming around 5–6 hours of television a day

(MacDonald 1990: 145). As Muriel G. Cantor and Joel M. Cantor summarise of this historical moment, the role of the networks in providing this content was substantial:

Network television was at its pinnacle in the late 1960s and early 1970s. More than 80% of the audience was turning on at least one of the three networks each night. Together the three of them shared a virtual monopoly of the prime-time schedule in 1971. (1992: 16)

Columbo's original primetime slot with NBC, then, was on one of the three major networks which together in the mid- and late 1970s enjoyed a more than 90 per cent share of the primetime evening market (Gitlin 1983: vii; MacDonald 1990: 195). In its prime (and primetime) position of influence on NBC, *Columbo* resonated with and helped shape cultural consensus for a broad national audience. In such a context we can begin to understand *Columbo's* origins a little differently. Firstly by considering the role of the feature length primetime show.

Small-screen features

The 1970s proved something of a turning point for the industry with regard to its provision of films for television. As cinema-going audiences began to dwindle, domestic television consumption rose (along with the growth of suburbia), making space for more movies on the small screen (Williams 1990: 61). There was also a shift in emphasis from rural shows of the 1960s – like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971) and various westerns – to the city-based detective shows of the 1970s. This shift took place as television courted a more lucrative target audience for advertisers, one affluent, urban and young (Moore et al. 2006: 121). The fact that *Columbo* is movie length is part and parcel of this shift. In 1961, NBC's *Saturday Night at the Movies* (1961–1978), showing Hollywood films of recent vintage (including in colour as colour television sets rose in number), proved so popular that it ran until the late 1970s (Moore et al. 2006: 165–166). This was indicative of the collaboration between the movie studios and the television networks during the 1950s, especially the production of the 'tefilm' in Hollywood (Anderson 1994; Curtin 2004). By 1960, 40 per cent of 'network TV programs were being produced by the major movie studios' (Moore et al. 2006: 166). However, as the number of former Hollywood movies to screen on television began to be exhausted, and in the interest of producing substitutable content more cheaply, in 1964 the networks began to commission their own made-for-television movies

(Moore et al. 2006: 166). By 1973 they screened nearly twenty hours of movies per week (Moore et al. 2006: 212).

In this context, the emergence of the NBC *Mystery Movie* wheel provided a way to appeal to a younger, more affluent and more urban market for advertisers. Hence it initially incorporated *Columbo* in LA alongside its two other middle-aged, handsome detectives in New York and San Francisco. *Columbo*, for all its complex literary and theatrical origins and its untypical narrative structure, also clearly aligns with the epoch's advertising agenda. The idea that it was created *in spite of* the limitations of the industry, then, begins to seem overstated. The opposite, in fact, seems the case.

Investment

Understanding something of this broader industrial context is also illuminating with regard to the investment which went into *Columbo*. This is an aspect of the show which cannot really be assigned to its writers, nor exactly to a battle won by creatives against an apparently cost-cutting studio. Often television is thought to reflect low budgets and rapid production times (Moore et al. 2006: 213). Critical appraisal of its aesthetic merits may, as a result, be negative. For example, for John Thornton Caldwell, *Columbo* is a typical product of the Universal Studios lot, a 'systematized film-based telefilm production with uniform settings, lighting, looks and cutting' (1995: 57). Caldwell continues, of shows ranging from *Columbo* to *Knight Rider* (1982–1986):

These MCA-style shows were shot in 35mm feature-film style. Due however to television's inevitable pressures – the less than feature-scale budgets, rigid series scheduling deadlines, and union rules – such programs were notable for sharing and perpetuating a proficient, but very neutral, B-film style from the lot. (1995: 57)

Caldwell may have a point to an extent. The above description does accurately describe something of *Columbo*'s numerous recycled interior locations, sparse or non-existent action sequences and emphasis on character interplay as the central audiovisual attraction. All such features are reminiscent of the B-movie. Even so, there is quite a difference between a B-movie and a television show like *Columbo*, and Caldwell's critique, in fact, should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Columbo was a multi-award-winning primetime show which attracted large audiences. It was initially shot in Technicolor, and although the first series was made rapidly this was as much due to Falk's other acting commitments as the inevitable pressures of the industry. Budget-wise, it

is true that this was far from infinite. For example, when Falk directed ‘Blueprint for Murder’ (1972) to close out the first series he personally paid for more extras so that the active building site that features in the narrative would look more realistic (Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 85). Even so, the original director of the two pilots and later executive producer, Irving, pinpoints *Columbo* as the programme which prompted the setting in of the rot as ‘the studios lost control of their shows’, resulting in excessive production spend (Mann 1984: 8). For Irving, this was due precisely to Falk’s famous perfectionism, with extra rehearsals and takes mitigating against rapid production. Rather than the usual five to seven pages of filming a day, Falk might manage two, thereby ensuring more days of filming, and extra costs (1984: 10; see also Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 276). This was in addition to the high salary Falk demanded, which gradually rose until, in 1976, Falk was the highest paid actor in television, on US\$300,000 per episode (Armstrong 1976: 21; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 194). Viewed in this light, then, the B-movie comparison seems reductive, as the many extra costs involved in shooting *Columbo* increased its quality. This clearly paid off, as is evidenced by both the popularity of *Columbo* and the numerous awards it received. There may have been battles with the studio, but ultimately *Columbo* was a particularly well-resourced programme. The B-movie comparison, then, seems a little off-pitch.

We can add that *Columbo* drew on significant established production talent behind the camera. In this it is again distinguishable from what might be expected of a B-movie. Of course, there were many industry personnel who worked on *Columbo* before moving on to greater things, as personnel did with B-movies. After all, in the 1970s, Universal Television produced more crime drama than the other studios and made opportunities available for perhaps ‘rawer’ talent, comparative to the lesser risk-taking of its competitors (Buckland 2006: 54; Snauffer 2006: 65). Alongside Levinson and Link, who later wrote and produced numerous shows such as *Murder She Wrote* (1984–1996) (with Peter S. Fischer, also a writer on *Columbo*), we might mention the writer Stephen J. Cannell (who later wrote *The Rockford Files* [1974–1980] and *The A-Team* [1983–1987]), alongside producers like Dean Hargrove (*Matlock* [1986–1995], *Diagnosis Murder* [1993–2001]), amongst others.¹ Most famously of all, *Columbo*’s first episode, ‘Murder by the Book’ (1971), was directed by Steven Spielberg, working from a

¹ On-screen, numerous actors similarly played small parts in *Columbo* before becoming more famous later in their careers (Kristen Bauer, Kim Cattrall, Blythe Danner, Jamie Lee Curtis, Pat Morita, Katey Sagal), or even appeared as extras (Jeff Goldblum).

script by Steven Bochco (Bochco 2017: 28–29),² both of whom were up-and-comers who would, each in their own way, later become giants of the film and television industries respectively.

Yet a number of established figures also wrote, directed and starred. For example, writer Jackson Gillis worked on several of the *Columbo* episodes of the 1970s – he also returned in the 1990s – having previously written for *Perry Mason* (1957–1966) amongst other shows. Across its lifetime, directors included Edward M. Abroms, Robert Butler, Jonathan Demme, Vincent McEveety, Leo Penn, Boris Sagal, Nicholas Colasanto and Sam Wanamaker. Numerous respected actors from stage, silver and small screen also featured – from Vera Miles to William Shatner – far too many, in fact, to list here.³ There were even cameos, like that of the multi-Oscar-winning Hollywood costume designer Edith Head (‘Requiem for a Falling Star’ [1976]). Altogether this stellar line-up in front of and behind the camera confirms the position taken by Gary Edgerton, that the television movie should not be understood as a B-movie was in the film industry (as providing a training ground for crew members ultimately moving on to

² Spielberg signed a contract at Universal Studios aged twenty-two. He directed several television episodes, including the first of *Columbo*, before his television movie *Duel* (1971) began his propulsion to stardom. Bochco joined Universal Television straight out of college in 1966, spending twelve years there, getting promoted from writer to story editor, producer and creative producer (Bochco 2017: 20–27). On *Columbo*, Bochco notes that he wrote seven episodes, whilst Levinson and Link note that he wrote the first draft of the scripts for series one, which they had plotted (Levinson and Link 1981b: 28; Bochco 2017: 28; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 44). Bochco left Universal Television in 1978, to join MTM Enterprises. Bochco is typically credited with his role in the invention of the format now known as ‘Quality TV’, commencing with his role as co-creator (and writer-producer) on *Hill Street Blues* (1981–1987) for NBC. *Columbo* has fun referencing these famous alumni. In ‘Mind over Mayhem’ (1974), we meet a child genius named Steve Spelberg (Lee Montgomery), whilst the Universal Studio Tour (including the shark from *Jaws* [1975]) features in ‘Fade in to Murder’ (1976) and ‘Murder, Smoke and Shadows’ (1989). The latter is an episode about a murderous young director with a penchant for special effects, another nod to Spielberg. In ‘Ashes to Ashes’ (1998), *Columbo* questions a suspect over who his cryptic use of the initials S. B. might refer to. The suspect responds, ‘Sonny Bono, Sandra Bullock, Steven Bochco’. *Columbo*, smiling, replies: ‘Bono, Bullock, Bochco, wow, there you really get the big ones. The crème de la crème, sir!’

³ For example: Anne Baxter, Tyne Daly, Faye Dunaway, Ruth Gordon, Lee Grant, Deidre Hall, Mariette Hartley, Kim Hunter, Janet Leigh, Myrna Loy, Ida Lupino, Julie Newmar, Jeanette Nolan, Martha Scott, Don Ameche, Jack Cassidy, Jackie Cooper, Robert Culp, Emilio Fernández, George Hamilton, Wilfred Hyde-White, Sam Jaffe, Patrick McGoohan, Ian McShane, Leonard Nimoy, John Payne, Vincent Price, Martin Sheen, G. D. Spradlin, Rod Steiger, Dean Stockwell, George Wendt.

better things). Rather, it should be recognised that there was *already* quality talent involved (1991: 116–118). As such, Caldwell’s choice of the term B-movie as a pejorative benchmark against which to measure *Columbo* ultimately seems erroneous.

The broader industrial context, then, adds depth to our grasp of why *Columbo* should not be understood as *solely* a work of creative genius, but, also, why it should not simply be dismissed as a substandard work churned out by the studio’s production line either (even if it was, naturally, industrially produced television). The investment the show received, the extra money and time along with the presence of key creative personnel which together made *Columbo* so successful, reaffirms that it was not a popular show in spite of the industry, but because of it.

Violence

The broader industrial context also explains why *Columbo*’s non-violent approach to crime-busting – a conscious decision by Levinson and Link (1983b: 150) and often mentioned as an unusual feature for a detective show – is not actually so strange. Rather, once again, it is in line with industry norms of the era.

It is true that there was an increase in crime and law enforcement programming in the 1970s, with ‘40 percent of prime time schedules given to crime shows in 1975’ (Carlson 1985: 29). Yet *Columbo* takes a rather sanitised, often oblique approach to the depiction of its opening murder. For example, when a chess grand master is pushed into a trash compactor in ‘The Most Dangerous Match’ (1973) this brutal attempt at murder is signified without any visual trauma. The victim is pushed through double doors into the hotel basement where the compactor is located. The edit provides the point-of-view shot of the victim as a coat is pushed into his face. Then there is a close-up of a sign on the door they have passed through, reading ‘DANGER NO ADMITTANCE’, and an amplification of grinding machine sounds along with dramatic music on the soundtrack before a sudden cut to black. Nothing is seen of the actual grisly event. Not even the man’s fall into the compactor. This avoidance of any too-frontal a depiction of violence, coupled with the fact that *Columbo* never (or, hardly ever) carries a gun, again suited the overall shifting industrial landscape. Coinciding with *Columbo*, after 1968 the major networks turned away from violent content (Cantor 1971: 161). In this era the major networks practised ‘least offensive programming’, in the hopes of maintaining the largest possible audiences (Curtin and Shattuc 2009: 37). The sign on the door, stating ‘DANGER NO ADMITTANCE’ summarises

perfectly this deliberate eschewal of on-screen violence. This broader industrial context thus illuminates more about why Columbo, in spite of his occasional aggressive behaviour towards suspects or their accomplices, and his questionable array of other crime-fighting devices – from entrapment to planting evidence (see Chapter 5) – is hardly ever violent.

Even in crime shows of the era where there was violence, it was often contained within stagey norms of a familiarly generic kind. For instance, in *The Rockford Files*, recurring fist fights appear as though straight out of the western bar room brawl, evoking James Garner's former role in *Maverick* (1957–1962). Again, in the *Mystery Movie* wheel's western *Hec Ramsey* (1972–1974) the occasional horseback shoot-outs and careering out-of-control wagon stunts spectacularly evoke the western's heritage in the wild west show and rodeo traditions. This is in stark contrast to, say, the lingering on death of a bloody western movie like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) made only a few years previously. Again, in *McCloud* (1970–1977), *Kojak* (1973–1978) or *The Streets of San Francisco* (1972–1977) even whilst criminals may fire guns wildly, the police reply, when it finally arrives, is minimal, measured and precise: one carefully aimed bullet often only wounding the criminal judiciously without taking their life.

Columbo's eschewal of violence, then, whilst indicative of great writerly skill on the part of Levinson and Link, nevertheless also corresponds exactly with the working practices and content agendas of the (transforming) industry of the time. Although it was undoubtedly a genuine artistic move to focus *Columbo's* investigative skills in the cognitive rather than the physical realm, nevertheless it cannot have hurt in securing the show's commissioning for primetime during the era of 'least offensive programming' (Curtin and Shattuc 2009: 37).

Target audience (ratings, market shares and advertisements)

Columbo's eschewal of violence also speaks to the show's targeting of a primetime audience more generally. Behind this decision lie various agendas concerning the demographics which such a show would have been thought likely to appeal to. At this point in time it seems impossible to calculate *Columbo's* lifetime audience, due both to the show's wide international reach, especially at the time of its release, and its longevity over the decades. Just to give some sense of the problem, how can we gauge lifetime audience size or demographic/s when reruns of what was primetime viewing have, over the years, become considered safe for daytime television consumption? There are now also many generations of fans involved and from all around the world. Even today, *Columbo* DVDs often include the

option of viewing with dubbing or subtitles in numerous languages. The research involved in charting such a complex terrain seems hardly feasible. Nevertheless, it is possible to consider a little of *Columbo's* original domestic target audience by noting its primetime place in the scheduling, and, indeed, certain aspects of its content.

Columbo initially screened in a primetime slot, 8.30–10 pm as part of the *Mystery Movie* wheel. As such it can be considered to target as wide a range of adult viewing demographics as possible (Blum and Lindheim 1987: 2; Cantor and Cantor 1992: 1). Take, for example, *Columbo's* class, which is emphasised from the second pilot onwards once the dishevelled, chilli-and-crackers-eating, extended family-referencing *Columbo* first emerges. *Columbo's* 'everyman' character seems carefully crafted to enable recognition of (and perhaps even identification with) *Columbo* on the part of both working-class and lower middle-class viewers. Such a strategy of straddling class boundaries ensures an extremely large potential viewing demographic as together these two categories account for over half of the US population (Thompson and Hickey 2011: 209; Gilbert 2017: 13–15 and 246–251).⁴ Admittedly, *Columbo* is often thought of as working class, or blue collar, and indeed this designation seems accurate in terms of many of the usual defining characteristics. For instance, *Columbo* never speaks of or otherwise indicates a college education, he has no pretensions in terms of taste, and his wardrobe, car and conversation indicate that he has to be very careful with money. However, other features often used to define working class are not so closely aligned. Noticeably, *Columbo's* seemingly blue-collar familial origins aside, having attained the rank of Lieutenant in the LAPD, *Columbo* does belong to a certain stratum of middle management. He leads a team, and although he often evokes the officious demands of his superiors as the reason for his nagging insistence on bothering suspects he clearly enjoys a large degree of unsupervised autonomy in his work. Moreover, the work itself is far from repetitive or unskilled (see Chapter 4). Finally, whilst *Columbo's* wardrobe may be dishevelled, this is not the case of his sergeants (who are typically neatly besuited, indicating a decent salary and professional expectation in terms of dress code), with whom *Columbo* shares a literal white collar (as distinct from their literally blue-collared uniformed colleagues). In all these aspects *Columbo* seems to align more with definitions of the lower middle classes.

⁴ Albeit Dennis Gilbert only differentiates between working, middle and upper middle classes, nevertheless the distinctions between working and middle he offers are close to those which William E. Thompson and Joseph V. Hickey delineate for working and lower middle class. It primarily seems a slight difference of terminology.

Columbo's class ambiguity is not solely the result of class categories being themselves inconsistent (or at least, distinct to the measures used by different scholarly definitions). Rather, in terms of class, Columbo's ambiguous status evidences the character's potential to appeal to the broadest possible audience. After all, the boundary between these two particular classes grows increasingly blurry due to the 'declining income differential between them' (Gilbert 2017: 249). Hence, for the purposes of this book I refer to Columbo as lower middle class out of respect for the Lieutenant's professional status (perhaps in a rather British way, admittedly), whilst acknowledging that it could equally be stated as working class without the argument being necessarily different (see further on class in Chapter 5).

For the network, however, of equal if not greater importance were specific age groups, and viewers from both rural and urban areas. NBC immediately celebrated the *Mystery Movie* in terms of its ability to attract consumers with disposable income: people aged 18–49 in general, including, and in particular, those 25–49 (and most especially in this last niche, men). In a report released on 5 October 1971, on the two weeks ending 26 September, NBC stated:

NBC's MYSTERY MOVIE is the top rated new programme of the 1971–72 season in terms of adult and younger adult audience delivery. NBC's MYSTERY MOVIE was viewed by more than 22 million adults 18+ and 13.7 million adults 18–49 per average minute . . . Further highlighting MYSTERY MOVIE'S impressive performance is its fourth place ranking among men 25–49. Only two front loaded Sunday Movie packages and Football outrated it. Finally, MYSTERY MOVIE delivered 10,770,000 adults 25–49 ranking seventh among all shows in this category. (NBC 1971a)

This self-assessment is entirely consistent with NBC's positioning of itself as the network most likely to reach precisely these sought-after adult consumer demographics (Alvey 2004: 48–49). However, some nuance is beneficial here, as the picture is known to be more complex than this.

Whilst 'young married and upwardly mobile professionals' were a key demographic target for the networks in this period, and whilst for a time primetime hoped to lure them by programming more works on 'controversial and serious themes' (including such shows as *M*A*S*H* [1972–1983]), *Columbo* does not engage with issues of social relevance in the manner of *M*A*S*H*, or even, say, *Kojak* (Blum and Lindheim 1987: 3). Rather, *Columbo* seems to have a broader range of viewers in its sites. This is perhaps unsurprising for, as Mark Alvey delineates, whilst in the early 1970s the three major networks did try to deliver to advertisers the most lucrative market of the younger, affluent, urban middle classes,

nevertheless ‘the networks continued to programme by and large for the masses, trying to garner the upscale audience as part of the bargain, all the while hoping for the breakout hit’ (2004: 60).

The networks, for Alvey, would have been aware of voices in the industry pinpointing older demographics (such as fifty-plus age groups) as lucrative markets being forgotten in the race for the younger middle-class viewers and their (maybe to some degree fabled) greater disposable income (2004: 59–60).⁵ In fact, the breadth of the original possible audience for *Columbo*, whilst it undoubtedly included the 18–49 age bracket, seems to also stretch to younger and older viewers on either side of that particular demographic. Let us firstly consider the latter of these: older viewers.

Commencing with the 1970s’ episodes, apparent in *Columbo* is an appeal to older viewers that will have included those fifty-plus. That is, viewers able to appreciate the nostalgia which the show revels in when pairing up former stars of the silver screen as murderers mentally duelling with Columbo (see further in Chapter 6). Moreover, although Falk was in his early forties when the show commenced, the original plan had been to cast Bing Crosby or Lee J. Cobb in the lead. During this era other cop and detective shows did cast older actors, such as Karl Malden (who was sixty when *The Streets of San Francisco* commenced), Buddy Ebsen (mid-sixties in *Barnaby Jones* [1973–1980]) and Mildred Natwick and Helen Hayes (aged sixty-seven and seventy-two respectively when *Snoop Sisters* [1972–1974] joined the *Mystery Movie* wheel on a Wednesday night). Falk was not particularly young, of course. Comparatively speaking, Michael Douglas was in his very late twenties when *The Streets of San Francisco* aired, as one for instance. But Falk was much younger relatively speaking than the other actors considered for *Columbo*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Falk’s performance of Columbo’s old-school, folksy charm manages to speak to a respectability a little out of step with the latest attitudes of the 1970s (even if loveably so). This does not seem to be accidental. The attractiveness of the older viewer was not lost on NBC, who in 1971 also advertised itself as having ‘more programs in the top twenty among adults 25–64 than any other network. According to the Nielsen report for the 1971–72 season, NBC placed nine programs, almost half, in this list’ (NBC 1971c). The

⁵ Alvey notes that NBC had been paying attention to audience composition in its daytime scheduling since the 1950s (2004: 45). Prior to the 1970s it might typically emphasise demographics when discussing a show which was failing to attract a mass audience and when market share was not available as a way with which to promote its potential to advertisers (2004: 49).

third-highest rated of these nine shows was the *Mystery Movie*, coming in behind only *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–1974) and *The Bob Hope Show* (1950–1979) (NBC 1971c).

Whilst the three shows initially included in the NBC *Mystery Movie* wheel did all feature attractive urban-based professionals, their age, and indeed the full extent of their urbanity, is worth considering carefully. Sam McCloud (Dennis Weaver) in *McCloud* (1970–1977), a show which was already running when the wheel commenced, played a New Mexico lawman fish-out-of-water in New York. As such he retained his rural roots and country ways in the big city. Noticeably, the actor playing McCloud, Dennis Weaver, took with him his association with rurality from the role of Chester in the western *Gunsmoke* (1955–1964). *McCloud*'s credits foreground this rural heritage, featuring the eponymous hero in his trademark cowboy hat incongruously riding a galloping horse through traffic down the middle of a busy New York street. Indeed, in the episode 'Manhattan Manhunt' (1970), McCloud tackles a fleeing suspect by leaping from his horse after chasing him through Central Park, a sequence evocative of the rodeo and wild west shows on which the western drew as a genre.

More obviously, *Hec Ramsey*, the fourth show to be added to the *Mystery Movie* wheel, in 1972, was a western. Its lead, Richard Boone, formerly the star of *Have Gun – Will Travel* (1957–1963), was in his mid-fifties. This was older than Falk in *Columbo*, Weaver in *McCloud* and Rock Hudson in *McMillan & Wife*, who were all in their forties when the wheel commenced. An older demographic, then, was certainly not forgotten in the wheel and nor was a rural demographic judging by the presence of the western. The latter demographic, in particular, helps explain the appearance of country star Johnny Cash as the murderer in the *Columbo* episode 'Swan Song' (1974). This before we mention detective shows on other networks in which rurality featured. On CBS, for example, in *Cannon* (1971–1976), Frank Cannon (William Conrad) reprised the post-war western-cum-thriller format of *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955) in its pilot, his business travel outside of LA in the series thereafter taking him to various inhospitable small rural towns. Again, in another Quinn Martin Production, *Barnaby Jones* – as Buddy Ebsen transitioned from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and various westerns to an urban cop show – the private detective returns from retirement on his ranch to resume his career, bringing with him the potential for rural spectacle (for example, scenes of a horse that performs tricks to his whistle ['Sunday: Doomsday' (1973)]).

The sponsor participations which *Columbo* attracted from the advertising world can add further depth to the audience demographics that this

primetime show was thought likely to draw.⁶ Both Mark Dawidziak and Shelton Catz, in the two existing books on *Columbo*, note that as *Columbo*'s popularity increased the show was lengthened to enable more ads to be included. Each author considers the extent to which advertisements were detrimental to the quality of the show (Catz 2016: 136–139; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 95–96). The drive to include more advertisement is unsurprising, considering that commercial television, as noted, is a delivery system for ads. Even so, especially for Dawidziak – who draws on the views of Levinson and Link, Bochco and Falk – this padding out is thought to have led to redundant or drawn-out scenes, or to having reduced the effectiveness of the programme's pacing. Yet there is another way to approach this. Television Studies has long acknowledged the importance of analysing ads for our understanding of the full meaning of programmes. For example, Raymond Williams seminally observed the wholistic nature of televisual flow (of adverts, trailers, and so on) within which shows are embedded, and which accord them cultural meaning and value (Williams 1990: 86–96 and 118). Accordingly, it is worth realising how *Columbo*'s content intermingles with its ads in a manner which reveals its target demographics at primetime.

When the NBC *Mystery Movie* wheel commenced on a Wednesday night it attracted over 100 sponsors, primarily, as might be expected, manufacturers of packaged goods, white goods and automobiles. These included numerous household names. Whilst too many to mention in full, the spread is amply illustrated by considering just some of those clustered under C: Canada Dry, Carnation, Chevrolet, Chanel, Coca-Cola, Colgate, etc. (NBC undated-a). If we focus in on *Columbo* specifically, the range of commercials which accompanied, for example, 'Death Lends a Hand' (1971) on WNBT/WNBC on a Wednesday night help illuminate the show's wide target audience. They included well-known brands of instant coffee, washing machines, cat food, hair spray, cola, fabric softener, fried chicken and deodorant (NBC undated-b). Interestingly, though, by 1972, with the wheel now showing on a Sunday night, the episode 'Dagger of the Mind', whilst including many similar advertisements – tinned soup, cars, cameras, cold and flu remedies, tumble dryers, men's slacks, insurance, disinfectant spray, cheesy puff snacks, razors, colour televisions, cake, drinks mixers, typewriters and soap – also indicates the anticipated presence of women viewers. This demographic is recognised by a range of

⁶ For an explanation of the history of television sponsorship in the US industry, from 'single sponsorship' of a dedicated show to the 'magazine sponsorship' model, in the 1950s, see Jason Mittell (2003: 44–49).

advertisements for ladies' shavers, compacts, make-up and perfume (NBC undated-c).

Thus, *Columbo's* manner of squarely addressing key adult audience (and consumer) demographics, whilst also engaging with older viewers, as well as with both urban and rural viewers, is apparent. This is, one might argue, the broad appeal of a country house drama, as per this aspect of the show's literary origins, but, equally, it is the ideal type of show for primetime in the broadcasting (as opposed to narrowcasting) era. To recap Alvey: programming for 'the masses' but including 'the upscale audience as part of the bargain' (Alvey 2004: 60).

We can add to this illumination of *Columbo's* broad appeal the seemingly counter-intuitive idea that a younger viewer might also be attracted to this cop show. On reflection, this is not actually such a strange idea, considering that *Variety* reported as early as 1972 on the importance of the combination of Disney and *Columbo* to NBC's success in attracting primetime audiences relative to its competitors (Anon. 1972: 33). Indeed, *Columbo* is a very sanitised cop show which might enable family viewing to an extent. Historically, *Columbo* emerged prior to 8–9 pm being officially designated, for a period, the 'family hour' (Carlson 1985: 30; Brooks and Marsh 1995: xix). Even so, this idea of who this slot is suitable for can be said to be apparent in *Columbo's* scheduling there. For example, on its move to Sunday night, in 1972, *Columbo* immediately followed NBC's airing of *The Wonderful World of Disney*, indicating the degree to which *Columbo* might offer some households a continuation of sufficiently sanitised family-oriented viewing, albeit in which parents might be joined by older offspring than all those youngsters previously enjoying Disney (Brooks and Marsh 1995: 1193). Observing various editions of the *TV Guide* for the era⁷ we find *Columbo's* particular time slot to indicate something of a possible changeover moment in terms of familial viewing demographics: the point where younger children go to bed, but older children can perhaps watch a little longer with parents. Or at least, one could argue that the 8–9 pm slot holds fairly safe shows like *Bewitched* (1964–1972) (when the first series of *Columbo* aired in September 1971, on a Wednesday) in comparison to a more racy movie like the James Bond spy thriller *Goldfinger* (1964) starting at 9 pm.⁸

⁷ Various *TV Guide* editions of the early 1970s and late 1980s were consulted at the British Film Institute (including 15 September 1971, 17 September 1972 and 6 February 1989). Also consulted were editions of *Television Index* from the same periods.

⁸ September 1972.

Admittedly, such a distinction is less clear if we emphasise other shows. The sense that there might be a difference between a darker comedy like *M*A*S*H* in the 8–9 pm slot (when the second season of *Columbo* commenced, on a Sunday evening, in 1972), or indeed the sitcom *The New Dick van Dyke Show* (1971–1974) commencing at 9 pm, and *Columbo*'s opening on a murder in the 8.30 pm slot, is far less clear-cut. Even so, that children might be in control of the dial at that specific time was certainly the case. On 11 October 1971 NBC celebrated the NBC *Mystery Movie* (then on a Wednesday night) becoming a 'Top Rated New Show', not long after it launched with *Columbo*'s 'Murder by the Book' on 15 September. They stated that the 'NBC Mystery Movie's performance was particularly impressive considering that the first half-hour faced a strong Charlie Brown Special rather than its usual Carol Burnett competition' (NBC 1971b). Indeed, during the 1960s and 1970s generally, across the three networks, shows to commence at 8 pm included *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968), *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974), *Happy Days* (1974–1984) and *The Waltons* (1971–1981), and even at 8.30 pm could still be found such family-safe fare as *The Flintstones* (1960–1966), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971), *Star Trek* (1966–1969) and *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974–1978) (Brooks and Marsh 1995: 1181–1200).

Within the drama itself, as *Columbo* progressed there were also occasions when a younger viewer, presumably watching with a parent, seems to be acknowledged. Otherwise, what can we make of *Columbo*'s humorous engagement with a child character, the knowingly named Steve Spelberg (Lee Montgomery), alongside Robby the Robot (from *Forbidden Planet* [1956]) in 'Mind over Mayhem' (1974)? Or again, the intelligent young adult women who *Columbo* sometimes interacts with, one of whom is even integral to solving the case with him ('Ransom for a Dead Man' [1971])? This seemingly direct appeal to much younger viewers would recur later in the show's lifetime, especially when it returned in the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, consider the sudden hiatus in 'Sex and the Married Detective' (1989) created by *Columbo*'s tuba playing for a group of young children. His melody accompanies a playful montage of a fountain moving independently outside, before the children join *Columbo*'s tuba march. It is hard not to notice the shift of address towards a younger viewer in such a standout moment in what is otherwise a *noirish* and somewhat steamy episode (for *Columbo* at any rate).

Even so, and whilst only a couple of decades later *Columbo* reruns would appear in daytime slots where they could more easily be viewed by younger audiences, there is little doubt that its primary target initially was older

viewers. Even if the potential to appeal to a younger viewer was not forgotten, it was typically adults who would have seen Columbo's tuba playing, and adults who would have enjoyed the nostalgia value of Robby the Robot nearly twenty years after his debut in *Forbidden Planet*.

In any case, when *Columbo* was brought back by ABC in 1989, its appeal to a wide audience – including both older and younger viewers – was retained. *Columbo* aired on a Monday night, initially, before moving to Saturday night a year later. It was, again, part of a *Mystery Movie* wheel, initially alongside programmes like *B.L. Stryker* (1989–1990), and later with dedicated *Kojak* television movies, amongst other shows. The ABC *Mystery Movie* wheel was scheduled a little later at 9 pm, at the same time as shows like *Lonesome Dove* (1989) and *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992). Falk was by now in his early sixties, and so was paired off against younger murderers. They were often in their forties, as murderers tended to be in the original seasons, but also included much younger actors. For example: a youthful movie director in 'Murder, Smoke and Shadows' (1989); two students in 'Columbo Goes to College' (1990); a disturbed, young, kidnapping ambulance driver in 'No Time to Die' (1992); and a trendy nightclub owner (and television actress girlfriend) in 'Columbo Likes the Nightlife' (2003). In the first season, by contrast, the actors playing four of the seven murderers were born within three years of Falk (Jack Cassidy, Robert Culp, Roddy McDowall, Patrick O'Neal) whilst Ross Martin was only seven years older, and the youngest of all, Susan Clark, was sixteen years younger. The change which occurred with the passing of time, from middle-aged Falk typically sparring with another actor in their forties, to an older Columbo investigating murderers twenty to almost forty years younger than himself, indicates how the adapted new *Columbo* ensured that many different demographics could still engage with the show.

Finally, regarding *Columbo*'s attempts to appeal as broadly as possible at primetime, something similar can be said of its international audiences. *Columbo* was a popular export product in the UK, Japan, Italy, Iran, the Netherlands, France, Romania, Mexico and Hungary at the very least (Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 309–310). Famous Italian *auteur* Federico Fellini is said to have departed dinner parties to catch *Columbo* ([1988] 2019: 309). In Japan, *Columbo* reputedly challenged baseball for popularity (Levinson and Link 1981b: 68), and Falk was twice invited to formal dinners at the White House when first the Japanese Emperor, and later the Prime Minister Masayoshi Ōhira, asked to dine with Columbo (Falk 2008: 179). Indeed, the most repeated anecdotes about *Columbo* involve its international audience. For instance, Falk was asked by the American ambassador to Romania to be filmed reassuring the Romanian people that the limited

number of episodes available annually was not due to their government imposing a quota on their beloved US show (Falk 2008: 221–224). Again, when Falk was filming *Vibes* (1988) in Ecuador, in an isolated Incan village in the Andes he was recognised as ‘Tenanté Columbo’ by delighted children (Falk 2008: 149–150). Even though it is beyond the scope of this work to provide an exhaustive verification of this audience reach, at least one indicative example can be given, from the UK.

Columbo was screened on several terrestrial channels in the UK, including on ITV, which (unlike BBC One and BBC Two) shows commercials. On ITV, *Columbo* appeared sporadically across the year, alternating with other films, or adaptations of best-selling novels, usually at primetime. Episodes appeared in the top twenty shows by viewing figures in 1979, 1988, 1989 and 1991 (Gambaccini and Taylor 1993: 97). All were weekend primetime slots, on Sunday in the 1970s and on Saturday in the 1980s and 1990s. All started just shortly before the 9 pm ‘watershed’ (after which content would be thought unsuitable for younger viewers), at either 8.15 pm or 8.40 pm, with the exception of ‘Murder, Smoke and Shadows’. This last, one of the first of the new episodes when *Columbo* returned after a decade’s hiatus, aired in 1991 at 7.40 pm, clearly with a much fuller family audience in its sites.

The episode which drew the largest audience was ‘Murder Under Glass’, from the last series of *Columbo* in the 1970s, on Sunday, 15 April 1979. The *TV Times* for that week does not declare the episode’s arrival with any significant fanfare, suggesting that by then viewers were familiar with *Columbo*. When aired on ITV, typically, *Columbo* would compete with more highbrow fare on BBC1, such as the Sunday film, play of the month or other feature length dramatisation, followed by *That’s Life* (1973–1994). On this occasion, however, it was Easter Sunday, and BBC1 was screening a film version of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, factors which may also have contributed to the larger audience for *Columbo* in an era of limited choice between three terrestrial channels.⁹ Thus, *Columbo*’s broad audience appeal, and tailoring to the primetime slot both in the USA and elsewhere internationally,¹⁰ are far from inconsequential in understanding

⁹ Channel 4 launched in 1982.

¹⁰ In Germany, RTL negotiated a deal to bring *Columbo* back to German screens and reported 6.5 million viewers for *Columbo* in 1991 (Kingsley 2004: 8; Koehl 2004; see also Meza 2004). In France, in the mid-1990s, TF1 was screening *Columbo* as part of a cop double bill (following French *policier*, *Navarro* [1989–2005]) during primetime (Anon. 1995: 46). France even made Falk a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters in 1996 (Anon. 1996: 16).

its origins, emergence and success at this particular point in the history of the television industry.

Overall, what this broader industrial view of *Columbo* emphasises, first and foremost, is the need to understand the show's origins in a different manner than in the oft-told story. But there is also more to be gleaned than just this. If *Columbo* is more than just a work of great creative genius (even if it is most certainly that as well) but is also an industrial product in tune with a time when primetime television helped people understand their lives – to return to Janet Wasko, television as 'THE storyteller for society' (2010: 3) – what is *not* needed is an evaluation of whether it has aesthetic worth or not, or of which episodes are better than others. This is still the usual next step after recounting the oft-told story, to weigh up episodes in terms of quality. Instead, what *is* now needed is a way of grasping what *Columbo means*. This book therefore argues that it is in the shaping of attention that this meaning is to be uncovered. For this, a very different approach is required. From the television industry, then, let us shift our attention to the scholarly understanding of the medium in relation to attention.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

The approach to *Columbo* which this book takes emerges from the interdisciplinary field of film-philosophy (scholarship at the intersection of Film Studies and Philosophy), which has also recently begun to explore television. It is from here that the inspiration to focus on attention was obtained, and, indeed, it is here that this book looks to make its intervention.

Historically, there has been engagement with television and philosophy under the broad banner of critical theory, especially with the thought of Martin Heidegger during the mid-1990s (Fry 1993; Dienst 1994). In some ways a precursor for this book, Richard Dienst's *Still Life in Real Time* (1994) drew on the works of Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze to explore, broadly speaking, the world through television and television through the world. What is a little different now is the gradual emergence of a groundswell from a different quarter. Very recently, film-philosophy has belatedly begun to turn to television (e.g. Sanders and Skoble 2008; C. Gardner 2012, 2018; Nannicelli 2016; Stadler 2017; Graham and Sparrow 2018).

A useful example indicating what is at stake in this turn is Steven M. Sanders's and Aeon J. Skoble's *The Philosophy of TV Noir* (2008) which explores 'the philosophical ideas presupposed and reflected' in television noirs from *Dragnet* (1951–1959) to *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) (Sanders

and Skoble 2008: 1). Sanders argues that: 'noir television is particularly valuable in dramatizing situations and experiences that raise philosophical questions about how to live, what kind of person one should be, and what, if anything, gives meaning to life' (Sanders and Skoble 2008: 1). This is very much in line with the way in which film-philosophy is often described, as exploring how films 'do' philosophy, or, put another way, considering how films can 'think'. Television, then, like film, can be said to have, or expound, a philosophy or philosophies. After all, if there is a 'philosophy of TV noir', then there are presumably many more philosophies, or ways of philosophising, amongst television's various offerings.

It is in the historical moment of this shift of emphasis in film-philosophy, towards television, that this book on *Columbo* examines attention. Specifically, it looks to intervene at the intersection of, on the one hand, Television Studies's long-standing interest in television's mediation of attention, and, on the other, how various critical thinkers consider our contemporary world. The last of these includes both philosophers and cultural theorists, particularly through foregrounded engagement with several contemporary Italian minds: Giorgio Agamben, Mauricio Lazzarato and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (along with passing discussions of the ideas of their countrymen Omar Calabrese and Umberto Eco). The Italian 'flavour' to the theory involved seems perhaps fitting, considering *Columbo*'s Italian-American heritage. The reality is, though, that the overarching theoretical influence on the analysis of *Columbo* is informed by Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's famous critiques of capitalism. This heritage, in particular Guattari's thinking, is evident in the work of the Italian thinkers referenced throughout.

This book's theoretical dimension also draws upon an interdisciplinary range of ideas about attention, including work within Film Studies as epitomised by Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006). This latter text is indicative of an interdisciplinary convergence with Art History (Beller is influenced by and develops seminal works by art historian Jonathan Crary [1999, 2013]), and various other fields in which attention is being explored. Work on attention will thus require a dedicated discussion in Chapter 2, wherein the different areas which intersect to make this intervention (work in Television Studies on attention, theoretical ideas of attention) are explored together. An intervention at this particular intersection seeks to broaden the scope of our understanding of how ideas like that of attention (and its intertwined societal and economic functions) can be fruitfully explored in relation to a specific television show that has maintained a huge global following over the decades.

Crucially, this type of analysis can happen in a more pinpointed manner in relation to television than it can if applied to film, due to the differences between the two media: their different industrial conditions and markets, narrative structures, viewing experiences, longevity, societal functioning, and so on. It is what is medium-specific to television which can help advance understanding of a theoretical subject like attention. In particular, the qualities which television offers that film does not, which film-philosophy now has to grapple with, are often noted to be both television's longevity across time (which is integral to *Columbo's* cult status, as I discuss further below), and also its potential for liveness (which I touch upon in Chapter 3) (Caldwell 2019: 23). To elucidate the nature of this intervention, the remainder of this chapter examines how this work exists in relation to film-philosophy's turn to television, as well as certain existing debates within Television Studies like that surrounding cult television.

Television-philosophy (?)

The manner of approach to *Columbo* which this book takes can be clarified through engagement with one of the most sustained examinations of television philosophically, Ted Nannicelli's *Appreciating the Art of Television* (2016). Nannicelli's in-depth exploration of television as art approaches it rather as an art historian might when assessing the results of the labour of a painter (2016: 122–208). This book shares Nannicelli's concern with understanding a show like *Columbo* as at once a product of authorial agency and yet also an industrial product specific to the era in which it emerged. It considers *Columbo* an artefact in line with the direction that Nannicelli pursues when discussing television shows as:

special sorts of artifacts – the results of human agential activity performed within a tradition of television-making . . . as shaped, expressive, usually communicative objects whose natures, meanings and values all need to be conceived as standing in relation to the conventions, norms, aims of that tradition and its history. Furthermore, it is to approach them as attempts – often but not necessarily successful – to achieve various goals, such as communicating meanings, eliciting emotions, and expressing ideas. (2016: 5)

Thus, this book's analysis of *Columbo* contains discussion of both Levinson's and Link's roles as originators and creators of the show, of individual directors (Gazzara in particular, in Chapter 3), even Falk himself as producer and occasional writer. At its heart, though, and what differentiates my own approach from Nannicelli's, this book is more interested in

how *Columbo* reflects, and reflects upon, the changing history of attention in its lifetime. This is visible in retrospect, even if we cannot expect its personnel to have always necessarily been in tune with it as they made individual episodes.¹¹ This approach makes sense in light of the show's employment of numerous creative personnel over the decades. *Columbo*, although created by Levinson and Link, is ultimately the product of many creative people. As such it reveals as much about its times (as an industrial product aimed at a certain audience, and, simultaneously, as a mediator of socio-historical change) as it does any particular authorial vision.

Importantly, this approach distinguishes this book from its two book-length predecessors.¹² The first, Mark Dawidziak's ground-breaking *The Columbo Phile* ([1988] 2019), has at time of writing been re-released for its thirtieth anniversary. It was based on interviews with key figures in the show's NBC years. These include *Columbo*'s creators, Levinson and Link, along with Falk and Bochco. For its part, Sheldon Catz's fascinating *Columbo Under Glass* (2016) covers the entire run, both the 1970s with NBC and the return of *Columbo* under ABC. There is no way to compete with the behind-the-scenes insight of Dawidziak. It is even said that Falk consulted with Dawidziak regarding the content of the earlier episodes when the show was reborn with ABC (Lertzman and Birnes 2017: 378–381; Dawidziak [1988] 2019: 384–388). Similarly, the encyclopaedic knowledge of Catz is not something this book can hope to match.¹³ But, ultimately, this is a very different kind of book. Whilst, like these predecessors, I am also a fan of *Columbo*, what this book provides is a very different work of analysis.

What unites Dawidziak and Catz is an evaluative approach to *Columbo* – making a case for the higher quality of some episodes over others.

¹¹ In terms of authorial agency, this is also to balance out too strong a sense of its creative force giving birth to the work with the various counter-arguments which surround the Romantic figure of the artist or *auteur*: for example, that creative personnel may or may not always themselves be conscious of the historical forces which work through them, especially when they express themselves in generic forms with long histories. This, even whilst, contrariwise, granting that they may consciously foreground a distinctive authorial style, and be astute at manipulating well-worn discourses surrounding the supposed tensions between art and commerce to construct their star image (Stoddart 1995: 44–55). This is to gloss over several decades of work on the *auteur*, coming from various perspectives, structuralist and post-structuralist, including by Peter Wollen, John Caughie and Timothy Corrigan.

¹² Paul Hughes's interesting *The Columbo Case Files* (2018) is a compendium of his internet-based writings.

¹³ Dawidziak and Catz helped keep alive *Columbo*'s legacy for fan communities (Catz 2016: 369), and this book owes a debt to their efforts.

However, this kind of evaluative approach has many challenges. As noted above regarding claims that the quality of some *Columbo* episodes suffered because of the lengthening of episodes to enable more advertising space to be sold, what can be a compelling point in terms of an evaluative approach can seem redundant from other perspectives. This is to touch upon a long-running argument about the nature of taste, and the role it plays in shaping the assessments of quality. As there are a range of audiovisual pleasures offered by any television show, some viewers may like a good narrative (convincing clues and a watertight case, as emphasised by Catz), but others may appreciate the pleasure of the spectacle (e.g. the sudden appearance of Los Angeles Lakers stars, Johnny Cash singing in close-up, a woman bossing her family business's male-dominated board of directors, or *Columbo* entertaining children on the tuba). In such evaluative writing there is the sense of a 'taste' hierarchy – of greater and lesser or preferred and less-preferred episodes – akin to the kind of rankings by 'quality' associated with Andrew Sarris's work determining a 'pantheon' of famous directors, or *auteurs*, in the 1960s (Sarris [1962] 2004: 562; Stoddart 1995: 42–43). Analysing and hierarchising episodes via quality, then, typically reveals subjective bias, whether conscious or unconscious, on the part of the critic.

Instead, to see *Columbo* as an artefact is to interpret it with a degree of authorial intention in mind but tempered by the realities of the television industry at the time as structuring milieu. This is the benefit of considering the additional dimensions to the oft-told story of the show's genesis which were outlined above. There is no real reason, then, to assert a qualitative judgement if the emphasis is placed instead on how the show relates to its socio-historical context.¹⁴

Such an approach also provides a wider lens through which to view *Columbo* than has previously been deployed by scholars – from various disciplines – writing on the show. This book hopes to offer more in terms of *Columbo*'s negotiation of its socio-historical context than is possible when exploring one episode, 'Dagger of the Mind' (1972), for its provision of a 'fresh Shakespeare' (Jaster 1999); a more inclusive focus on the life of the show than an analysis of the friendship between Falk, Ben Gazzara and John Cassavetes on their collaborations on *Columbo* and *American Independent*

¹⁴ In Paul Hughes's *The Columbo Case Files* (2018) he states that his intention is to explore *Columbo*'s 'place in American culture' (2018: 2). Yet his manner of doing so is essentialist. For example, he explores 'paying attention and asking questions' (p. 5) but only as 'deep practices not unrelated to love' (p. 4). Again, when Hughes attempts to contextualise socio-historically around the 1970s, he explores very generalising ideas like 'health and sickness' (p. 185) or 'pride' (p. 244).

movies (Hastie 2017); a greater breadth than a study of Steven Spielberg's contribution to the series as the director of the first episode (McBride 1997; Buckland 2006; Morris 2017); and more historical contextualisation than is found in studies of the function of variation in *Columbo's* serial narrative form (Calabrese 1992: 39–40; Eco 1994: 83–100).

Finally, to begin to round off this discussion of the intervention this book looks to make, it is also worth clarifying why it does not aim to greatly influence the field of Television Studies. This is, after all, a discipline within whose distinctive history some particularly philosophical or theoretical approaches have been deployed (Gray and Lotz 2018: 8–33). The difference between the approach taken in this book and what might be considered more typical of the mainstream of Television Studies is evident if we look at the various ways of approaching television currently dominant in the field. For example, Janet Wasko's *A Companion to Television* (2010), whilst setting out to inclusively introduce the field's broad terrain, does so under headings which emphasise: 'History', 'Aesthetics and Production', 'The State and Policy', 'Commerce', 'Programming, Content and Genre', 'The Public and Audiences' and 'International Television'. Numerous other such texts reveal similar emphases, indicating that in the mainstream at present things theoretical may often tend to function in the background.¹⁵ Or at any rate, they are not foregrounded quite as they are in film-philosophy, the area in which this book situates itself.¹⁶

With this discipline specificity in mind, we might consider that there are many more typical ways to approach *Columbo* as an artefact, or object of analysis in Television Studies, than the one undertaken herein. A television historian, for example, might be interested in the question of just exactly who watched *Columbo* over the decades – what was its audience from the 1970s until the early 2000s? They might approach this question

¹⁵ Other examples reinforce this backgrounding of the theoretical. Wasko can be seen to follow Glen Creeber's *Tele-visions* (2006), in which, whilst half of the chapters deal with various ways of analysing television (including some theoretical directions), the second half indicates: audience, history, regulation, national and international, and convergence. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill's *The Television Studies Reader* (2004) has seven sections covering television's institutions, spaces, modes, production, social representation, audiences and convergence. Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz's *Television Studies* (2018) divides the discipline into four key, often intersecting, approaches: programmes, audiences, industries, contexts.

¹⁶ Harry Benshoff's 2016 introduction to film and television analysis, foregrounds theory throughout. Yet even here its final chapter, 'Contemporary Thinking on Nation, Race, Gender, and Sexuality', stops short of the concerns currently prevalent in film-philosophy (ethics, posthumanism, ecology, etc.).

by conducting archival research to seek out information regarding the show's sponsors over time, consulting the trade press, and by examining which commercials were scheduled during *Columbo*.¹⁷ This chapter contains a degree of this type of work, informed by materials from archives in the UK and the USA, even if it is not the primary focus of the book itself.¹⁸ A different type of Television Studies scholar might set up interviews with *Columbo* fans to ascertain what pleasures the show delivers, whether the emphasis was historical or contemporary. Doubtless there are many other ways of proceeding.

By contrast, this book explores *Columbo* by analysing the televisual text in its socio-historical context. Naturally, an act of interpretation of this kind is not in any way controversial. Film Studies, Television Studies and many other Arts and Humanities disciplines regularly conduct such hermeneutical work. In so doing, they follow broader shifts since the 1960s and 1970s, prompted by thinkers like Michel Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari, away from seemingly ahistorical theoretical approaches. Grounding hermeneutics in this way, analysing *Columbo* with regard to its socio-historical context, is thus not intended to be ground-breaking. Television crime drama, after all, is often interpreted with respect to its negotiation of socio-historical change. This is especially so in texts following in the wake of Charlotte Brunsdon's seminal work on the topic (2000: 195–200). Sue Turnbull, for example, in *The TV Crime Drama* (2014) emphasises the importance of understanding the genre 'at a specific moment in time and at a particular social and historical context' (p. 40). The same is true of scholarship on other televisual modes and genres, including dedicated books on discrete series like *Mad Men* (2007–2015) (such as the various collected essays in *Analyzing Mad Men* [Stoddart 2011]), as well as in work on long-running productions as diverse as the influential documentary, *Seven Up* (Bruzzi 2007) and the science-fiction children's programme (with cult following), *Doctor Who* (Leach 2009). Indeed, work on crime fiction per se, especially crime literature, also often approaches texts in this way (see Chapters 2 and 5).

The approach herein taken to *Columbo*, then, is not intended to be earth shattering, even if its recourse to philosophy is nowadays perhaps a little

¹⁷ My thanks to the anonymous Reader 2 of an early iteration of this project, who indicated what they considered were the shortcomings of the book in this respect.

¹⁸ On site in the UK, at the British Film Institute, London, July 2019 and January 2020. Off site in the USA, via correspondence with the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Moving Image Section at the Library of Congress, both January 2020.

unusual for the mainstream of Television Studies. *Columbo* is understood to be an artefact, the analysis of which reveals as much about the meaning of the programme as it does the shaping of attention in that era, the two being inextricably linked. The approach to this stems, though, from a rather different set of questions than those listed above regarding industry and audiences. The research questions propelling this work relate to attention, and stem primarily from considering the show's aesthetic aspect (i.e. what is seen on-screen). Specifically, they arose initially whilst watching *Columbo* episodes without any academic purpose in mind, simply for pleasure. In so doing, several things began to 'bother' me. I found that, like Columbo, I had 'just a few questions' to ask of the show. Accordingly, I began to watch and re-watch with these questions as my focus, analysing the entire run of *Columbo* chronologically, twice, with a critically engaged eye, to uncover the answers.

The key questions which emerged are: Why does Columbo act like he does? Why so many machines? What exactly does Columbo police? Where is LA? Together these questions inform an exploration of *Columbo*'s engagement with attention at the close of the Twentieth Century: its ability to reveal how it is shaped, and *Columbo*'s role in shaping it. Chapters 3–6 provide the answers to these questions, the Conclusion then pulling together the strands to complete the picture of *Columbo* and the transformation of attention which took place in the late twentieth century. It is in this way that the book offers something a little different in its recourse to theory. It indicates how one television show 'philosophizes' or 'thinks' this socio-historical shift in the shaping of attention. Hence we might tentatively consider this a work of television-philosophy.

Analysing a show with such a long lifespan in this way requires a flexible approach to the number of episodes explored in each chapter. Overall, the argument weaves through the entirety of the show's episodes (all sixty-nine are mentioned at some point). Some chapters focus in depth on only a couple of key episodes: providing a significant and clear comparative approach to *Columbo* across the decades and thereby illuminating the changing historical context it negotiates (Chapter 2). Others mention as many as thirty episodes as part of a wider ranging exploration of a topic like performance (Chapter 3). Some episodes may only be mentioned once, and briefly, whilst others – those which bring different aspects of the argument into clearest focus – may recur across chapters. In addition, *Columbo* is considered alongside contemporary detective shows from NBC's *Mystery Movie* wheel, including *McCloud*, *McMillan & Wife*, *Hec Ramsey*, *Banacek* (1972–1974) and *Quincy, M.E.*, as well as comparable shows of the era like *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Kojak* and *The Rockford Files*.

Thus *Columbo's* longevity informs the analysis. It indicates one key way in which its medium specificity offers insights into how attention was shaped in the late twentieth century in a manner which a film or films could not.

As noted, the intention is not to intervene significantly in Television Studies. Even so, there is a minimal contribution to that discipline. This can be seen by briefly recognising what is specific about *Columbo* as a work of television. Its longevity on-screen, which is very different from what a typical film might manage (even most franchises), is only matched by its ongoing and vibrant cult afterlife. To round out this chapter, then, let us examine how this analysis of *Columbo* does offer a little something to Television Studies, through the show's problematisation of certain aspects of now seminal definitions of cult television. This will provide a springboard into the next chapter, on the role of *Columbo's* somewhat unique narrative structure in its shaping of attention.

Columbo's Cult Afterlife

Columbo was, from its first airing, immediately popular. Both pilots performed well in the Neilson ratings, its first season placed in the top ten most watched shows, and its first four seasons helped the *Mystery Movie* wheel consistently place in the top twenty-five most watched programmes (Brooks and Marsh 1995: 1265–1266; Link 2010: 12; Lertzman and Birnes 2017: 184 and 187).¹⁹ Falk as *Columbo* soon adorned the cover of *Time*. However, in contrast to *Columbo's* popularity with the viewing public, *Columbo's* initial reviews were lukewarm.

Variety, for instance, was doubtful about the initial pilot, 'Prescription: Murder', which aired on 20 February 1968. Their review considered it to 'come across more as a padded-out hour-actioner segment than as a feature film', that the script had 'soggy stretches' and that 'more distinctive dialog and characterization might have given it more substance'. It also criticised the acting, deemed the ending 'predictable and unconvincing', and overall condemned it as having the 'slickly expensive look typical of

¹⁹ Measuring the success of *Columbo* thusly is challenging. The measurements are taken for the *Mystery Movie* wheel, rather than individual shows. We can tell that the first four seasons drew large audiences. In the sixth edition of *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows* (1995), Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh draw on the Nielson ratings to list the wheel as the 14th in the 'top-rated programs by season' for 1971–1972 (at 23.2 per cent of audience); then it jumps to 5th for 1972–1973 (24.2 per cent); at 14th for 1973–1974 (22.2 per cent); and at 22nd for 1974–1975 (21.3 per cent), after which it drops out of the top 25 (1995: 1258 and 1265–1266).

such endeavours' (Frie 1968: 38).²⁰ Yet this is curious indeed, as *The Film Daily* reported the following week that the pilot 'scored one of the most lopsided victories of the season when it more than doubled both the combined ratings and combined shares of its competition in the New York City Overnight Nielson Ratings', with a peak of a 53.6 audience share, and an average of 45.2, well ahead of the rival networks respective audience shares for their programmes (ABC had 22.2, CBS 14.7) (Anon. 1968: 3).²¹ A similar disparity was evident when the first episode of the first series (the Spielberg and Bochco episode, 'Murder by the Book'), aired in 1971. *Variety* found Falk's acting 'overdone' and his style 'predictable and repetitive', and foretold the 'one-dimensional role' would 'wear thin quickly' (Bok 1971: 24). Only a year later, however, *Variety* reported that NBC had edged ahead of CBS in the fifth week of the season-to-date Nielsen ratings, with *Columbo* specifically (now in its Sunday night spot) cited as key to this success. It was rated second in the Nielsen's ranking of 'Network's Top Shows' (with a market share of 42) at that specific moment (Anon. 1972: 33).

To be fair to the critics, *Columbo* did, quite quickly, also become a critical success. The first series garnered Emmy awards for creators, Levinson and Link, and its star, Falk (Levinson and Link 1981b: 67). Ultimately four of Falk's five Emmy wins would be for *Columbo*, and over its lifetime the show would be awarded Emmys for supporting actor (Patrick McGoohan, twice), best guest actress (Faye Dunaway), editing (Edward Abrams), cinematography (Lloyd Ahern, Harry Wolf, Richard Glouner) and best limited series (Hyatt 2006: 265; Catz 2016: 364). What this initial disparity between *Columbo's* popularity with its audience as opposed to the slightly-slower-to-catch-on critics indicates, then, is the manner in which the show resonated with viewers *in spite of* the parameters of expectation of critics. As this popularity remains in force today, what can we make of *Columbo's* ongoing appeal to its fans with regard to existing definitions of cult television?

²⁰ *Variety* is known historically for publishing reviews under pen names. Frie and Bok, cited in this chapter, are presumably examples of this.

²¹ The difference between market share and ratings is helpfully elucidated in Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc's *The American Television Industry* (2009). Both are percentages. Ratings indicate a percentage of the total number of television-owning households which tune in to a particular show, whether the television is on or off. Share indicates a percentage of the total number of television-owning households which tuned in to a specific show, out of all those in which the television was turned on. This, then, can be understood as the difference between a percentage of what is hypothetically possible (ratings) and what is possible in the reality of the moment (share) (2009: 35).

Columbo both does and does not coincide with the seminal definitions of cult television. Key thinking on cult film and television initially looked back to Umberto Eco's work, from 1985, in which he argued that a cult show,

must provide a completely furnished world so that fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspect of the fan's private sectarian world, a world about which they make up quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of the sect recognise through each other a shared expertise. (1985: 3)

From this starting point, and ensuing critique, grew initial calls in Television Studies for a more multidimensional analytic approach to understanding cult television at the intersection of texts, production context, distribution, audience reception and fan engagement (e.g. Hills 2002: 131–143; Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson 2004: x).

Immediately, it is clear that *Columbo* is neither fish nor fowl with respect to such a definition. As the show's global cult afterlife indicates, it furnishes more than enough of a complete world for fan engagement of the sort described: from quizzes to cookbook to touristic attraction statue to online watch parties (see the Introduction for the full panorama). However, what stands out from repeated consumption of *Columbo* is the *inconsistency* of this furnished world, a feature which has significance for how it shapes attention.²² This might seem a slightly perverse point to make, considering *Columbo* is a generic cop show repeating a winning formula. However, it is clearly the case that such inconsistencies appeal to fans. This is worth digging into further.

In a breakdown of the emerging ideas of cult television of the early 2000s, Matt Hills finds that, at a textual level, a 'consistent narrative world' (2004: 511) is often considered crucial to definitions of cult television. The fan community engages with an 'immensely detailed' and 'fantastic' world, of which they can only glimpse a fraction in the show itself. Around a show like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), then, we might find a 'hyperdiegesis' – an 'extended, expansive narrative world', or a 'Buffyverse' – emerging amidst the television programme, spin-offs (i.e. *Angel* [1999–2004]) and various forms of fan engagement (Hills 2004: 511). This is a function of seriality, and the consistency required when such a

²² Even without conducting the kind of fully rounded research which cult television scholars indicate as best practice, it is possible to state that *one* aspect of fan engagement is also precisely that which keeps *Columbo* from aligning with existing definitions of cult television: *textual inconsistency*.

cult universe grows through ongoing viewing of a show. This, even if it must, to retain interest, *occasionally* play with its own narrative rules (e.g. Hills notes the standout episode of *Buffy* which was performed as a musical). Again, many cult shows are fantasy or science-fiction programmes, immersion in which reveals the complex rules by which this universe functions, and often include an ‘endlessly deferred narrative’ exploring this universe. This is apparent, for example, in the continuing ‘voyages’ to ‘strange new worlds’ of science-fiction shows from *Star Trek* (1966–1969) to *Farscape* (1999–2003) and beyond (pp. 511–513).

Yet, *Columbo* does not fit this model because, rather than the ‘multiple time frames and settings’ necessary to fuel a ‘potentially infinitely large metatext’ (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson 2004: xii) as in the ‘Buffyverse’, *Columbo* offers a very different experience: no singular, coherent ‘Columboverse’, only a multiverse of infinite variations on *Columbo*. This is not a serial form, after all, it is an episodic format, and rather than occasional differences working to maintain interest (such as the musical episode of *Buffy*), here *inconsistency itself is the norm*. This is so even in spite of the formulaic nature of each episode – see the murder, watch Columbo catch the murderer. What shape does this inconsistency take?

Even whilst each episode begins anew, and is coherent to itself, episodes often create cognitive dissonance in the mind of the dedicated fan, revealing thereby the absence of any coherent and consistent fictional world encompassing the episode. For example, Mrs Columbo cannot possibly be the greatest fan of every single celebrity-murderer Columbo encounters. Columbo presumably does not have such a huge and interesting family as he describes. It is never clear if Columbo has children or not (he very occasionally indicates that he might, but on another occasion definitively states that he never did); can speak Italian or not (in some episodes he speaks Italian, in another he claims he could not master it); is aviophobic or not (sometimes afraid of flying, other times revelling in it); is happy to drink on duty or never does (he claims, and does, both); enthusiastically loves to read mystery novels or does not because he cannot figure them out (both of which he states); has had the top down on his convertible Peugeot before or not (in 1991 he claims it is the first time, but we have seen it previously in 1976); or even whether Mrs Columbo is real or not (we never see her, even if others do, and we see Columbo speak to her on the phone). Just at the narrative level, then, *Columbo* only really has coherence *within* each stand-alone episode. Across episodes it is, at best, enigmatic in terms of evidencing a coherent ‘Columboverse’. Thus whilst seminal definitions of what characterises cult television tend to exclude episodic cop shows like *Columbo* (focusing instead on textual features more normal to the science

fiction and fantasy genres), the show's cult appeal indicates that there is more to be learned here.

The recurring presence of several actors playing different roles across various episodes of *Columbo* only adds to this deliberate inconsistency. Sometimes *Columbo* episodes can appear a little like plays performed by an acting company or troupe, with roles rotating as they perform their repertoire. Actors like John Finnegan, Vito Scotti, Val Avery, Mike Lally, Fred Draper and Bruce Kirby play different parts in numerous episodes. The likes of Joyce Van Patten, Anne Francis, Mariette Hartley, Molly Hagan, Dean Stockwell, Ray Milland, Leslie Nielsen, James McEachin, Wilfred Hyde-White, Tim O'Connor and Patrick O'Neal join the show a couple of times, but again playing different parts each time. It seems unlikely that many people watching in the 1970s would have had an issue with respect to consistency of world, as the inconsistency provides enjoyment from recognition and familiarity within (generic) difference. Conversely, some less attentive viewers may simply not have spotted it at all, especially in this still just-pre-video era, consistency not necessarily being something a *Columbo* viewer may have sought in any case.

Nowadays, for dedicated fans like Sheldon Catz and Paul Hughes spotting these appearances seems to be a key pleasure, judging by the mentions that occur in *Columbo Under Glass* (2016) and *The Columbo Case Files* (2018) respectively. Similarly, on online forums, eagle-eyed *Columbo* fans have spotted numerous inconsistencies, including that the murderers in two different episodes of the first series drive the exact same Mercedes, down to its very license plate!²³ This suggests that at least *one* of the cult textual pleasures which *Columbo* offers to fans is that of seeing how the formula repeats with this evident inconsistency, creating an incoherence and discontinuity *resistant* to the construction of a coherent 'Columboverse'. How else can we assimilate that Bob Dishy appears in different episodes playing a cop working alongside Columbo, but with a different first name each time? Or, that John Finnegan appears as a colleague or seemingly a former colleague (now bar owner) of Columbo's in some episodes, whilst in others as someone employed in a completely different career (such as, amongst other roles, a security guard, a foreman on a construction site, or as an assistant director on a television set)? Compounding this sense that continuity should not be expected (but rather, that inconsistency is

²³ This piece of trivia has appeared several times on the Lt Columbo Forum for fans (part of The Ultimate Columbo Site). For example: <http://pub10.bravenet.com/forum/static/show.php?usernum=806565873&frmid=6&msgid=1298887&cmd=show> (accessed 3 January 2020).

part of the fun), the NBC *Mystery Movie* wheel provided supporting roles for various actors across the different shows. Bruce Kirby, for example, played supporting roles in both *McCloud* and *Banacek*, not to mention his appearances in *Ironside* (1967–1975), *Kojak*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *The Rockford Files* and *Delvecchio* (1976–1977). Many of these, of course, were made by Universal. Weekly viewing in the 1970s, then, may well have included the same kind of playful pleasure in recognition that fans of *Columbo* indulge in today.

In a certain sense, noting this playful inconsistency may not indicate anything more than the ‘errors’ which may inevitably creep in to long-running television shows (Nannicelli 2016: 137). As noted, Falk himself may have had to consult with Mark Dawidziak, the author of *The Columbo Phile*, once the second run began with ABC, due to details he himself could not recall from the NBC years. If anything, such inconsistencies (for example, perhaps of actor-character [Finnegan], or character name [Dishy]) simply re-emphasise the need to consider *Columbo* within its industrial context. *Columbo*, after all, was presumably not initially produced with a cult following in mind, something which has been argued for more recent programmes since the 1990s (particularly after fan intervention helped propel *Star Trek* reruns into syndication in the 1970s [Reeves et al. 1996: 28]). *Columbo*’s textual inconsistencies, we might argue, are just a product of the show’s era of production, and in this sense there is nothing remarkable about them. Indeed, there were other shows of the time in which familiar actors appear playing different characters across various episodes, so who would really care if Dishy reappears as a colleague of Columbo but with the wrong first name? This is before we even think about how fans engage with soap operas in which characters may be played by different actors, or a storyline suddenly recast as just a dream as in *Dallas* (1978–1991). Thus the in-jokes which *Columbo* very deliberately indulges in, like the referencing of other *Columbo* episodes in a way that a dedicated viewer might pick up on, can be dismissed as just that, in-jokes, rather than a deliberate, foregrounded and tongue-in-cheek play with inconsistency.²⁴ In a sense, of course, this is all true.

²⁴ For example, in the first episode of series one, ‘Murder by the Book’ (1971), one of the writing duo responsible for the (fictional) Mrs Melville Mysteries gifts a signed copy of a book to a blackmailer who has realised his guilty secret (he has murdered the other half of the writing duo). The title of the book is *Prescription: Murder*, also that of the first *Columbo* pilot. See Chapter 4 for another example of such self-referential behaviour in ‘Fade in to Murder’ (1976).

Yet for many cult shows of more recent decades the consistency of the narrative world is crucial. When such an inconsistency was deliberately introduced into *Buffy*, with the sudden arrival of Buffy's sister Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) in season five, the 'Buffyverse' accommodated it by providing an explanation for it within the diegetic world. In *Columbo*, by contrast, revelling in such inconsistency – such as when Columbo verbally introduces yet more and more family members, including a nephew who enthusiastically practices both needlepoint and weightlifting – is all part of the viewing pleasure. On the one hand this could be seen as simply noting that seminal definitions of cult television are a little limited due to their emphasis on science-fiction serials. Yet on the other, as the next chapter will explore, these inconsistencies provide an access point for our understanding of the show's shaping of attention. Namely, *there is something strategic about the play with inconsistency which is made into a feature of the show, which helps shape how we pay attention in our everyday lives.*

Think, in particular, of Mrs Columbo's deep and pre-existing fanaticism for everyone famous whom the Lieutenant meets during his investigations. This would seem to deliberately indicate the illusionary nature of the hyperdiegetic world (the 'Columboverse') which Columbo verbally conjures up by referring so frequently to Mrs Columbo and his seemingly-impossibly-large family. It is here that the narrative inconsistency points to *Columbo's* shaping of attention. Briefly for now, as the next chapter explores this in depth, it is as if each episode were a *game* which is fully reset each time a new episode starts. The next iteration of the game will contain mostly familiar content, but with some slight variations.²⁵ In this, *Columbo* is like any number of games, but an apposite comparison might be the board game *Clue* (*Cluedo* in the UK). In both *Clue* and *Columbo* we know that there will be a murder, murder weapon, location, and so on, but each time how we get to this knowledge will be different (see also Kim 2014: 1–2). Or rather, specifically in the case of *Columbo*, it is like *watching someone else play Clue/Cluedo* when you already know who the killer is, the fun being in seeing how the other players figure out what happened from the clues they find. The moments in which the inconsistency of the 'Columboverse' is revealed, then, become the running joke that validates

²⁵ This emphasis on variation is somewhat as was noted of the neo-Baroque nature of *Columbo* by Omar Calabrese in his influential book on that topic (1992), albeit he was not interested in the show's game-like quality.

this experience as being one of gaming. The viewer's attention can be distracted momentarily by the inconsistency, and this is very pleasurable, but this will likely not be for too long because what has been 'spotted' (the actor in a new role, the new reference to the family, or the fact that Mrs Columbo is the latest celebrity-murderer's biggest fan) is incidental to the process of investigation.

Thus the way in which *Columbo* offers visual pleasures to its fans sets it apart from, and illustrates something of the fault lines in, seminal definitions of cult television. A slightly different approach is needed, then, to uncover what is so appealing about *Columbo* as a cult show. Following the influential work on cult television of Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rodgers and Michael Epstein on *The X-Files* (1993–2018), *Columbo*'s shifting popularity across its lifetime and beyond – from primetime favourite, Emmy award-winning Nielsen's ratings high-achiever in the 1970s, to online streaming cult niche in the 2010s and 2020s – can be seen to reflect the industry's shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting that has occurred since the time of *Columbo*'s first appearance (Reeves et al. 1996: 24). Tellingly, this was part and parcel of the broader economic shift to post-Fordism under Ronald Reagan which occurred in the historical interstice between *Columbo*'s two runs, accompanying also a geopolitical 'displacement of cold war order by New World Disorder' (p. 24). This historical shift, taking place in the background to the last fifty years of *Columbo*'s popularity, then, also reveals how the show expresses the transformation in the way in which attention is shaped across this period (the subject of Chapter 2). *Columbo* undergoes the shift from a primetime show shaping cultural consensus to, especially after its run had finished, a cult classic for special interest audiences. Its changing role as a shaper of attention in ways which remain relevant even today thus illuminates the background socio-historical change very clearly. This is, specifically, *a change from attention in the service of national security during the Cold War* (when *Columbo* played on a major network during primetime, shaping cultural consensus nationally and even internationally), *to the increasing monetisation of attention for private gain as per Reaganomics, and the now globally prevalent understanding of neoliberalism* (as *Columbo* transfers to a more niche programming position enjoyed mostly by cult audiences as re-runs, DVDs, and through online streaming).

In arguing this, the cult status of *Columbo* is not insignificant. The longevity of the show's popularity, whilst related to the aforementioned industrial factors, is also testament to something else that is closely related to *Columbo*'s unusual structure: its game-like nature, and the importance

of inconsistency (and perhaps nostalgia) in it.²⁶ This is explored further in Chapters 2 and 6. Yet, as noted, this foray into cult television is not an attempt to intervene in the cult television debate to any real degree. After all, many of the questions which can be asked of such seminal definitions have since been interrogated, often by these same scholars (e.g. Hills 2012; Pearson 2012). The findings of this book offer at most a curious footnote to that debate. Rather, then, much as the historical contextualising of *Columbo* with respect to the US television industry and audience above is schematically included to lay the ground for the critical analysis of *Columbo*'s shaping of attention which follows (not to add great archival depth), similarly, this book does not pursue in depth the kind of analysis proposed by Hills, Gwennlian-Jones and Pearson.²⁷ Detailed accounts of *Columbo* in the manner of television history or audience reception studies will have to await the labours of others.

Even so, to recap the start of this chapter, I am broadly in agreement with the emphasis in work on cult television that what might be considered the 'mythological' notion of a cult show's origins amongst fans should be tempered by realising both the importance of its written origins *alongside* the reasons why programmes emerge when they do, looking as they do, in a complex and often-shifting industrial and socio-historical landscape.²⁸ If we do begin thus – by contextualising the oft-told story – then the ground can be established for further interdisciplinary analysis of a show like *Columbo*: as though it were an artefact able to reveal much about how the shaping of attention has transformed along with *Columbo*'s changing socio-historical context.

In sum, that some aspects of this analysis of *Columbo* may contribute something of interest to Television Studies is to be hoped for. Nevertheless, the major intervention remains in and for film-philosophy, around our understanding of how television shapes attention. Crucially though, and

²⁶ Other ideas surrounding cult television similarly fall short of explaining *Columbo*'s cult cache. For example, it does not offer the same kitsch pleasures as Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt identify of *Columbo*'s contemporary, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974–1978). As Jancovich and Hunt note, this popular primetime show of the same era has latterly gained a cult afterlife on more specialist channels. Yet, *Columbo* does not share its kitsch appeal from 'production values [which] have come to appear hopelessly outdated' (2004: 29).

²⁷ For Hills: 'an approach that recognises how cult texts, their producers, and their fans are all institutionally located' (2004: 522).

²⁸ See Hills, on how the fan community is involved in the creation of the story of a show's origination or its, as it were, *auteur* (2002: 133).

the reason for the above engagement with key aspects of the interdisciplinary terrain, this intervention can occur precisely *because* of existing work on attention in Television Studies. Rather than this book advancing Television Studies, then, Television Studies advances film-philosophy. We might even say that it creates a further work, of television-philosophy. Just how this happens is tackled in the next chapter, which also commences the analysis of how *Columbo* shapes attention.