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'What Do Rocky and Bullwinkle Have to Do With History? - The Chronicle Review' has been sent to hwillis@usc.edu and sfanders@usc.edu.

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What Do Rocky and Bullwinkle Have to Do With History?

By Peter Monaghan

John F. Kennedy did not die by an assassin's bullet only on November 22, 1963, in Dallas.

He died again, and continues to die, in movies like Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), the television show *Quantum Leap*'s 1992 episode, "Lee Harvey Oswald," and many video and online games that allow players to dicker with historical events—conspiracy theory-inspired games like *JFK Reloaded* (2004).

Steve F. Anderson's striking contention is that theorists of history pay too little attention to the way media products like those shape the understanding both of historical events and of the way history is told. "We must cultivate an awareness of too easily marginalized media practices, whether they are part of a self-consciously artistic avant-garde, informal networks of amateur creators, alternate-history gamers, or pop-culture remixers," writes Anderson in **Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past** (Dartmouth College Press).

Anderson, an assistant professor of interactive media at the University of Southern California who also directs its Ph.D. program in media arts and practice, argues that academic history has not yet developed ways to handle the kinds of approaches to history-telling found in many media forms. Whether or not academically credentialed historians like it, he observes, they are far from the only ones telling history and defining how it can be conveyed.

In any case, he writes, "cultural theories that describe contemporary historical consciousness in terms of debasement and loss mendaciously imply that there was once a time when historical thinking was more firmly grounded in secure access to an authentic past."

"The past is routinely being remixed, reimagined, rescripted, and reappropriated in powerful and eccentric ways, often by individuals

—fans, geeks, hackers, teens, and artists—who do not necessarily see themselves as engaged in the discourse of history at all."

Anderson elaborates in an interview: "It is very likely not the book by the Harvard historian that 300 people in the world read that gives us a historical sensibility and becomes part of how we behave in the world," he says. "It's *The X-Files*."

He suggests that the reasons for that are many, including public suspicion surrounding events like Kennedy's assassination, and the complicity of mainstream news media in disinformation campaigns during American wars—Panama, Vietnam, Iraq. Those factors, he says, prevent closure on historical events, and instead encourage the opening of more channels and modes of recounting history.

What most interests Anderson about many often-bizarre, history-related media products is that they contribute to the study and understanding of historiography—the way history is told. Cumulatively, they "shape our basic relations to time, history, and memory," he says.

Of course, some of them would strike many academic historians as trash, while more-considered forms, such as avant-garde films that consciously comment on history-telling, might seem simply obscure or baffling.

For Anderson, they all have a contribution to make, even if they do not aspire to factual accuracy or plausibility. When, for example, Kirk and Spock go undercover as SS officers to overthrow a Nazi-like regime on the planet Ekos, in a 1968 episode of *Star Trek*, they may "reveal what is missing or repressed within conventional history writing or, indeed, the cultural unconscious." Within that open framework, it is no contradiction that Anderson sings the praises of Marcel Ophüls's long, difficult films about historical atrocities as well as of a game that permits an encounter between Lincoln's Civil War army and that of Genghis Khan.

Both, Anderson argues, discourage viewers from accepting pat constructions of history and make them ponder: What is history, anyway?

In recent decades, some historians have lamented that television, in its championing of the forgettable, breeds "collective amnesia" and a "crisis of historical consciousness," in two phrases used by the cultural theorist George Lipsitz. Those scholars would presumably frown at Anderson's appeal to the authority of Rocky and Bullwinkle. But he observes that when the ABC network's animated

show *Rocky and His Friends* (1959-61) ran segments in which Mr. Peabody, a pedantic talking dog, schooled a naïve human protégé in world history, it did so in keeping with television's earlier federal mandate "to inform citizens."

American television has long dealt in nuanced ways with history, Anderson claims. It has obsessed over the past, as evidenced in a proliferation of overtly historical or nostalgia-oriented programming, such as 1960s shows like David Wolper's *The Passing Years*. More recently, perhaps hoping to emulate ABC's late-1970s blockbuster miniseries, *Roots*, public television has doled out lashings of Ken Burns-style documentaries.

Historical popularizations and even counterfactual narratives, such as what would have ensued had Hitler defeated the Allies, all play a role in the processes Anderson encourages, because "we need to understand what might have happened if we are going to truly understand what did happen."

His book project began, many years ago, "just thinking about the ways in which what I remember of the past is drawn from ridiculous sources, like *Star Trek*," Anderson says. He later became a devotee of experimental and avant-garde independent films, and finds many that consciously bear on the issues of historiography that occupied him as he prepared *Technologies of History*. He had studied at the California Institute of the Arts with the filmmakers Morgan Fisher, James Benning, and Thom Andersen, and had served as a film researcher on *Red Hollywood*, Andersen's 1996 film with Noel Birch, a revisionist history of Hollywood's blacklist era.

The cover of Anderson's book is drawn from a forthcoming online historical game that he considers "a brilliant work of historiography." *The Cat and the Coup*, by Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad of USC's Game Innovation Lab, is about the CIA-influenced downfall of Iran's first democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1953. Players become Mossadegh's cat, coaxing the leader through events by knocking objects off shelves, scattering his papers, jumping on his lap, and scratching him. Unlike Mossadegh, players are assured of landing on their feet, Anderson observes.

The Cat and the Coup differs from many games by not locking players into highly restrictive digital architecture, he says. In a similar spirit of allowing the most possible outcomes for a media product, Anderson persuaded Dartmouth College Press to allow him to apply a Creative Commons license to his book, which he also

assigned to his extensive online companion pieces, including a video advertisement and a demonstration of alternative historiography called "Technologies of History Interactive," with many riffs on the Kennedy assassination.

By making those freely available, Anderson hopes to reach academics and electronic communities, such as gamers and digital artists. In that way, the open-access license dovetails, he says, with his advocacy of the broadest access to cultural expressions, even those that may appear obtuse, confusing, or deceptive. (He is also founder of Critical Commons, a nonprofit advocacy coalition that supports a liberal definition of fair use of media for scholarship, research, and teaching.)

The days are over, he says, when official histories, told by credentialed, academic historians, will suffice, or will vouch unchallenged for how the past happened.

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