Chapter 1

I Want My MTV Cops
Miami Vice as Television Commodity

In September 1985 *Miami Vice* stars Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas made the cover of *Time* magazine, accompanied by the headline "Cool Cops, Hot Show." *Time* typically reserves its cover for items it wants to suggest are of major significance within American culture, and this was the first time that the stars of a television show had appeared since August 1980, when the caption "Whodunit?" accompanied *Dallas* star Larry Hagman posed as the dastardly J. R. Ewing. The season-ending episode of *Dallas* in March 1980 had set up the mystery of "Who Shot J.R.?," a question that gripped over 300 million viewers worldwide, and spawned T-shirts, posters, bumper stickers, and a summer of frenzied media speculation. While *Miami Vice* hadn't produced a superlative cliff-hanger to rival *Dallas*, its appearance on *Time*'s cover nevertheless implied that it too had attained the status of a cultural phenomenon, and warranted the magazine's showcase treatment. The accompanying article made this clear, claiming that the show was transforming the look and sound of television, and reportedly demonstrating to "TV executives that there are alternatives to the cookie-cutter blandness of most network fare."[1] The article began by noting what it saw as *Miami Vice*'s arresting visual style, innovative use of rock music, and beautiful on-location shooting, but pointed also to the stunning success of its soundtrack album, the influence of the show's stars on trends in men's fashion, and its impact on the profile of the city of Miami. All in all, *Time* concluded, "a year after its debut on NBC, *Miami Vice*, TV's hottest and hippest new cop show, is reaching a high sizzle."

This was, no doubt, the kind of coverage NBC had only dreamed about when it commissioned Anthony Yerkovich to write a pilot script for the show. The result of discussions between NBC and Universal-TV executives about a new cop show, Yerkovich's initial premise, as outlined in the script "Gold Coast," was a combination of the derivative and the innovative; in part a clear example of what Todd Gitlin terms the "recombinant" logic of network television, which seeks to rework "elements from proven successes."[2] The central pairing of streetwise, plainclothes detectives Crockett and Tubbs, patrolling the city in a flamboyant car, owed much to *Starsky and Hutch* (1975–9), a show on which Yerkovich had served as a writer. Less recognized was the modeling of Crockett and Tubbs on *Hill Street Blues* (1981–7) police officers Bobby Hill and Andy Renko. Gunned down at the end of the pilot episode, but revived after audience testing revealed their popularity, Hill and Renko, a pairing of "the earnest responsible black and the self-doubting, wisecracking southern racist farmboy" represented a key example of what would become one of 1980s Hollywood's most successful screen relationships, namely that between black and white "buddies."[3] By no means new (one could cite *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and Bill Cosby's breakthrough comedy series *I Spy* (1965–8) as notable forerunners), the "biracial buddy" relationship was at the heart of some of the decade's top box-office hits, including *Stir Crazy* (1980), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Lethal Weapon* (1987), and *Die Hard* (1988), not to mention many of their various high-grossing sequels. *48 Hrs.* (1983), starring Nick Nolte as hard-drinking, chain-smoking, southern cop Jack Cates, and Eddie Murphy as smooth-talking, expensively suited New Yorker Reggie Hammond, was another influence on *Miami Vice*. Nolte was by all accounts the studio executives' ideal for the casting of Sonny Crockett.[4]

Where *Miami Vice* differed from many, if not most, of its biracial buddy counterparts was in the complete lack of racial tension between buddies. Only briefly in the pilot episode, when Crockett asks Tubbs if he is "down here working on your tan" does the show replicate the racist wisecracking of *48 Hrs.*, and this facet of Crockett was quickly written out of his characterization. Moreover, the only other time

when Tubbs's identity as a black man is addressed in the dialogue is in the season four episode "Indian Wars," as Tubbs tells a Native American that his people "do not have a monopoly on suffering"; a point made while undercover as a college professor, which rather ambiguously serves to make his comment part of his performance. In eschewing almost entirely the issue of black racial identity (Trudy Joplin's identity as a black woman also passes entirely without comment), *Miami Vice* undoubtedly perpetuates what Ed Guerrero cites as the propensity of the buddy formula to erase "a black collective consciousness and sense of politics."[5] However, at the same time the show repeatedly represents Tubbs (and less frequently Trudy) as an appealing romantic figure, engaging in a series of relationships that challenge Jacquie Jones's observation that the buddy formula tends to either deny or demonize black sexuality.[6] What *is* far less equivocal is the emphasis on the ethos of male camaraderie offered by the main buddy pairing, and this is something this book looks at in more detail in chapter 4.

Yerkovich's pilot script for *Miami Vice* also established Sonny Crockett's identity as an American Vietnam war veteran. Through Crockett, *Miami Vice* participated, like its network TV counterparts *Magnum P.I.* (1980–8), *The A-Team* (1983–6) and *Airwolf* (1984–7), in what Harry W. Haines describes as the "ideological rehabilitation" of the veteran in 1980s popular culture, overturning earlier portrayals of them as complicit in wartime atrocities or returning home traumatized and psychotic.[7] As was apparent with *Magnum P.I.*'s Thomas Magnum (Tom Selleck), Crockett's status as a veteran was employed to give his handsome playboy persona an edge of soldier steel, thus reconciling differently desirable aspects of masculinity. Yet in many ways the show's more complex relationship to Vietnam was rendered by a character not in the pilot episode, namely Lieutenant Martin Castillo. As a former DEA agent operating during the war in the "Golden Triangle" (an opium-producing area overlapping Vietnam, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), and Laos), Castillo was used to connect up the nation's catastrophic military involvement with its 1980s narcotics epidemic; his wartime exploits included resisting the CIA's sanctioning of heroin distribution to fund its activities in the region.[8] As David Buxton notes, in what is also an obvious allusion to the

decade's AIDS outbreak, "caught in Vietnam, the vice is a virus from a less civilized country; untreated at the time, it has spread out of control in America itself."[9] Castillo's backstory, and the narrative set-ups it established for the show, were elaborated in the only scripted episode of *Miami Vice* credited to Michael Mann ("Golden Triangle Part II"), reportedly based on his screenplay research trip to Burma in 1980.[10] The introduction of Castillo augmented the show's rather lightweight initial "veteran hero" premise with a more substantive working through of the legacy of Vietnam; in particular the covert maneuverings of the military-industrial complex.

Returning to the figure of Crockett, it is clear that his initial characterization also owed a debt to Travis McGee, the detective hero of mystery writer John D. MacDonald, first seen in the 1964 novel *The Deep Blue Goodbye*. McGee, a former college football player and Korean war veteran, lived on a houseboat called *The Busted Flush* docked in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and drove a convertible, souped-up Rolls Royce. The similarities with Crockett's biography and set-up are striking. MacDonald's novels earned him a critical reputation as "the pre-eminent Florida novelist," admired for a "remarkably close observation of the state: its grifters and operators and big-bucks crooks."[11] Miami crime writer Carl Hiaasen, in his introduction to a reprint of *The Deep Blue Goodbye*, notes that MacDonald was "the first modern novelist to nail Florida dead-center, to capture all its languid sleaze, racy sense of promise, and breath-grabbing beauty."[12] Fittingly, it is this sense of place that Yerkovich describes as essential to his original vision for *Miami Vice*. Interviewed by *The New York Times* in the summer before the show's debut, Yerkovich stated that he "wanted to explore the changes in a city that used to be a middle-class vacation land. Today Miami is like an American Casablanca, and it's never really been seen on television."[13]

Yerkovich's pilot script for the show sought to make that simile clear; Sonny Crockett's opening line, "Five thousand street corners in Greater Miami and gumbo here gotta pick ours," is a spin on Rick Blaine's (Humphrey Bogart's) memorable line "Of all the gin joints …" in the 1943 film *Casablanca*. While immediately endowing Crockett with Blaine's weary cynicism, Yerkovich's script also carefully

side-stepped NBC's 1983 ill-fated TV series of *Casablanca* starring *Starsky and Hutch*'s David Soul and aligned itself rather more with Brian De Palma's big-screen version of another classic studio picture, namely Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932). Released in 1983, De Palma's exceedingly loose remake, starring Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer, relocated from depression-era Chicago to present-day Miami, with title character Tony "Scarface" Camonte (Paul Muni) renamed Tony Montana, no longer Italian-American, but instead a refugee from Fidel Castro's Cuba.

De Palma's movie had not been well received in Miami from the moment the details of Oliver Stone's script had become known. Representatives of the city's Cuban community did not welcome the decision to reimagine "Scarface" as a Mariel boatlift refugee turned homicidal cocaine kingpin. The Mariel boatlift, which occurred between April and October 1980, and with the consent of Castro, saw around 125,000 Cubans flee the island for Florida, where many already had relatives in exile. While America's acceptance of the refugees was widely understood as a humanitarian gesture on the part of the federal government, and an indication of improving US–Cuban relations, the American press quickly began to circulate stories that Castro had used the boatlift as an opportunity to empty Cuban jails and mental hospitals of their inmates. While more sober reporting indicated that less than two percent of exiles could be regarded as hardened criminals, concerns that *Scarface* would deliver a big-screen re-enactment of Cuban stereotyping led to public protests during the shooting of scenes in Miami, and the eventual abandonment of plans to film the entire movie on location in the city.

The notion of a sudden influx of foreign, non-white felons represented an incendiary addition to a situation which was escalating racial tensions in the city. Miami had already been rocked in May 1980 by the "Liberty City riots," the nation's first major race riot since the 1960s. The riots, ignited by the acquittal of five white police officers accused of beating a black motorist to death, resulted in a number of fatalities, over 1,000 arrests and $200 million worth of damage, also had their roots in the sense of injustice felt by the city's relatively small black community, many of whom saw themselves as

being increasingly squeezed out by the larger and expanding Latin-American population.[14]

The riots and the Mariel boatlift brought Miami to the attention of the world's press, and represented a spectacular rupture of the city's prevailing image as sunny tourist resort and favored retirement locale. As T. D. Allman notes, "long-term demographic, economic, and political trends collided in an explosive fashion with several contemporary and unanticipated social upheavals. One result was that the city's all-important image took a brutal beating. The once 'Magic City' became better known nationally and internationally as 'Paradise Lost.'"[15] The latter phrase is a reference to a *Time* magazine profile of the city from November 1981, titled "Trouble in Paradise," and which asserted that "an epidemic of violent crime, a plague of illicit drugs and a tidal wave of refugees have slammed into South Florida with the destructive power of a hurricane."[16] FBI statistics suggested that Miami had become the most crime-ridden city in the nation, and it was frequently cited by the press as the murder capital of the US. Critics pointed out that this state of affairs was not aided by the state's liberal gun laws, which allowed for the legal carrying of concealed handguns. Much of the high-profile crime was related to the drug trade, and included a number of grisly machine-gun murders between warring drug gangs.[17] Miami began the decade identified as the main port of entry for cocaine to the US, with "more than 80% of all cocaine seized worldwide [being] confiscated in Florida."[18] A DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) official related that so much drug money had been seized that "we've had difficulty transporting it for storage. We're talking about literally billions in small bills."[19] What money wasn't confiscated appeared to be finding its way into the banking system at a staggering rate. Observers noted that banks in Miami were the only ones in the country to show a currency surplus, somewhere in the region of $3.9 billion in 1980, a state of affairs that prompted a government enquiry. As one investigating Senator conceded, "not only are millions of Americans addicted to drugs, many banks are addicted to drug money."[20]

Allman notes that "as late as 1977, there had been no foreign banks in Miami. By the early eighties, more than 130 banks in Greater Miami

were engaged in international operations, and more than 250 multinational corporations had opened offices."[21] He points out that the south Florida region was handling "about 40 percent of all US trade with Central America," and "[d]irectly and indirectly, this influx of foreign money was pumping more than $35 billion a year into the area's economy."[22] Some voiced concerns that a significant proportion of that money was derived from illegal narcotics, and that laundered bills had found their way into the $3 billion construction boom that transformed downtown Miami in the early 1980s.[23] As *The New York Times* stated in 1985, "the building boom has led to a Cinderella-like change in the Miami skyline, from an old stucco and brick face to gleaming new high-rise buildings standing shoulder to shoulder along the blue-green waters of Biscayne Bay."[24] The image of a subtropical city jittery on a cocktail of cocaine, currency, and construction lent itself readily to crime fiction, and De Palma's *Scarface* provided Anthony Yerkovich with the prototype for *Miami Vice*'s vision of high-rolling drug lords reveling in the trappings of the 1980s consumer boom.

Yerkovich stayed to oversee that vision as one of *Miami Vice*'s co-executive producers for the first seven episodes before departing. NBC, forewarned of his intention to leave, expressed concern to Universal-TV, who approached Michael Mann with the invitation to come on board as an executive producer.[25] Mann agreed, and remained for the duration of the show's production (five seasons and 111 episodes in total). Like Yerkovich, Mann had served as a writer on *Starsky and Hutch*, and had also scripted episodes for the TV show *Police Story* (1973–7), and created the ABC detective drama *Vega$* (1978–81) for Aaron Spelling. Michelle Brustin, former Vice President of Drama Series at NBC, points out that it was Mann's track record in television, rather than as a director of feature films, that helped reassure nervous network executives concerned about the "overproduction" of the show's pilot.[26] Mann in fact came to *Miami Vice* having recently faced critical derision and box-office failure with his film *The Keep* (1983). Adapted by Mann from the novel by F. Paul Wilson, *The Keep* pits Nazi soldiers against a 500-year-old monster in a Romanian fortress. While the basic premise bears little relation to Mann's previous work,

the noir-style chiaroscuro lighting and synthesized scoring by Tangerine Dream both feature in Mann's preceding film, the well-received *Thief* (1981), which depicts the attempt of professional safe-cracker Frank (James Caan) to pull off one last major heist before going straight. With its neon-lit dark city streets, waterfront settings, use of slow-motion photography, and tight, terse dialogue, *Thief*'s tale of a man living a double life (Frank is a car salesman by day, thief by night) prefigures both the style and the tales of duplicitous living developed subsequently in *Miami Vice*. As Frank says to his girlfriend Jessie, seemingly oblivious to the provenance of his expensive accoutrements, "what do you think I do? … I wear $800 dollar suits." The existential strain of Frank's double life – the more he tries to extricate himself from his predicament, the deeper he gets – would also be repeated in the professional success and personal failings of the Vice detectives. While Frank is very much a loner, he is shown visiting Okla (Willie Nelson), a mentor/father figure from his time in prison. In so doing, *Thief* reprises the theme of male camaraderie in prison first seen in Mann's Emmy-award-winning TV movie *The Jericho Mile* (1979), as the isolated Larry "Rain" Murphy (Peter Strauss) befriends fellow prisoner R. C. Stiles (Richard Lawson) to create a cross-racial friendship that undercuts the delicate balance of race-based prison cliques. *The Jericho Mile* also stars the Puerto Rican playwright and poet Miguel Piñero (as Rubio), who had been nominated for a Tony Award in 1975 for his play *Short Eyes*, written while Piñero was incarcerated for robbery in Sing Sing prison.[27] Piñero would go on to play Esteban Calderone in the pilot of *Miami Vice*, thus starring as the show's prototypical villain, and acting as the catalyst for Tubbs's arrival in Miami, and in essence the entire premise of the show. Piñero also wrote the *Miami Vice* installment "Smuggler's Blues," which is, for a number of commentators, the quintessential series episode, reflected arguably in the fact that its plotline forms the basis for Mann's script for the 2006 *Miami Vice* motion picture. The film accelerates the pace of Piñero's tale of drug trafficking in line with what David Bordwell terms the "intensified continuity" of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking, but also the instantaneous flows of data that characterize trading in the globalized digital era.[28]

The *Miami Vice* motion picture saw Mann and Yerkovich (the latter as Executive Producer) combine professionally for the first time since the show. Indeed, Yerkovich's departure from *Miami Vice* was followed by a well-publicized spat about the creative origins of the show, which played out in the pages of *Rolling Stone* in 1985. In a cover article on the show by Emily Benedek for the March 1985 edition, the author suggested that the idea for *Miami Vice* had been "floating around NBC for a while" before Yerkovich was employed to write "a rough draft teleplay." In addition, Benedek stated elsewhere in the piece that Michael Mann's "mark is apparent in every frame of every episode. Mann's style involves an aggressive use of visual images, camera angles and sound."[29] Benedek's piece prompted a terse response from Robert A. Harris, President of Universal-TV, who stated that "the idea that became 'Miami Vice' was not 'floating around at NBC for a while' but was generated by the show's creator, Tony Yerkovich." Harris's letter was joined by others written by John Sturnow, Executive Story Consultant on the show, who opined that "Tony [Yerkovich] established the characters, narrative style, and format of the show in his pilot script," and by Steven Bochco, co-creator of *Hill Street Blues*, who stated that "no one is more intimate with Tony Yerkovich's writing gifts than we at *Hill Street Blues* are, and you may rest assured that *Miami Vice* was his creation, his script, and reflected his sensibilities."[30] *Rolling Stone* published an apology, explaining that the description of "Mr. Yerkovich's role was based on information provided by *Miami Vice* executive producer Michael Mann." While this spat may seem rather trivial, the fact that such senior figures waded in points to the obvious fact that, as Richard Blum and Richard Lindheim point out, "television credits are very important for financial and professional reasons."[31] But what is also apparent in these exchanges are the traces of a major shift then occurring in network television. As John Thornton Caldwell points out, in the 1980s American television "moved from a framework that approached broadcasting primarily as a form of word-based rhetoric and transmission … to a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme consciousness of style."[32] In the mid-1980s no dramatic show seemed to embody these changes as emphatically as *Miami Vice*, and the pages of *Rolling Stone*

played the rather unusual role of publicly illustrating the transition from a creative emphasis on "writing gifts" to visual and aural style. Mann's subsequent helming of the feature film, a medium where the director is typically afforded most artistic attribution, serves in retrospect to reinforce the perception of his auteurist signature on the show.

With that notion of the transforming nature of network television in mind, it is worth returning again to the *Time* September 1985 cover article on *Miami Vice*. Timed to coincide with the start of the series' second season on NBC, the catalyst for the magazine's interest was its remarkable ratings in the summer reruns. The strong showing for *Miami Vice*, and also for network companions *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, meant that NBC won the battle for summer ratings. All three fared much better than reruns of CBS's top-rated serials such as *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*, which were dropped in favor of movies. Unlike *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, *Miami Vice* went into reruns on the back of unspectacular viewing figures, but the show's seasonable parade of sun-kissed locations, tropical cool, and chic summer fashions, not to mention the weakened competition, aided a remarkable upsurge in the show's fortunes, and helped it enter the top ten of the all-important Nielsen ratings for the first time.

Until the 1980s the summer had been typically a fallow period for network television, regarded as something of a hiatus in the competition for viewers that characterized the rest of the year. The opportunity to all but "shut down for summer" was a luxury afforded the so-called "Big Three" networks due to their long-standing stranglehold on the television industry. For several decades ABC, CBS, and NBC formed what Michele Hilmes terms "Classic Network System," functioning as "a closed oligopoly" that thrived "by restricting competition and avoiding risk."[33] This stable structure made network television a profitable business for broadcasters, advertisers, and the Hollywood studios then producing the overwhelming majority of the shows that filled the schedules. But in the mid-1980s, the "Big Three" networks confronted for the first time in decades a threat of competition that forced them to rethink their traditional complacency toward summer scheduling. As CBS president of entertainment Bud Grant conceded at the time, "We're in a 52-week business now."[34]

By the mid-1980s the concerted growth of cable TV, VCRs, and independent stations meant that networks faced round-the-year rivalry for the attention of the audience, which was no longer largely dependent on them for their viewing fare; so much so that by the early 1990s the "Big Three's" share of the prime-time audience had slipped to 61 percent, down from a dominant 92 percent in 1977.[35] While both cable and video had been around since the mid-1970s, it was only in the mid-1980s that they became significant entities in the broadcasting sector. The key to this was a change in the regulatory climate that allowed the potential of these technological developments to be realized. Many broadcast historians point to the appointment of Mark Fowler as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1981 as a pivotal moment in this transformation. As the government agency charged with regulating the broadcasting and telecommunications industries, the FCC had a major role in shaping the development of the sector. As Alisa Perren points out, Fowler's appointment moved the FCC away from its traditional "'public interest' mandate" and toward an emphasis on freeing the sector from government regulation. The aim was to stimulate a competitive environment in which "the market – not the government – should determine the 'winners' and 'losers.'"[36] This focus on "winners" and "losers," competition, and "the marketplace" makes clear Fowler's adherence to the free-market economics of the Republican administration, and as Perren notes, he "frequently emphasized his allegiance to the man who appointed him, President Ronald Reagan."[37] The boom in cable TV and independent stations was greatly aided by this new competitive climate, in which the buying and selling of TV stations occurred with unprecedented scale and sanction.

Beyond the purview of the FCC, another legal ruling had a momentous role in shaping home entertainment. In January 1984, the year of *Miami Vice*'s debut, MCA/Universal (which would produce the show for NBC) saw the final failure of the lawsuit they first filed in 1976 against Sony Corporation of America, manufacturers of the VCR. MCA/Universal was the biggest independent producer of television shows in the US, and the lawsuit was an attempt to make the home taping of their and all others' shows illegal. This landmark ruling

which, as Frederick Wasser points out, was "one of those rare instances when the government or the court did not take the opportunity to extend copyright protection in the current era of new technologies," effectively gave a green light to the practice that would redefine the viewer's relationship with television, namely time shifting.[38] Being able to watch what they wanted when they wanted, while whizzing past commercials, was as liberating for viewers as it was potentially ruinous for TV companies that depended on advertising revenue for their livelihood. By the mid-1980s the VCR was firmly established as a mass medium, with 11–12 million sales per year till the end of the decade, by which time nearly 70 percent of television households had a machine.[39]

VCR penetration was also driven by movie rentals and tape purchases, which, as Wasser notes, "transformed the VCR from being an extension of the TV to being an alternative to the movie theater."[40] With cable TV also operating as a competitor to the networks' own film broadcasts, and with the added attraction of being able to offer more recent, and, crucially, uncensored and uninterrupted (on pay-cable) screenings, the "Big Three" were operating in a broadcasting landscape unlike anything that had been seen previously. Adding to their woes was the rapid take up of the RCD (remote control device) in the 1980s, so that by the end of the decade around 66 percent of television households had at their fingertips the capability for greater "flipping frequency" not only between channels, but also between devices (TV, VCR, cable box).[41] As Eastman, Neal-Lunsford, and Riggs point out, many in the TV industry perceived the RCD as "a detriment to their carefully planned audience flow strategies, resulting in lower ratings and an increased failure rate for new programs."[42] One consequence of this was a concern within the industry on how to devise strategies to encourage viewers to keep their finger off the button. In the 1980s and early 1990s, this often revolved around ways of innovating in the transitions between programs. Later in the decade, the focus shifted to means for ensuring viewers flipped (or clicked) to the other stations, websites, and related media properties that the networks also owned.

Arguably the most emphatic illustration of the momentous times befalling the networks was the fact that in 1985, the year that *Miami*

Vice made its impact, the Big Three were sold after decades of stable ownership. In tune with the climate of mergers and acquisitions affecting corporate America, a consequence of the Reagan administration's approach to business taxation and market deregulation, all three networks became part of large corporations with different business cultures and, inevitably, different visions of how their new acquisitions should operate.[43] If that wasn't enough, by 1985 advanced plans were already in place for the launch of Fox, a fourth network, which would commence in October 1986. After years of successful resistance to a new competitor by the "Big Three," Fox took full advantage of recent sector deregulation, offering a major challenge to the established networks, and prospering through its core strategy of appealing to young and urban audiences. Crucially, the formation of Fox TV ushered in a "new era marked by network-studio integration," as television and film companies were permitted to merge (and merge they did, in the next wave of "merger mania" in the mid-1990s), for the first time in their mutually supportive, but often rancorous, histories. Already required to adjust to the inroads made by cable TV, VCRs, and independent stations to their audience base, the success of Fox in capitalizing on demographic, regulatory, and technological trends would demonstrate to the networks, and their new owners, how to operate as a fully integrated media conglomerate in this new broadcasting epoch, which Michael Curtin has termed the "neo-network era."[44]

Miami Vice might usefully be thought of as a show wrought by these forces of realignment; conceived during the waning of the "Classic Network era," but anticipating and responding to many of the shifts that would come to define the era of the "neo-networks." Indeed, the show's launch on September 16, 1984 in NBC's "Sunday Night At The Movies" slot suggested much about how it was complexly related to this rapidly changing broadcasting landscape.[45] On the one hand, the pilot episode was something of a throwback in that it was a big-budget, two-hour "television movie." This was a format that the networks were then increasingly shying away from; escalating production costs and the diminishing proportion of pilots taken up as series had seen a marked decline in the format.[46] On the other hand,

the decision to use the format had been taken in part to gauge the market for TV videocassette releases, and the pilot was available not only in VHS and Betamax versions, but also as NTSC and PAL cassettes, so that it could be sold both domestically and in other global retail markets.[47] Right from inception, therefore, *Miami Vice* was conceived with one eye on a fundamental shift in the media industries in the 1980s, which was to think of television programs and movies as "content" that could be "repurposed" in different formats. As Stephen Prince points out, until the 1980s "cinema was celluloid," and television was broadcast.[48] By the end of the decade, everything (in principle at least) was "software."[49]

In many ways the most indicative demonstration of *Miami Vice*'s position within the rapidly innovating sector for audio-visual entertainment in the 1980s, and the interlocking logics of "software" and "hardware" that drove much of its development, lies in the story of the show's enduring nickname, "MTV cops." The oft-repeated tale of *Miami Vice*'s genesis involves the late Brandon Tartikoff, then President of NBC's entertainment division, scribbling "MTV cops" on a napkin. It is from this beginning that the discussions between NBC and Universal-TV purportedly commenced. While Tartikoff went on record to describe this as "apocryphal," he did assert that the show "had its genesis in a vague idea I had about getting an MTV sensibility into a cop show."[50] As Tartikoff admitted freely, at that time he had become "obsessed" with MTV.[51] From the debut of its inaugural clip, Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star," on August 1,1981, MTV would become a major driver for the expansion of basic cable subscription, particularly when it became available in New York and Los Angeles at the beginning of 1983.[52] By the end of 1983, it could reach more than 17 million households nationwide.[53] While this was a drop in the ocean compared to network television, what was crucial was not raw numbers but *who* was watching. As Andrew Goodwin points out:

> [MTV's] budgets were underwritten by an expectation that an all-music service would deliver those younger consumers (12–34 year olds), who were difficult to reach through television. MTV was to be "environment" that would narrowcast the right kind of music and thus target an elusive socioeconomic group.[54]

Although it remained unstated, Tartikoff's "obsession" with MTV was clearly attributable to the basic cable network's remarkable capacity to attract younger viewers to television, and consequently to the advertisers, whose revenue had been driving MTV's profits through the roof. While the coveted youth demographic was not a new discovery for NBC – Elana Levine has explored the network's failed attempts to court younger viewers in the 1970s through depictions of sexuality – music television took advantage of recent technological advances to appeal to that audience in ways previously not possible.[55] The most important of these were key developments in stereophonic sound transmission and receiving equipment. MTV was available to cable subscribers in stereophonic sound via a special hookup to stereo phonographs provided by their local cable company. Indeed, anyone who viewed the cable network's opening-night transmission would have noticed that stereo sound was central to MTV's promotional strategies from the outset, reiterated time and again in its own advertising clips and in the patter of the VJs. Robert Pittman, Vice President of programming at MTV, remarked at the time of the networks' launch that

> we're now seeing the TV become a component of the stereo system. It's ridiculous to think that you have two forms of entertainment – your stereo and your TV – which have nothing to do with one another. What we're doing is marrying those two forms so that they can work together in unison. We're the first channel on cable to pioneer this.[56]

While MTV may have been the first to offer stereo sound to US cable customers, the development of the technology for broadcasting network shows on television was also well underway. Japan had had a stereo TV service since 1978, using a system known as multiplex television, with stations broadcasting shows in two sound channels. Japanese broadcasters estimated in June 1984 that 20 to 25 percent of television sets then being sold had the ability to receive multiplex programs, with about 12 percent of the programming, or about fourteen or fifteen hours per station per week, making use of the multiplex technology, primarily for music and sports shows.[57] In Europe only West Germany's second network (ZDF) had offered stereo programs

(mainly pop-music-based) since 1982.[58] In March 1984 the US Federal Communications Commission authorized Multichannel television sound, better known as MTS, as the US standard for stereo television transmission. Unlike the Japanese system, MTS used three channels, which meant that not only could it transmit shows in stereo, but it could use the extra channel to broadcast in Spanish for the substantial US Latino market.

There was at that time an increased sense of purpose for the TV industry to focus its energies on pushing through the necessary authorization for stereo broadcasting, so as to match the range of videodisk and videocassette players being sold that offered stereophonic sound (when played though a home stereo system), which were starting to pick up sales in 1982 and 1983. The US network that led the charge for stereo TV broadcasts in MTS was NBC, starting with the July 26, 1984 edition of *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, even if at that point only New York had stereo broadcast transmitting equipment. The previous month, the network announced that its new cop show, *Miami Vice*, would be the first prime-time series to be delivered regularly in stereo, with Brandon Tartikoff telling *Broadcast Week* that because "music plays such a strong part in the action, stereo would be a way to showcase the new cop show."[59] The two-hour pilot and the first twelve episodes were recorded in four-track stereo, though most TV markets did not yet have either the transmission equipment or the stereo TV sets to receive the stereo broadcast. As an interim solution, NBC depended upon FM radio stations to "simulcast" the show in stereo sound, so that viewers could listen to it through their hi-fi systems. Michael Mann explained that even if few viewers would hear the first series in stereo "a show goes into syndication after three years on the air … by that time stereo broadcasting will be a reality, and because all the negatives to *Miami Vice* are in stereo, they will be far more valuable if the show goes into syndication."[60]

NBC's position as the early pace-setter in stereo programming could also be attributable to the activities of its parent company at the time of *Miami Vice*'s inception, namely RCA. RCA had long been a leading manufacturer of television sets and, along with competitor

Zenith, had then the largest share of the US consumer market. As *The New York Times* pointed out, "NBC wants stereo for the same reason it was the first to 'go color' some 20 years ago: to drum up trade for its corporate sibling."[61] Like many consumer electronic innovations before and after, stereo television sets entered the marketplace as high-end products, relying upon the demographic described by Everett Rogers, pioneer of diffusion of innovations theory, as "innovators" and "early adopters" – willing to pay the higher price for being the first to own new technologies, and absolutely crucial to manufacturers if their products are to get off the ground.[62] *Miami Vice*, described by Jane Feuer as a key example of "yuppie television," should be understood therefore as central to NBC's attempts to encourage upscale viewers to purchase stereo TV sets, with the hope that the consequent diffusion to the majority of the audience would follow.[63]

Reflecting their higher prices, and the limited number of programs broadcast in MTS, initial sale figures for stereo TV sets were predictably small, with an estimated one and a half million sales in 1985. The year 1986 represented a breakthrough with the consumer electronics publication *Twice* declaring that the "biggest technology winner in 1986 was color TV with built-in stereo audio decoder."[64] At that time, 19- and 25-inch sets retailed for between $500 and $1,200, while at the top end of the market Mitsubishi's new 37-inch stereo television cost $3,200. Viewers desiring even larger screens could purchase 40–50-inch stereo projection sets from NEC, Pioneer, and RCA for $2,000–$3,000. NBC continued to show the way forward as the most aggressive scheduler of MTS broadcasts, offering twenty-one shows in its 1985–6 schedule, including *The Tonight Show*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Steven Spielberg's Amazing Stories*. Writing about MTS broadcasting for *Time* magazine in April 1986, Richard Zoglin began by highlighting the show he felt best illustrated the appeal of stereo TV, which was *Miami Vice*. He provided this example of a viewer of the show, which was rather in keeping with the age and career profile characteristics of the coveted "early adopter":

> Don Morris, 31, a newspaper graphics editor in Stockton, Calif., hooked up his new television set last November and settled into a chair to watch

Miami Vice. During a tense scene set in the Everglades, Morris heard what sounded like an intruder in the house. He turned around quickly, only to discover that the rustling noise was coming from a speaker behind him. That marked the beginning of Morris' conversion to stereo TV. "Television elsewhere," he says, "seems one-dimensional and hollow."[65]

An article on MTS broadcasting in the August 1986 edition of *Money* magazine also began with a description of watching *Miami Vice* in stereo, and was similarly emphatic in its depiction of the auditory impact of hearing "Don Johnson open fire from the careering car at screen right." The article sought to convey a sense of the thrill as "the shot barks in your right speaker, the ricochet twangs in the left. Meanwhile, the background throb of the show's trademark synthesizer and guitar music resounds from wall to wall."[66] The appeal in both of these magazines was to the home theater enthusiast and audiophile, for whom "sound every bit as full, rich and distinct as that from FM radio stereo or a top-quality audio cassette deck" is understood to be a major selling point, and for which *Miami Vice* served as the hardware's "killer application."[67] As Barbara Klinger points out, the marketing of home theater equipment is "defined by particularly attentive viewing sensibilities and heightened sensory experiences," crucial in persuading consumers to part with the substantial sums often required for its purchase.[68] Beginning in the mid-1980s, when the equipment was "expensive and largely reserved for the rich," home theater has, argues Klinger, "helped to redefine and revivify the media industries associated with it."[69] *Miami Vice*, perhaps better described as MTS, rather than MTV, cops, had a landmark role to play in this narrative of commercial rejuvenation, so much so that David Marc and Robert J. Thompson contend that it "almost singlehandedly created the consumer market for stereo television."[70]

In our present media moment *Miami Vice* has fully realized its potential as "software" and as an entertainment "franchise." The 2003 merger of NBC and Universal Studios bequeathed the new entity, NBC Universal (owned by the conglomerate General Electric), with the back catalogue of Universal's television productions. This enabled NBC to own all the programs that it was not at liberty to produce in

an earlier era. Under the Prime Time Access Rule (PTAR), first issued by the FCC in 1970, the US government had sought to address the fact that the networks were dominating production of the shows that aired in prime-time.[71] The ruling stipulated that the first hour of the daily prime-time schedule be dedicated to airing independently produced shows, with the intention of increasing diversity; in particular by stimulating local and regional programming. In practice, as Michele Hilmes points out, "major film studios and Hollywood-based independent producers moved in to fill the void."[72] One of the largest and most prolific of these producers was Universal-TV, then owned by MCA, responsible in the mid-1980s for shows such as *Airwolf*, *Magnum P.I.*, *Knight Rider*, *Murder She Wrote*, and *Steven Spielberg's Amazing Stories*, as well as *Miami Vice*. Like other independent producers, Universal-TV owned the shows it produced, but sold the "license fee" for exclusive airing to a network. As Blum and Lindheim note, negotiations over license fees became particularly fraught in the mid-1980s, as production costs escalated.[73] Indeed, *Miami Vice* was the subject of tense and well-publicized negotiations between NBC and Universal-TV as this exceptionally expensive show became ever more costly.[74]

All of this is happily forgotten, of course, in the current era of corporate conglomeration and media convergence. In July 2006 NBC television screened the two-hour pilot of *Miami Vice* in High-definition (HD) to hype the theatrical release of Universal Studios' *Miami Vice* movie, while seeking also to boost sales of the *Miami Vice* TV series DVD boxed sets, launched by Universal Home Entertainment in February 2005. If director Michael Mann emphasized the opportunity presented by the movie to "explore some of the things we couldn't in television," and strove to point out the difference between it and the original show, it is clear that from the perspective of NBC Universal, the movie was timed for optimal cross-platform franchise exploitation.[75] Indeed, this had already begun with the release in 2004 of *Miami Vice* the X-Box/PC/Playstation2 game, meticulously recreating the look of the 1980s show, and basing game play on one of the television episodes. This was followed in 2006 by *Miami Vice* the PSP game, this time basing game play on the new movie. Additionally, there was

Miami Vice the mobile phone game, produced by British game publisher Player X, also based on the movie. In February 2008 NBC announced that it was to stream full episodes of "vintage" TV shows on its NBC.com website, including *The A-Team*, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, *Emergency*, *Miami Vice*, and *Night Hour*. Many of these shows, including *Miami Vice*, could also be watched at Hulu.com, which had been founded in March 2007 by NBC Universal in partnership with Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. Hulu's declared mission was to "help people find and enjoy the world's premium video content when, where and how they want it." Hulu's website stated that it drew from "more than 90 content providers, including Fox, NBC Universal, MGM, Sony Pictures Television, Warner Bros," a list consisting of some of the biggest entertainment companies in the world.[76] Explaining NBC's strategy in a keynote speech at the National Association for Television Program Executives' trade show in February 2008, chairman Jeff Zucker stated that NBC "needed to be everywhere."[77] As Henry Jenkins notes, "in the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms."[78]

Developments in digital technologies and media delivery systems have led a number of television scholars to rethink how we define and describe the object of study. As Lynn Spigel suggests in the introduction to *Television after TV*, "Television – once the most familiar of everyday objects – is now transforming at such rapid speeds that we no longer know what 'TV' is at all."[79] Henry Jenkins describes "transmedia storytelling" as "a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence," encouraging consumers to "[chase] down bits of the story across media channels," an approach familiar to fans of shows such as *Lost* and *Heroes*.[80] On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind the fact that television texts are, and always have been, fluid and adaptable to change. As Toby Miller notes with reference to the cult TV show *The Avengers*:

> The life of any internationally popular TV series is a passage across space and time, a life remade over and over again by discourses, institutions,

> practices of production, distribution and reception, and the shifts in tempo and context that characterize cultural commodities.[81]

One consequence of this fact is the difficulty of settling once and for all on a particular notion of what a television text might actually *mean*. If texts are fluid and contingent, then so must be their interpretations. This does not imply that we simply concede that texts can mean absolutely anything, but rather, as Barbara Klinger points out, "historical and intertextual environments shape meanings that circulate during the time of reception."[82] NBC.com's present framing of *Miami Vice*'s identity as "vintage TV" encourages viewers to appreciate its outrageous fashions and 1980s soundtrack through the lens of nostalgia. But the site also makes reference to Michael Mann, stating that he is "now recognized as the contemporary master of neo-noir." Knowledge of Mann's career as director of films such as *Manhunter* (1986), *Heat* (1995), and *Collateral* (2004) offers viewers another perspective on the show, inviting them to consider it as an early formative work of a recognized cinematic "master." Neither of these interpretative frames was available at the time of the show's initial broadcast, yet both work powerfully to shape understandings of it in our present moment.

As *Miami Vice* and its other "vintage" counterparts find immortality in what Caldwell describes as the "endless 'ancillary afterlife'" of the digital era, it is easy to lose sight of the contexts that shaped the initial production and reception of these shows.[83] For example, *Miami Vice*'s extensive use of freeze frames and slow-motion shots, particularly in "non violent scenes that would not customarily incorporate slow motion," are two of the most striking features of its visual style, but may be perceived by viewers today as simply dated and overblown.[84] Yet an understanding of the show's origins at the moment when broadcasting sought to adapt to the challenges wrought by a new wave of competing audio-visual technologies offers a more informed perspective. *Miami Vice* went on air just as the domestic VCR had achieved substantial levels of market penetration, particularly in the upscale demographic the show was designed to attract. It is no coincidence that two of the VCR's most innovative functions – its capacity

to offer freeze frame and slow-motion playback – are also two of *Miami Vice*'s most arresting stylistic techniques. *Miami Vice* was arguably one of the first shows to offer its viewers a knowing awareness of its own status as "entertainment software" to be paused, rewound, and replayed.