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Defending Brideshead While Attacking the Media

Posted August 1, 2008 | 02:13 PM (EST)



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Reading news stories about politics that bungle the facts and repeat partisan talking points as if they're reasonable charges can be frustrating enough. But when you read media coverage of something truly unimportant -- like entertainment -- it can be truly maddening. Maybe it's because so much coverage of movies, music, books, TV and the like is rooted in opinion (are the three Star Wars prequels a blot on Lucas or actually wildly successful?).

Sometimes of course, the media just gets it wrong. In a New York Times business article about Steven Spielberg, they incorrectly refer to Spielberg having directed "more than 50 movies." Huh, I thought. A quick check of IMDB.com showed what happened: the reporter probably just glanced at the number of credits under "director" in Spielberg's entry and considered their work done. In fact, under "director" IMDB includes episodes of old TV shows, video games, home movies he made as a kid (Spielberg is a wunderkind but he certainly didn't direct his first feature film at 13), upcoming projects that may or may not happen and even uncredited work on the opening segments of a 1984 TV miniseries. It's a lot more accurate to say Spielberg has directed more than 25 movies, depending on how you count a segment of Twilight Zone: The Movie and TV films released theatrically overseas. But in any case, you can shout out, "You're wrong!" and feel justified. Even in entertainment news, there are such things as facts.

USA Today made a similar mistake. In covering the vampire novels of Stephenie Meyers, they compared the 8 million copies of her books sold to the "28 million" copies of Harry Potter books in print in the US by JK Rowling. Huh? That was the print edition and now online they've quietly changed it to "140 million copies" of Harry Potter books in print in the US alone. Again, unlike a movie review or a debate over whether Barack Obama is presumptuous by taking an overseas trip that John McCain previously blasted him for NOT taking, there's no question about the facts.

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Then we come to *Brideshead Revisited* and 80s TV. A new **two hour feature film** version opens wide today and while the reviews have been mostly mixed to poor (with Rex Reed notably loving the film), that's for everyone to debate. It's harder to swallow a feature in the *New York Times* that **takes a second look at the classic British miniseries and finds it wanting**. But what can you say? An opinion is an opinion. I for one prefer the British miniseries to both the new feature film AND the novel it's based on. (I enjoy **Evelyn Waugh** but much prefer his nasty satires like *Scoop* and *Decline and Fall* and the racist but funny *Black Mischief* to the more staid *Brideshead Revisited*.)

All you can do is read a review you disagree with and hope to find some whopper of an error or an opinion so out of whack it undermines what they are claiming. This review came close with one offhand reference to the fact that *Brideshead Revisited* was only a moderate success in the UK when it first aired. Really? The DVD extras vaguely refer to the miniseries being a "smash" hit in the UK. But then they also refer to the theme song hitting the Top 10 of the pop charts when it only reached #48. A quick call to the British Film Institute found no firm evidence either way though a look at some of the weekly TV charts when the miniseries first aired seem to indicate the *Times* might be right about this.

Then comes an opinion so clearly wrong, I felt another "gotcha" coming on. Writes the *New York Times*:

"It is worth considering that "Brideshead Revisited" appeared during -- to borrow a phrase of Waugh's -- the "dead years" of television. Long-form narrative had yet to wield its powerful influence on the medium. In 1982 American viewers had a choice between the sensuous exploration of love, fidelity and money that "Brideshead" provided and "The Facts of Life" (or "One Day at a Time" or "T. J. Hooker")."

Frankly, this is absurd. You might argue the jiggle years of the mid 70s were a low point for broadcast TV, thanks to hits like *Charlie's Angels* and *Three's Company*. But in fact, the end of the 70s and the early 80s were unquestionably a high point of quality television only matched by today. (And we need 100+ channels to equal what they accomplished with three -- and PBS.)

On TV in the late 70s and early 80s was *Hill Street Blues*, arguably the most influential and important TV show of all time. It was far from alone. You could also watch *St. Elsewhere*, *Fame*, *Little House on The Prairie* (quite a good show in the early years), *The Paper Chase*, *Rockford Files*, *Lou Grant* (dated but acclaimed at the time), *Rumpole of the Bailey* and the groundbreaking *Cagney & Lacey*. And sitcoms! The sitcoms of that era leave the current poor crop in the dust. *M\*A\*S\*H* had seen better days, but it was still *M\*A\*S\*H*. Then there's *Barney Miller*, *Taxi*, *Cheers*, *Buffalo Bill*, *Newhart*, *Soap*, *Fawlty Towers*, and the equally brief but equally brilliant *Police Squad*.

But why compare *Brideshead Revisited* to a sitcom like *The Facts of Life*? Perhaps because the late 70s and early 80s was a highpoint for the miniseries the likes of which we may never see again -- yet another reason why arguing that *Brideshead* only looked decent because everything around it was dreck is foolish. Other miniseries from the late 70s and early 80s include Alec Guinness's remarkably subtle work in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*, plus *Shogun*, *Holocaust*, *The Duchess of Duke St* (from the people behind the landmark *Upstairs Downstairs* of the early 70s), *Masada*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Reilly Ace of Spies* and more. Throw in TV movies and you're looking at *The Day After*, *Special Bulletin*, *The Bunker*, *A Woman Called Golda*, *Something About Amelia*, *Bill* (w Mickey Rooney), *Gideon's Trumpet* w Henry Fonda, *Guyana Tragedy* w Powers Boothe, *Friendly Fire* and *Playing For Time* w Vanessa Redgrave.

Now does that really sound like an era best exemplified by *The Facts of Life*, *One Day at a Time* and *TJ Hooker*? In fact, you have to willfully ignore the best and the brightest of the era, the most acclaimed shows and many top hits in order to pretend that 1982 was a bleak time for television. Besides, I love my twee, languid, oh so pretty miniseries *Brideshead Revisited* almost as much as I love *Hill Street Blues*, *Cheers*, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and the other brilliant TV of the late 70s and early 80s.

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This brings back a lot of memories. I loved the Brideshead Revisited series in the 80s and remember many fine programs on Masterpiece Theater when I was a kid (and a huge anglophile!) Even the silly stuff back then had better talent than what they put out there now with all of the reality shows populated by clueless (but self-promoting) wannabes and C List "celebrities".

I hung in there with TV through the 90s but I have given it up for the most part now. I still prefer British programming (excellent mystery/crime series, hilarious and truly edgy comedies and sophisticated drama) and tend to purchase series from Amazon UK on DVD or watch things online.

Perhaps I am missing something on American TV. I am certainly completely ignorant of what is on currently. But, much as I enjoyed the TV shows of my youth, I don't feel like I am missing out much lately.

And, to the poster above...thanks for reminding me of Anthony Andrews! I haven't thought of him in years and I had a huge crush on him from Brideshead! I'll have to see what he is currently up to.

[Favorite](#) [Flag as abusive](#) [Posted 08:06 AM on 08/04/2008](#)

[Michael Giltz](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Thanks for reading. I won't defend the crush of brainless reality shows, but reality has been a part of TV since Queen For A Day and This Is Your Life, so it's nothing new. And the heyday of the late 70s early 80s had silliness like Real People, That's Incredible, Those Amazing

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Animals and the syndicated In Search Of... to name just a few. And you are definitely missing out on some great TV if you stopped watching in the 90s. Whether you rent DVDs or watch online, there's a lot of terrific TV (especially since so many more channels make original programming), so catch up on the UK version of The Office, HBO's The Wire, The West Wing, Buffy The Vampire Slayer, Freaks & Geeks, Gilmore Girls and so many others. I'll assume you're on top of UK mysteries like Poirot and Wire in the Blood. (And of course the first few Prime Suspects are the best crime movies of all.) As for Anthony Andrews, he's been popping up on some of those UK shows like Miss Marple, Rosemary & Thyme and the like.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:13 PM on 08/04/2008

— **Iwaxanatroi** See Profile I'm a Fan of Iwaxanatroi [permalink](#)

See, the Times is coming from that oh so superior "I don't really watch television" mentality instead of the "i love television; there's so much good writing on it" mentality. I teach creative fiction writing and I tell my students there's an advanced level writing class on their TVs every night of the week. Of course I believe you can also learn from bad writing, but the truth is that TV scriptwriters have to produce stories that are strong enough to keep viewers from channel surfing and they have to do it within strict time limit-- except, of course, for Brideshead, which went on for at least a decade. I still remember dissolving in tears at a closing shot of Sebastian played by Anthony Andrews, then the handsomest man in the world. It was a shot of Sebastian numb-drunk and staring into space and you realized that all his bright promise was fading and would never come to anything because of his alcoholism. So how anyone put this monument of a story into a two-hour movie I have yet to fathom, but please please don't listen to the TV hating Times and go rent the thing.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:28 AM on 08/02/2008

— **Michael Giltz** See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz [permalink](#)

Thanks for the props for television. I couldn't agree with you more. I too get the feeling the TV critics for the NYT don't really watch or enjoy a lot of tv, even though there's an abundance of solid TV worth watching, if only for a time. (3 seasons of Gilmore Girls, 2 of Battlestar Galactica, 4 of West Wing and so on). If only shows knew when to stop. BUt that's antoother story. Anthony Andrews was indeed the prettiest man on the planet.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 07:56 PM on 08/02/2008

— **QueenCeleste** See Profile I'm a Fan of QueenCeleste [permalink](#)

The brilliant Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman and its hilarious spinoff starring Martin Mull, Fernwood 2Night, come to mind, as well as the drama Family. PBS's Masterpiece Theatre had one extraordinary series after another.

And I plan to see Brideshead Revisited this weekend, reviews be damned!

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:53 AM on 08/02/2008

— **Michael Giltz** See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz [permalink](#)

My friend just saw the Brideshead remake and enjoyed so hopefully you will too. Since the miniseries Brideshead was shown in the UK in 1981 and in the US in 1982, I limited myself to shows that aired from 1979 to 1982. So I didn't include Mary Hartman or the 1977 spin-off Fernwood2Nite (or Mary Tyler Moore, the greatest sitcom of all time). I wonder if Family would hold up well (I haven't watched season one on DVD yet). I loved it at the time but think it will probably be very earnest. And you can never go wrong with Masterpiece Theatre.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 07:54 PM on 08/02/2008

— **Eric8869** See Profile I'm a Fan of Eric8869 [permalink](#)

I totally agree with the inappropriateness of the comparison. The 70's had some of the best television ever - all those Normal Lear TV series about social issues no one would address in a sitcom today. Can you imagine a major sitcom about a racist being the number one comedy series now?



The 80's also had AN EARLY FROST - the first TV show to deal with AIDS/HIV - YEARS before Hollywood movies tackled the subject.

When I think of 80's television I think of Family Fare (Cosby Show, Family Ties) - delicious camp (Dynasty) and incredible mini-series (The Thorn Birds etc). All of these had things of merit - Cosby show was about parenting, Dynasty had one of the first gay characters on TV (however flawed) and the Thorn Birds tackled religion, sex and ambition.

So yes - it was a cheap shot.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:05 AM on 08/02/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

You're right about Norman Lear. All in th Family is STILL a shockingly blunt show, especially the first few years. I remember An Early Frost vividly but it came out in 1985, a little bit outside of the time period covered so I didn't mention it. The gay character on Dynasty was great...until he decided he wasn't. Thanks for reading.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 07:52 PM on 08/02/2008

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