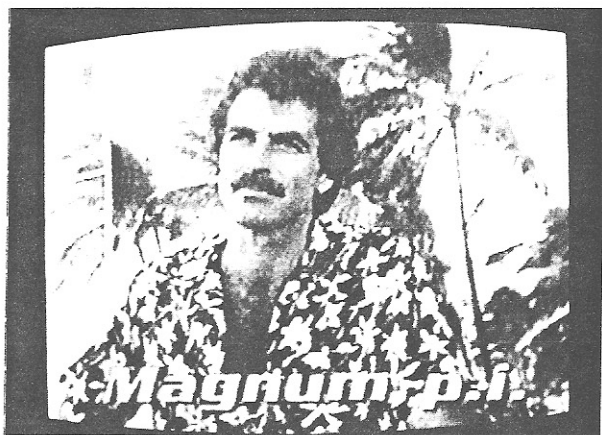


# THIGHS AND WHISKERS: THE FASCINATION OF

## 'MAGNUM, p.i.' (TELE)

BY SANDY FLITTERMAN



FAR FROM THE androgyno-erotics of a Michael Jackson, Thomas Sullivan Magnum, or Tom Selleck—this effacement of the boundaries between persona and personality is crucial—is undeniably male. His sexuality is channelled in the clearly defined cultural circuits of 'masculinity': a healthy athleticism, a jocular sense of (male) camaraderie, an easygoing virility are the attributes that cluster around his image like so many happy fans. Part of the power of this image, this *magnum opus* of masculinity, depends on the perception of both Thomas and Tom as 'regular guys', fellows who combine a strong sense of masculine capability with an endearing fallibility and awkwardness. Selleck's casual off-hand acting style is well-suited to the production of a fictional character (Magnum) whose very vulnerability makes him something of an accessible ideal. Bounding through most of the show's episodes like an affable golden retriever, Magnum the detective and Selleck the star share an all-American wholesomeness—an appeal based on astonishing good looks and self-effacing humour that has re-defined the notion of the prime-time private eye by joining a slightly embarrassed comic sense with the *machismo* of the matinee idol.

So decisively inscribed in the iconography of manliness is the Mag-

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num/Selleck image that attempts to capitalise on his star quality by means of a pin-up style photo (reclining on a hammock, elbows out and arms supporting a smiling face, high angle photography and high key lighting) have been less than successful. And no wonder – these conventions of the pin-up are traditionally almost exclusively reserved for the female. No sexual ambiguity, no confusion of gender here; in the elision of image and identity (Tom Selleck *is* Magnum) there is a fluid transfer between myth and person, character and star persona, which draws on the resources of a well-established body of cultural connotations of masculinity. While the signifying networks of gender representation involved in both television and cinema produce images of sexual identity which traditionally associate the figure of the woman with mystery – the ineffable unknown – ‘masculinity’ seems far less troubling. The representations of the Magnum/Selleck figure reinforce this conclusion: to the troubling indeterminacy of femininity (woman as a riddle, a problem, a source of anxiety... more on this later) is counterposed the stabilising security, the comforting precision of a clearly defined configuration of masculine attributes.

This suggests that the fascination of the programme *Magnum, p.i.* lies in something other than the commonly assumed beefcake appeal of its star. For although Selleck (and his body) are undeniably displayed as libidinal spectacle, the episodes of *Magnum, p.i.* continually manipulate – play upon – cultural constructions of masculinity; it is almost as if, in each episode, Thomas Magnum is the figure around which various reflections on masculine encoding and identity circulate. And it is this parodic, semi-ironic stance which functions to problematise the look at the male body, thereby rendering it infinitely more complex.

In his illuminating discussion of ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’<sup>1</sup> Steve Neale asserts that the male body is often ‘feminised’ when it functions as the object of an erotic look. Because the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema (and here I’m extrapolating to television) is implicitly male, he concludes, ‘erotic elements involved in the... male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed’<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in relation to men there is a ‘refusal to acknowledge or make explicit an eroticism that marks... [the functions of] identification, voyeuristic looking and fetishistic looking’.<sup>3</sup> I will argue, however, that something of the opposite occurs in *Magnum, p.i.* Here the erotic elements are instead exaggerated, foregrounded, exploited. The force of Magnum’s image, precisely his power as spectacle, is mobilised in order to play off representations of masculinity against one another, to engage in a play of cultural meanings and definitions of sexuality. Far from repressing the erotics of the gaze, the structures of fascination in looking at the male body are utilised in order to permit this signifying articulation; this in itself is a decisive element in the show’s popularity. It is this diversion, a significant derailing of the libidinal gaze which nonetheless depends on the maintenance of its erotic power, which generates the fascination of *Magnum, p.i.*

In terms of the male image, where Neale sees homosexuality as an undercurrent in need of constant repression, a very different kind of process is activated by Magnum, who is *both* decidedly masculine and decid-

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Neale, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’, *Screen*, November–December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 2–16.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p 15.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Morse, 'Sport on Television: Replay and Display', in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Regarding Television, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 2*, University Publications of America, 1983, pp 44-66.

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edly on display (always keeping in mind that notions of the 'masculine' are constant constructions across a body of social practices and discourses, rather than perpetually enduring essences). Perhaps, as Margaret Morse notes in relation to televised sports, an emphasis on *display* may indicate important changes in cultural notions of masculinity, changes in 'the collective identifications or "social imaginary" which project and reinforce what it is to be a man'. 'Perhaps', she adds, 'males are on their way to becoming as dependent on "image" as females'.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, the eroticism involved in looking at Tom Selleck/Thomas Magnum is in this sense *not* repressed, but somehow exacerbated (played out) in order to allow the *Magnum, p.i.* series itself to reiterate continually the parable of masculinity.

## I.

It seems that a short summary might be in order here for those who do not share the engaging obsession of some twelve million viewers in the United States. (Since its première in December of 1980, *Magnum, p.i.* has remained among the ten top-rated shows on US television.) The basic plot of the series acts as a framework for the various weekly episodes. The show is set in Hawaii; its central character is a private investigator who has worked in US naval intelligence and has seen combat as a US Navy SEAL (the naval equivalent of the Green Berets) during the Vietnam War. In exchange for providing security on the fabulous grounds of celebrated (and always absent) novelist Robin Masters' estate, this investigator, Thomas Magnum, receives lodging, the use of Masters' Ferrari, and assorted amenities connected with the millionaire's life. Jonathan Higgins (played by John Hillerman), a former sergeant-major in the British Army with a penchant for rambling recollections of his service in the name of the Empire, is the estate's major-domo. Apollo and Zeus, two Doberman pinschers, sleek as seals, guard the grounds and express a peculiar animosity toward Magnum, an irritation which is an extension of the mutually annoying relationship between Magnum and Higgins. Rounding out the cast of regulars are two of Magnum's Vietnam War buddies, TC (Roger E Mosley), who owns a small island-hopping helicopter service, and Rick (Larry Manetti), who manages the beachfront King Kamehameha Club.

The *Magnum, p.i.* series takes its place in a long tradition of private eye programmes, many of which are set in exotic locales. But although its surface format (crime-stopping investigator, high speed car chases, compulsory shoot-outs, action-packed scuffles, and some light romance and humour) links it to a history nearly as old as broadcast television as we know it (NBC's *Martin Kane*, *Private Eye* was introduced in September of 1949), it is clearly distinguished from both its predecessors (*Surfside 6*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Streets of San Francisco*, *Hawaii Five-O* and *The Rockford Files* – the latter two to which it is often compared) and subsequent shows with similar preoccupations (*Riptide*, *Matt Houston*,

*Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Knight Rider, The Fall Guy, Simon and Simon*). The most obvious and thus easily notable distinguishing characteristic is the masculine magnetism of its star, which functions, as I have noted, as a sort of pivot for the repeated reflection on the social construction of gender. This, of course, is only possible because the Magnum/Selleck image is somehow larger than life, somehow transcends the generic definitions of the private eye. *People Magazine* unwittingly crystallised it by describing him as a 'combination of a man's man and a lady's dream', signalling the realm of the ideal into which Magnum/Selleck (as both fictional character and as star) easily settles. Unthreatened about his masculinity, and therefore unaffected by the need to defend it, he functions at once as identification figure and desired object. Thus the combination of personality traits (vulnerability, friendliness, a disarming accessibility) and idealised aspects produces an interesting dialectic: Tom Selleck conveys an impression of continual availability while remaining utterly unattainable.

The series didn't always have this unique emphasis, however. It began in the conventional mould; yet as the show progressed, the focus of attention on Magnum himself – and his particular combination of boyishness and masculine strength – increased. Selleck figures in almost every sequence of every episode; the cases where this is not true stand as noticeable aberrations. The hermeneutics of the detective-show format gradually became a kind of alibi, a pretext for the spectacle of masculinity offered by the programme's star. Thus each guest, each riddle to be solved, eventually provided a kind of showcase designed to display the specific attributes of the hero, such that the more riveting perambulations of Magnum himself (Magnum getting out of the Ferrari and striding to an investigative locale, Magnum emerging from the water and loping along the beach, Magnum traversing the expansive Hawaiian estate while musing in voice-over about some perplexing detail) began to take precedence over the more traditional modes of narrative complication.

Two developments marked this transformation: while Selleck was giving his character emotional depth and perfecting a self-mocking, slightly flustered style, the writers were creating episodes more clearly designed around the visual elaboration of the hero. The original Magnum of the pilot was the epitome of the conventional, aggressively slick James Bond character, whose highly codified behaviour worked well with a series based on formulaic action and adventure. The second pilot, however, focused on a much less perfect hero (Selleck himself is credited with the changes), and while vestiges of traditional private eye iconography appear in early episodes, the major thrust of the programme's four-year history emphasises (and here I'm quoting Margaret Morse again) the 'shared cultural ideal of masculinity... an *image* of fascination, the perfect machine of a body-in-motion choreographed... as a vision of grace and power'<sup>5</sup>.

I should add that, interestingly enough, the fallibility of the modified Magnum is linked to an increasing sensitivity and respect toward women. Where a 1980 CBS press release referred to the hero as a

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp 44, 45.

connoisseur of 'fast cars and beautiful women', as someone who enjoyed a 'rakish and unorthodox lifestyle', most subsequent episodes demonstrate instead Magnum's appreciation of women as complex and interesting human beings. Magnum still drives the Ferrari, but the somewhat dubious conditions under which he does so are frequently referred to, as in the admonishment by Higgins in one episode: 'You continue to drive a car that you do not own, do not rent, and do not even wash'. Likewise, the sexism of the original hero is relegated to the level of caricatured reputation; in one episode a young woman, an expert equestrian, says to Magnum: 'I heard you were a womaniser, a *roué*. But the moment I met you, I knew you were no *roué*. You have the kindest eyes I've ever seen'. The women in the various sequences are writers, marine biologists, doctoral candidates, journalists, teachers, ballerinas and the like; the episodes explore a kind of psychological depth in these relationships that would be impossible for the practitioner of CBS's 'rakish lifestyle'. More often than not, Magnum *diverts* the women's attraction for him, turning them down in the name of some new awareness of their own career motivations and goals.

What seems to be in operation here is a kind of transfer of sexual energy, in this case a re-channelling of the negotiated erotics of television viewing; Magnum is partly transformed from a dashing macho-mythical figure with which a largely male audience can identify, into a desired and desirable object whom mostly female viewers can long to possess. This psychic collusion of being and having within a single potent figure at once collapses the distinction between traditionally gendered subjectivity and objectivity, identification and desire, and blurs the boundaries between erotic identity and object choice as forms of visual pleasure. Magnum's double narrative status as both subject and object thus increases his position of fascination, a fascination which is reinforced by his constant visual presence in every episode.

This shift in what Magnum himself represents (and the concomitant psychic richness for the spectator) entails a shift in audience as well. Another way to account for the programme's popularity, then, is to take into consideration the preponderantly female audience which is added to the traditional viewership of private eye shows. Obviously, the question of audience is extremely complicated, but what I'm suggesting here is that the programme's popularity with women is based on something more than pure erotic appeal. It has to do with the interesting reversal involved in this transfer from the subject of desire to desired object. Whereas an object of identification is traditionally endowed with an aggregate of features, an object of desire is the result of some reifying process of objectification. However, with Magnum the move from identification figure to desired object carries with it an *increase* in dimensions. Thomas Magnum, then, is a *multi-faceted* desired object, one who somehow escapes reification and is all the more desirable because of this. It is something of a paradoxical reversal, then, for as the Magnum *character* becomes more three-dimensional in the traditional realist sense (more sensitive to women, more fallible and flustered), the Magnum

It is therefore possible to see two parallel factors accounting for the magnetism of *Magnum, p.i.* both the result of a studied emphasis on the Magnum/Selleck figure and the visual pleasure evoked: 1) The show differs in focus from other private-eye adventure programmes (while at the same time capitalising on the wide audience available to this enduring television form), and 2) Magnum himself represents a different type of masculine hero (who both encompasses and re-works the traditional characteristics of the private investigator). As the playful title to my article indicates, a certain erotic appeal associated with Selleck's body gained iconic precedence as the series progressed. This can be charted in each episode by the increasing preponderance of shots of Selleck, matched only by the decrease in romantic involvements of any kind for him. (This does not necessarily mean that episodes evoking Magnum's love-life have not been aired; rather, instead, the few shows that do involve this – Magnum with his lovely and tragically irretrievable Vietnamese wife, Magnum with his adorable and keenly attracted first client, Magnum with his mysterious and captivating Asian girlfriend from the past – are not the programme's norm.) As the episodes turned more conclusively around the idealised image of masculinity that the Magnum/Selleck figure represents, the programmatic and conventional 'sex appeal' effects – such as those offered by bikini-clad beach bunnies of the sort that populate more overt male-fantasy action programmes such as *Riptide* and *The Fall Guy* – began to disappear. And concomitant with this was a noticeable change in Magnum's wardrobe: casual slacks and polo shirts gave way to tank tops and shorts or swimming trunks, marking the transfer from a commodified sexuality both exploitative of and repugnant to women, toward an elaboration of the gaze whose object was an image of masculine power and perfection.

In other words, to return to my point of departure, it should be clear by now whose thighs, what whiskers are evoked in my title. Augmenting the repetitive emphasis on the programme's star are two recurring types of shots which appear in nearly every episode, each designed to maximise the impact of Selleck's visual magnificence. The first, a medium long-shot, usually depicts Magnum walking out of the blue waters of the Pacific after a contemplative swim. (The same effect is sometimes accomplished through shots of Magnum striding in shorts or cut-offs.) The accompanying voice-over provides narrative anchoring for what would otherwise be an instance of pure erotic display. The second type of shot, a close-up, usually in low angle with a breezy blue sky as background, emphasises three of Selleck's characteristic facial traits, the green eyes, craggy dimples, and golden, shaggy moustache (with its connotations of sensuality and masculinity). Both types of shots – the thighs and the whiskers – make the most of natural elements (wind, surf, sand, sunshine) to enhance the image, confirm the idealisation of Selleck/Magnum's figure and physique. But where the first type of shot usually distances this image through the use of somewhat ironic narration ('I know

what you're thinking . . .', etc), in a sense articulating the visual with verbal discourse, the second type of shot more readily provides the viewer with unmediated access to the image, obliterating the distance between viewer and viewed and absorbing the viewer in specular desire.

## II.

*Magnum, p.i.* is basically an all-male show, but not all of its leading men share Selleck's luminous position. In fact, as I noted at the outset, each of the other characters represents one or two components of the masculine image of which Thomas Magnum is the sum total and idealised whole. And in their partial, stylised representations of gender codification, all three of the surrounding males – TC, Rick and Higgins – fall quite short of the vaguely Aryan ideal suggested by Magnum himself. TC, the Black helicopter mechanic, is a paragon of physical strength, as evidenced every week by the presentational shot of his emphatic musculature in the opening credit sequence. 'Rick', as his nickname indicates (Orville is his actual name), is a nightclub operator who continually postures and parodies the smooth, unflappable toughness of a Bogie character. This, too, is iconically signified in the credit sequence, where Rick either tips his hat or poses in a snazzy suit (depending on the season to which the episode belongs). Actually, what remains of the Bogart parody is a toned-down version of the original Rick character. Donald Bellisario, *Magnum's* executive producer and co-creator with Glen Larson, has both written and directed episodes. He initially had Rick invent the Bogie persona to hide his terror in Vietnam. The network complained about the character's bad Bogart imitations, not realising that they were intentional, and all that remains now are innuendos, vestiges of this attempt to align personality with cultural myth. Finally, Magnum's bantering adversary, the overwhelmingly British Jonathan Higgins, veers between obsessive propriety and excessive gallantry, his suave sophistication and urbanity acting as a foil to Magnum's all-American naturalness, ease and spontaneity.

This shorthand characterisation and embodiment of masculine traits is further elaborated by an episodic narrative structure which continually puts these representations into play. While it is true that the episodes usually involve some sort of criminal activity and investigative chase – missing persons, suicides, drug deals, political assassination attempts, jewel heists, corporate embezzlement, military espionage, kidnappings, robberies, and the like – there are really only a few basic plot types for the series, each of which in some way demonstrates, reflects upon and manipulates codes of masculinity. The episode entitled 'I Witness', for example, is something of an affectionate parody along these lines. One of the few programmes which does *not* revolve around Magnum himself, it concerns a closing-time hold-up of the King Kamehameha Club at which Rick, TC and Higgins are all present. Magnum's help is enlisted to solve the crime, and the episode consists of all three men's conflicting descriptions, each flashback representing the self-perception of the char-

acter whose version it is, and making the heroics depend entirely on an exaggeration of that character's manly virtues.

Concomitant with his Bogie image, Rick's version has him emerging as the tough-guy hero while TC is more concerned with trying to seduce an uninterested woman and Higgins falls prey to a flood of babbling verbiage as he obsessively and characteristically recalls instances of his own military heroism. TC's version has him invited for a nightcap by the same woman (she now has a PhD in economics) who finds him 'enlightened, compassionate, and socially wise'. Here, he is a picture of masculine strength and composure next to Rick's cowardly trembling and Higgins' frightened delirium. In his version, Higgins, of course, is the image of nobility amid writhing chaos; he deals with the situation with 'aplomb, alacrity, and experience'. He reasons with the culprits and finally resorts to an expert display of karate to bring the situation under control. The entire episode, then, is a narrational version of a macho-competition, each contestant fashioning an ideal self-image through discourse in order to illustrate his prowess. Magnum, who for all purposes has been absent from a good three-quarters of the episode, solves the crime and emerges as the true hero, untainted by the need either to defend or display his masculinity. And the audience, in its turn, experiences a good deal of pleasure (I hesitate to say having its cake and eating it) both enjoying the manliness that Magnum represents and participating in a distanced critical appraisal of masculine behaviour.

What 'I Witness' parodies, the rest of the episodes articulate in a more serious way. A typology of narrative motifs illustrates the few basic themes (all dealing with representations of masculinity) around which the different shows cluster, regardless of their surface narrative effects. Some episodes deal with investigative involvements with women, putting Magnum in a situation of *displaced* romance in relation to a woman who has disappeared at the beginning of the programme ('Wave Good-bye', 'Skin Deep'). Others are genre parodies ('The Black Orchid', 'The Return of Luther Gillis') in which the conventions of *film noir* or TV private-eye programmes are playfully examined. Still others turn on the placing of sexual codes in crisis, as when a political assassin disguises himself as a woman in order to pass unnoticed ('The Jororo Kill'). Then there are the episodes which clearly incorporate a romantic motive; these, significantly, do not involve Magnum in the amorous relationship. In the 'romance trilogy' (my term), all three of the male characters - Rick, TC, and Higgins - fall in love with women who are each particularly suited to their specific masculine attributes and needs. Magnum, however, only figures investigatively, exploring each episode's narrative complications while leaving romance behind. In 'Woman on the Beach', Rick falls in love with a ghostly apparition, a woman who uncannily disappears as soon as Rick gets close; 'Letters to a Duchess' allows Higgins to enact his ideal of gallantry and manners; and 'Paradise Blues' finds TC overpowered by a fatal attraction for a self-destructive woman whom he had known in Vietnam.

More recently, there has been a preponderance of episodes of male camaraderie in which female characters are excluded altogether. Instead



This association is augmented by the fact that in his voice-off monologues Magnum incessantly refers to Hawaii as an elusive and seductive woman, indulging paradisiacal fantasies and caressing all with her fascinating visual opulence. But it is not simply this exotic and erotic appeal which confers on Hawaii a sexualised feminine identity; something of the heterogeneity of her cultural richness (in 1891, when Queen Liliuokalani attempted to end foreign influence on the islands, there were Americans, British, Germans, Chinese and Portuguese in addition to the native Hawaiians of Polynesian descent), a marginalised play of differences against the asserted stability of fixed poles, locates the signifiers of Hawaii in the realm of the cultural connotations of the feminine. A land of contrasts – orchids and volcanoes, rugged cliffs and smooth sandy beaches, rich indigenous cultures and Western imperialist influences – Hawaii is posed as a marginal locale, an insular ‘dark continent’ halfway between the East coast of Southeast Asia (say, Vietnam) and the west coast of the US (say, Malibu). The *Magnum, p. i.* series takes this complexity as its formative matrix: whereas Magnum himself represents a stabilised resolution of these contradictions (a Vietnam veteran with a Californian ethos who in a sense takes charge of the miniature imperialist enclave), the mystery and romance of the islands, their intersection of mysticism and concrete historical facts, remain perpetually in flux, perpetually elusive but always there, permeating the text of each episode.

### III.

An episode entitled ‘Woman on the Beach’ offers another variation on this archetypal polarity, one in which the masculine and feminine principles are embodied in the characters themselves. The episode involves the pursuit of an elusive female figure and the investigation into her mysterious death some 35 years earlier. In accord with the prohibition on romantic involvement for Magnum, Rick is the one who falls in love with the enigmatic Sarah, while Magnum, out of friendship, attempts to discover her secret. It is an episode rich with allegorical possibilities: a resolute and forceful masculine figure pursues an image of woman as other – veiled, perplexing, fleeing, unattainable. This is encapsulated in a cogent metonymy at one point in the episode: a gardener (on the grounds where Magnum has followed the woman) knocks Magnum unconscious and removes first his baseball cap, then the gauzy scarf he is clutching. Cap and scarf, punctual evocations of masculine pursuer and vanishing, evanescent female, signify what this emblematic episode (and by extension, the series) turns on. For it is precisely this circulation of symbolic figures – an appealing and infinitely available masculine figure, a baffling, equivocal woman with whom all relationship is an impossibility – which both permits and ensures the perpetual focus on Magnum as libidinal object.

The episode is distinguished by a remarkable coherence and unity; its sophisticated structure involves the varied reiteration of several basic narrative situations. Briefly, Rick meets the attractive and mysterious

'Sarah Clifford' at the King Kamehameha Club after he has been stood up by a date and ribbed by his unsympathetic comrades. A walk on the moonlit beach produces no insight into her tragic past; in fact, she literally disappears when Rick turns his head, leaving him bereft and hopelessly in love. Magnum decides to help, and his investigation leads to shipping magnate Henry Ellison's office, where he and Rick learn that the woman Rick met died 35 years earlier. Intrigued by this hint of the supernatural, Magnum goes out to the old Clifford estate only to find the veiled and silent woman leading him on a chase through the grounds, from the tennis court to the hothouse and finally to the potting shed. Further investigation leads to Lisa Page, a woman remarkably like the baffling Sarah and someone capable of at least partially clarifying the situation. She is the niece of Sarah Clifford and, unwilling to believe that her disappearance was a suicide, she is writing a book about her aunt. When Magnum and Rick find the filmy veils of 'Sarah Clifford' in Lisa's house, she furiously orders them to leave. Perplexed by the scarf he has found at the potting shed, Magnum enlists Rick and TC; they discover a skeleton buried at the very spot where the scarf was found. By this time it has become clear that Ellison, an unsuccessful suitor, had murdered Sarah and is now intent on eliminating Lisa. He visits her house, makes her dress up in the veils, takes her to the Clifford estate and then chases her with the aim of killing her too. Magnum and Rick arrive in time, of course, and Lisa is saved.

But it is the final sequence which provides a unique and startling twist. Lisa and Rick, Magnum and TC are sharing drinks at the Club when Lisa admits to having dressed up as Sarah, but denies leading Magnum to the hothouse (etc). Magnum, having 'had enough ghost stories for this week', goes to the beach for a contemplative smoke. Suddenly, Sarah appears, her face half hidden in the shadows. But as Magnum looks off to confirm that Lisa is actually at the table with Rick, the woman vanishes. All that meets Magnum's astonished return gaze is the empty shore, the waves catching the moonlight in such a way as to shimmer like Sarah's veil.

The episode is structured around the three reiterative chase sequences (plus a coda) in which the veiled, enigmatic female figure (each time an avatar of the same fundamental feminine persona) escapes a masculine pursuer, variously portrayed as threatening or benign, visible or unseen. Each chase defines and then restructures a relationship to a woman: she is in some sense the object in all three, while the pursuer of each varies. The first chase is the initiating flashback; opening the episode, it depicts Sarah's actual death in the summer of 1945. Yet the assailant is present only as a point of view, and the particulars of the chase and murder are left obscure. In the second chase, Magnum pursues Lisa who is dressed up as Sarah, though the episode's conclusion forces a reinterpretation of this chase as that between Magnum and a ghost. The third chase involves Lisa and Ellison; here, while the exact identity of both pursuer and pursued is known, the pursuit is more complicated because, in a sense, Ellison is chasing *both* Sarah and Lisa, while Magnum and Rick

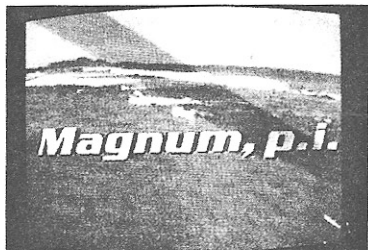
<sup>6</sup> Here again the important slippage between character and star persona comes into play: Tom Selleck, a California 'golden boy' from the San Fernando Valley, is an avid athlete who played basketball on his college team (though he was equally skilled at baseball). His early acting roles capitalised on this aura of athleticism. In 20th Century Fox's 1969 prime-time soap-opera experiment, *Bracken's World*, Selleck played one of the volleyball regulars at the talent teacher's Malibu beach house. And in *Coma* (1978), Selleck's character, suffering from a knee injury during a touch football game, dies in the opening sequence; the fact that this untoward accident occurs to such a healthy physical specimen provides the first signal that something is very wrong in the hospital.

there is an emphatic concentration on sports, male bonding, and masculine pursuits. (Interestingly enough, the episodes that most deeply explore the effects of the Vietnam War and the range of experiences taken up with it, do not fall into this category. Vietnam flashbacks are much more likely to appear in episodes in which the ghosts of the past swirl into present-day complications, evoking the war as a complex of interminable effects and consequences.) The male camaraderie episodes instead revolve around softball games, bare knuckle boxing, football and baseball enthusiasm (Magnum's ubiquitous Detroit Tigers cap), surf skiing or endurance sports like the Iron Man competition (though these last two involve an ironic undercutting of Magnum's athletic capabilities).<sup>6</sup>

But what of romance? Surely if *Magnum, p.i.* were nothing more than a narrativised spectator sport, the impact of the widespread female viewership which it enjoys would be diminished considerably. While there is certainly a surfeit of scopophilic pleasure involved in the sports episodes in particular, the attraction of these viewers seems to depend on something else in addition. As I noted before, much of the fantasmatic power of the Magnum figure depends on the constructed impression of Magnum/Selleck as infinitely available, depends on displacing or diverting his romantic involvement. It is in this context that Hawaii, eternally exotic, mysterious and seductive, can be seen to function as something more than a simple setting for the action, providing something other than background locale. For it does not seem impossible that the land of Hawaii itself, in this context, works as a signifier of the feminine, a female icon which plays counterpart to Magnum's instantaneous and stylised representation of the male.

The scenic extravagance and lush natural beauty of Hawaii with its abundant connotations of exoticism and sensuality are evoked repeatedly, even before the weekly episode begins, by the programme's opening credits. In several of the title shots a helicopter swoops over a green wilderness of mountains covered with tropical foliage, races over glistening tidelines with their lunar rhythms, soars over fertile valleys through intense, sunny skies. The driving yet lyrical beat of the theme music adds to the feeling of transport associated with Hawaii's mystique, its lure as tropical paradise. These are the same credits which depict Magnum, in almost half of the 35 shots, in a litany of characteristic appearances, a typage of masculine modes: Magnum in the Ferrari, Magnum on the beach, Magnum in Vietnam, Magnum goofing off, Magnum in dress uniform, Magnum in cut-offs, Magnum in the jungle, Magnum in the chopper. . . . Each micro-situational unit, serialising the image of Tom as image, teases us with narrative possibilities and whets our appetite for more. Women, however, are almost entirely absent from this introduction (there are only two shots of women, and they are exceedingly difficult to discern – one is obscured by scuba gear, the other only partially visible in the ocean). Thus here in the credits, to the definitiveness of the repeated assertion of the masculine icon is juxtaposed an aura of majestic natural splendour, evoking the pervasive sense of mystery and romance that is traditionally associated both with Hawaii itself and with the feminine figure.

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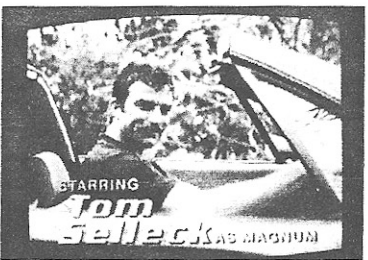
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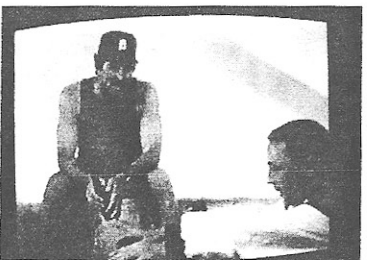
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The masculine hero in the feminine tropics: shots from the *Magnum, p.i.* title sequence.

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<sup>7</sup> The *Magnum P.I.* music is by Mike Post and Pete Carpenter, the same men responsible for the music on *Rockford Files* and *The A-Team*. The Post-Carpenter music is the same for action sequences in most episodes of all three shows – *domp da da bomp damp damp* – but *Magnum's* music uses bongo drums, tambourines, guitars for variety and 'Hawaiian-ness'.

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are chasing Ellison. I will discuss the final vision of the woman, the coda, below.

If each of the chase sequences involves a different version of the female character, in terms of the narrative they are, in fact, different women. It is due to the consummate skill of Judith Chapman that each one – Sarah, Lisa, the ghost – is characterised by completely distinct voice modulations, facial expressions, and mannerisms which contribute to the notion of very separate personalities. The Sarah of the flashback is playful, spirited and slightly naive, while Lisa is strident, determined and confident; the spectral Sarah is mysterious, somewhat tragic and ultimately seductive. Yet in spite of this significant variation, it is part of the force of the final sequence to restore this variety to a totalising signifier of an elusive female presence. The rhythmic repetition of the chase sequences contributes to this, masking the difference of the individual female characters with an overlay of similarity and redundancy.

The opening sequence, anchored temporally by the title 'Summer 1945', offers the woman as victim before any narrative psychology or motivation can provide her with a substance. At first it is an idyllic image: to the period strains of 'Satin Doll' and the gentle sounds of a cocktail party, a young woman in white runs happily in the shadows to meet her lover. She is figured in an almost abstract play of light and shadow as she darts about the foliage. Her expression turns to one of fear as she realises that the man in the darkness is her attacker, and as the pursuit heightens, non-diegetic music begins. This is the first in a series of musical accompaniments that mark all three of the chase sequences; all are variations on the credits theme music, using brass, percussion, muted horns and kettle drum to punctuate the suspense.<sup>7</sup> This first chase provides an almost minimalist opening to the episode, using elliptical elements such as footsteps (of the unseen attacker), cries for help, close-ups of the locked shed door, off-screen sounds of struggle, to indicate almost hieratically the commission of a crime and the installation of the original trauma which sets the episode in motion. Structurally, this is the antecedent history of the episode, something that will henceforth not be figured, but will continue to haunt the actions of the characters as primary motivation, the fantasmatic generator of the fiction.

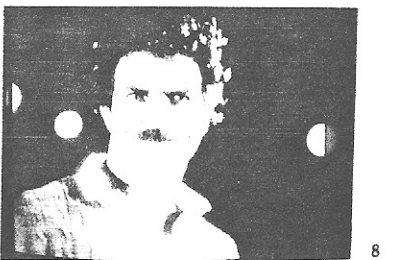
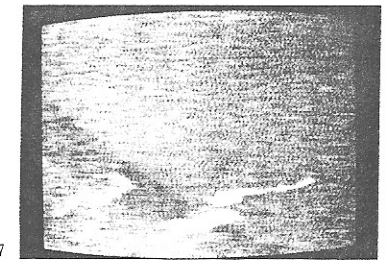
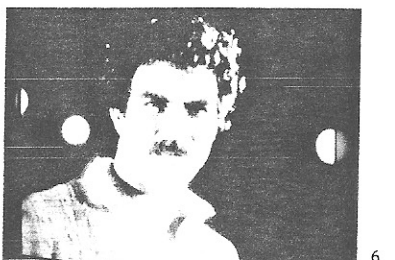
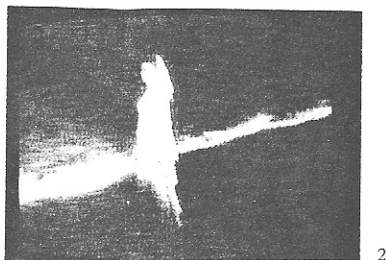
The second chase occurs when Magnum visits the Clifford estate. His characteristic voice-off opens the sequence when suddenly, in a condensation which associates woman, veil, mystery and music, 'Sarah' appears – her face obscured – and leads him through the murderous trajectory of the opening sequence. There are significant differences, however. This chase occurs in daylight, and the pursuer is fully in view. The spectator has a detached position outside the action – watching Magnum chasing and watching – while the first sequence was mainly depicted from within the attacker's point of view. Thus it is the *spectacle* of the chase, posing male and female archetypes in a symbolic situation, which characterises the interest of this sequence. The chase ends as Magnum picks up the scarf, an expression of confusion on his face. This close-up prefigures the important concluding shot of the episode, an indication of Magnum's bafflement in the face of the mystery of woman. A commercial break

separates the chase from the crucial exchange which follows, pivotal in that it counterposes a mysterious and cryptic woman with the affable and ironic Magnum in a paradigm of frustrated communication which underlines their impossible coupling.

The third chase occurs in daylight as well, but the orchestration of archetypes is now replaced by fully developed characters: we have a more complete view of Lisa's face and her assailant, Ellison, has the psychology, motivation and representation that he lacked in the first sequence. As with the two previous pursuits, the musical variation of the credits theme and the lack of spoken dialogue emphasise the spectacle of the chase, minimalising extraneous detail and heightening crucial elements of the narrative situation. Thus in a nightmare reiteration of the original crime, Ellison (a phantom assailant in the first chase) is about to murder Sarah's 'double' who has returned to haunt him. The sequence is resolved when Lisa runs into Rick's arms and Magnum exchanges shots with Ellison.

It is Magnum's final vision of the woman which gives the episode both its title and its uncanny power. As he stands on the beach, only the sounds of the wind and the waves are audible. Suddenly, a close-up reveals an expression of surprise, and the corresponding reverse shot, punctuated by a lyrical oboe, offers a spectral vision of 'Sarah', her face half hidden in the shadow, the moon caressing her with luminous highlights. The play of light and shadow on her face and veil, the white orchid in her hair, are elements which link this apparition to the original vision of Sarah. It is thus both the return of the repressed history of Sarah and the impossible vision of an unattainable female. When Magnum looks over at Rick and Lisa, they kiss and accomplish what he cannot. He returns his gaze to the shore only to find the woman disappeared, present only in the flickering traces of moonlight on water. The final shot is a close-up of Magnum with an endearing expression of bemused disbelief, a characteristic look that invites a relation with the spectator. For it is only fitting that in the absence of the vanished woman, the spectator feels called upon to fill the void, return the gaze and acknowledge the rapport.

In 'Woman on the Beach' the question of the past, the 'truth' of history, is intimately bound up with the question of femininity. For just as Lisa assumes a masquerade in order to discover the reality of her aunt's death, so does Magnum pursue the mysterious woman in order to solve the crime. The ghost of Sarah is the least substantial, the most 'dressed up' of the female avatars and, as such, the flower and the veil become important cultural signifiers of the mystique of femininity. The mystery of Lisa's identity, then, is the mystery of Sarah, and Magnum's pursuit of the one leads to a certain knowledge about the other. But – importantly – the truth of the murder leaves the meaning of the woman unresolved, and in fact complicates it: the ghost is finally *more* perplexing, the woman even more intriguing, a composite of the different female representations that have preceded her. Thus the farther Magnum's quest, the deeper into the past and the closer to the truth he gets. But to the degree that the hermeneutic truth – the truth of the murder – becomes



The lady vanishes: the final vision on the beach.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Upon Leaving the Movie Theater', in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (ed), *Apparatus*, New York, Tanam Press, 1980, p. 2.

exposed, the 'truth' of the woman becomes more insubstantial, fleeting and evanescent. The 'reality' of Sarah, in terms of her death, is gradually revealed through the discursive reconstructions of her past, the various narratives that thread together the circumstances of her life. But once this question is answered, the riddle of femininity remains; the enigmatic question that frustrates all investigative attempts endures. The 'real' Sarah is beyond resolution, a phantom on the beach that any woman can become.

#### IV.

'Woman on the Beach' deals with what Magnum himself, extrapolating from Higgins, refers to as a coincidence of 'family scandal, *affaire de coeur*, and links with the netherworld'. When seen from a slightly different optic, this is quite a precise, if unwitting, formulation of the family/desire/phantasm constellation at the very core of the television apparatus itself. For, as Roland Barthes reminds us, television is, in its institutional form, first and foremost a family affair, a 'household utensil' which has supplanted the hearth as familial locus, though what is represented is not always – nor even primarily – family romance.<sup>8</sup> And from the perspective of spectatorial desire, the texts of television are always, in some sense, affairs of the heart, desiring productions which repeatedly and variously elicit a libidinal investment on the part of the viewer. Finally, the reference to the supernatural evokes the fantasmatic nature of the television image, an imaginary signifier in its own right which, while sharing certain traits of the cinematic signifier, nevertheless requires specific conditions of production which differentiate it. Fantasy, with its roots in the visible (from the Greek *phantazein* = to make visible), is the crucial component of the television image, for it is through such circuits of meaning and pleasure that the television spectator is bound. Because it so skilfully combines relations of family, desire and psychic production, 'Woman on the Beach' is an exemplary episode, illustrative of both the television institution's mode of functioning and of *Magnum, p.i.*'s production of powerful images of sexual identity. Thomas Magnum is a highly charged object of the libidinal gaze not only for the idealised image of the male body that he represents (the thighs), but for his appealing personality as well (the smile, the whiskers). At a time when questions of sexuality and gender representation are wrought with contradiction, the image of masculine perfection that Magnum/Selleck embodies – notions of perfection always evoke connotations of wholeness and completeness – provides a potent and enduring icon, one whose irresistible attraction holds viewers motionless, spellbound, fasten(ed) to their television sets.

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