SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE: A CASE STUDY OF MAGNUM, P.I.

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies
School of Professional Studies
Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision and Mentorship of Dr. Tony Andenoro
Organizational Leadership

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

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December 2011
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Abstract

The study that follows examines the depiction of Vietnam veterans in the television series *Magnum, P.I.*, particularly the representation of the struggles Vietnam veterans faced when reintegrating into civilian society after the war. Assessment of the series using fantasy theme analysis reveals that *Magnum, P.I.* generates a shared understanding for regular viewers of the post-combat experience for veterans. This is important to note because entertainment media, namely television, is a far-reaching outlet that can be utilized to teach and expand viewer understanding of social issues, such as the plight of veterans. Also, the struggle of veterans to reintegrate into society is an on-going issue, one that did not end with the Vietnam conflict. Soldiers have a very specific experience in war, and the transition back into “normal,” civilian society can be challenging. Using fantasy theme analysis of the content of *Magnum, P.I.*, this study addresses the ability of entertainment television to develop shared understanding amongst a community of viewers through symbolic convergence.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

By the end of April 1975, the American military had withdrawn all personnel from the Vietnam War. While the war was technically over for the country, it was not over for most of the individuals involved. Many struggled with internal turmoil for years following the war because of both their experiences in Vietnam and the unwelcome sentiment they faced when they returned home. Vietnam was an unpopular war, and as a result, very few entertainment television programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s featured Vietnam veterans, as producers felt the American public would not want to watch a story with ties to such an issue (Berg, 1972; Heilbronn, 1985; Romas, 1993).

One prominent exception to this was the series Magnum, P.I. Debuting on December 11, 1980, more than 5 years after the end of the Vietnam War, Magnum, P.I. featured a Vietnam veteran as the title character. Thomas Magnum is a former Naval Intelligence officer who left the military to open a private investigation company and to serve as the head of security for novelist Robin Masters’ estate in Hawaii. Magnum, P.I. ran from December 1980 until May 1988, and while the primary focus of the series was not Magnum’s military service, it was a dominant and regularly recurring theme, as well as the impetus behind many of his decisions.

Magnum is stuck in the intersection between two worlds. He is living in the present, spending time with friends, running his business, and trying to make ends meet as a civilian, all while dealing with the events of his military past, the horrors of war, and the loss of loved ones. This struggling existence, common to many veterans, can truly be summed up by Magnum’s reflection from the season 3 episode “Black on White”:

The [Hawaiian] islands have a way of easing pain, of helping one forget the past, which is probably why I’m here. Yet I had a feeling that no matter how warm the sand, or no
matter how blue the sky, part of me would never forget. I don’t recall who said, ‘war is hell,’ but whoever it was, he was only half right. It isn’t just war that’s hell; it’s living with the memories of what you did in it.

The character Thomas Magnum speaks for and represents a community of veterans who experienced the Vietnam War. His experiences are their experiences. His struggles are their struggles.

**Importance of the Study**

Entertainment television is a powerful, far-reaching outlet that can be utilized to teach and expand viewer understanding of social issues. As one of the first television series to not only address the plight of Vietnam veterans, but also depict them in a positive manner, *Magnum, P.I.* displays this in the way it taught audience members and changed the way American society thought about Vietnam veterans. Veterans are “affected by stress symptoms as a consequence of their exposure to combat,” making their transition back into civilian society particularly challenging (Hayman, 1987, p. 363). The existence of a character struggling with these same symptoms on mainstream television in the series *Magnum, P.I.* brought this issue to light for many Americans, but more importantly, it let other struggling veterans know they were not alone.

Soldiers have a very specific experience in and following war, an experience that most civilians will never fully understand. However, repeated exposure to certain characters, symbols, and stock scenarios related to Vietnam led regular viewers of *Magnum, P.I.* to a greater understanding of the struggles of reintegration for Vietnam veterans. This shared heightened awareness formed a community amongst viewers through the process of symbolic convergence.
The study that follows includes content analysis of *Magnum, P.I.* to determine what shared understanding the series actually generated for the community of regular viewers. Examination of the elements of this shared understanding contributes to the field of communication, namely media studies, by displaying the true power of television to act as a catalyst for changing social awareness.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Symbolic Convergence Theory:** a theory of communication asserting that groups develop a shared consciousness of reality, as well as a sense of community, through socially shared narrations (Bormann, 1972; Bormann, 1982a; Bormann, 1982b; Bormann, 1985; Griffin, 2009; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991).

**Fantasy:** “the imaginative and creative interpretation of events,” grounded in reality, that serves as “the way that communities of people create [and express] their social reality” (Bormann, 1982b, p. 52).

**Fantasy Themes:** all the dramatic elements within a fantasy that shape and organize the depicted experience, such as characters, symbols, and key phrases (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 90).

**Fantasy Type:** “a stock scenario that is repeated or shared over and over again” and summarizes or references a certain message with the intent of evoking a specific emotion (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, pp. 91-2).

**Rhetorical Vision:** the “unified putting-together of the various scripts that gives the participants a broader” view of reality (Bormann, 1985, pp. 133).
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following section reviews the literature related to the topic of this study. The majority of the supporting literature addresses symbolic convergence theory, the capability of television to develop shared meaning amongst viewers, and the depiction of Vietnam veterans in entertainment media. This section concludes with a review of the literature pertaining to the series Magnum, P.I., including a synopsis of the plot and a description of the series’ place in popular culture and its effect on society.

This study is grounded in the philosophical assumptions of the rhetorical tradition of communication theory. Aristotle’s concept of rhetoric involves public address with the intent of persuasion, which, in addition to entertainment, is a key function of a television series (Griffin, 2009, p. 280). Critics of Aristotle suggest that rhetoric can be used for selfish and unjust purposes, to coerce an audience into accepting certain beliefs (Griffin, 2009; Nichols, 1987). However, Aristotle’s rhetoric is based in virtuous moderation, the idea of being truthful without being brutally honest nor lying (Griffin, 2009, p. 286). The challenge for a rhetor is therefore to make a point with sensitivity, to express opinions that benefit others without causing harm. A television series can accomplish this by including themes and characters that depict societal reality with subtly, rather than with the often unsettling starkness of news media.

According to Aristotle’s concept, rhetorical acts do not seek truth, but rather demonstrate “truth that’s already been found,” meaning that “rhetoric is the art of discovering ways to make truth seem more probable to an audience that isn’t completely convinced” (Griffin, 2009, p. 280). A television series achieves this by making societal issues more accessible and easier to understand for the general viewing populace. Through rhetoric, television series “tend to expand and intensify man’s insights” about society (Berg, 1972, p. 255). In the case of Magnum, P.I.,
the series expanded the viewers’ understanding of the struggles of Vietnam veterans, an important societal issue of the early 1980s.

**Symbolic Convergence Theory**

Regular viewers of a television series are individuals who become a community because they share the watching experience and develop a common understanding of what they have seen. This connection of isolated audience members, with no prior, communal history, occurs through the process of symbolic convergence. Symbolic convergence is a general theory of communication asserting that groups develop a shared consciousness of reality, as well as a sense of community, through socially shared narrations (Bormann, 1972; Bormann, 1982a; Bormann, 1982b; Bormann, 1985; Griffin, 2009; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991).

Bormann (1985) defines this type of rhetorical activity as a “fantasy theme” or “the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group’s psychological or rhetorical need” (p. 130). Bormann (1982b) uses the word “fantasy” very specifically, and not in the common, literary sense of fictional stories that are “imaginary [and] not grounded in reality” (p. 52). Rather, he applies the term to the communicative process of making a very real experience “visible” and understandable by others, and thus shaping it into social knowledge (p. 52).

Bormann’s (1972, 1982b, 1985) theory is based on the premise that human beings are natural storytellers who share their fantasies through rhetoric in order to make sense of past experiences. By doing so, they create socially shared and accepted views of reality. Bormann (1972, 1982a) extends his theory to explain how rhetoric in the form of mass media functions in the development of meaning that audiences derive from the stories they observe. Since audience members watching the same program are sharing a fantasy, “they jointly experience the same
emotions, develop common heroes and villains, celebrate certain actions as laudable, and interpret some aspect of their common experience in the same way” (Bormann, 1985, p. 131). Thus, by sharing a common experience, an audience of individuals becomes a community.

Symbolic convergence, this construction of community, occurs when multiple viewers develop a shared understanding of the same narration, regardless of whether they have actually experienced the fantasy in their own real lives. This is because the process of sharing a fantasy leads participants “to share the interpretation of the drama, the emotions, meanings, and attitudes of the drama,” (Bormann, 1982a, p. 304). Symbolic convergence can thus bring together a group of Vietnam veterans who are reliving their combat and post-war experiences through the eyes of the television character Thomas Magnum, but it can also transform non-veterans into a community by giving them a glimpse into the veterans’ experiences. Moreover, repeated exposure to the same fantasy strengthens this community and deepens the understanding of the drama depicted because these dramatizations “serve to sustain members’ sense of community, to impel them strongly to action, . . . and to provide them with a social reality” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398).

**Television Develops Shared Meaning**

Television permeates modern American culture. It is a medium through which information is shared and opinions are expressed. Television exposes viewers “to problems that would normally lie outside the range of [their] direct exposure” and expands their understanding of social problems (Berg, 1972, p. 259). It dramatizes communication, thus creating a ripe platform for symbolic convergence. As a staple of most American households, television is highly influential because it reaches so many people. In fact, Berg (1972) claims “what modern man knows about his world is largely attributable to the mass media of communication, namely
television” (p. 255). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) identify television as “the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history” (p. 17). It is “the primary common source of socialization and everyday information” in America (p. 18). Due to the sheer number of viewers influenced by television, the audience develops into a community, even though viewers may be physically isolated from one another. Viewers who do not know one another and may not even be in the same city or region are watching the same programs, taking in the same messages, sharing the same fantasy, and thus developing a shared understanding of the world around them. They therefore become a community.

This shared understanding develops because viewers contribute to determining the meaning of televised images, and they use that meaning as the basis of their perception of reality. Livingstone (1992), McLuhan (1964), and O’Donnell (2007) all explain this by acknowledging that viewers are informed, active participants in the process of constructing meaning. While “television creators tap into cultural norms to” determine what they show to an audience, it is the audience members who either approve and accept or reject and resist the content (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 143).

Also, the viewing audience is heavily absorbed in the action they are watching. They become emotionally involved, they feel as though they are experiencing what the characters are going through, and consequently, they can assign meaning to the experience. McLuhan (1964) cites the example of a medical show, which may be so engrossing that viewers without any medical knowledge feel directly involved with the drama, so much so that they are not just watching an operation, but feel as if they are performing it (p. 328). According to McLuhan, viewers reach a shared understanding because mass media translates experiences into terms for
all to understand and accept. Haralovich (1991) agrees, stating that “popular fiction
‘reformulates’ ideologies and social relations into accessible and popular forms” (p. 124).

Murdock (1998) supports this, describing the relationship between television and the
audience as highly interactive. He states that television programs are a prominent source of
cultural symbols, and therefore they represent a “key repository of available meanings which
people can draw upon in their continuing attempts to make sense of their situation” and the world
around them (p. 206). Murdock concludes that viewers’ systems of meaning, including their
understanding of social structure, social process, history, and reality, are all influenced by
television-relayed messages. Cortes (2005) furthers Murdock’s point, asserting that viewers
glean “what they believe to be reliable information from” entertainment media, and they use that
information to “draw conclusions” (pp. 56-57).

Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong (2004) expand on the influence of television by examining the
persuasive power of narrative. They explain that narratives tap into the emotions of viewers,
impacting what they believe, teaching new behaviors, and shaping cultural identity (p. 176). The
authors determine that when audience members not only like but, more importantly, identify
with narrative characters, those viewers form positive associations with the beliefs and behaviors
of those characters (p. 180). This association then shapes the viewers concept of the reality
depicted in the narrative.

**Media Depictions of Vietnam Veterans**

Berg (1972) explains that many of “the greatest issues of the day,” including the Vietnam
War, “are known only indirectly and usually via the mass media” (pp. 255-256). Prior to
*Magnum, P.I.*, the American public’s shared understanding of the Vietnam War was based
primarily on news coverage (Adams, 1977). This “unpopular and heroless war was the first to be
brought to the [American] people by television,” and most of the coverage was harsh and negative (p. 248). The story, or fantasy, presented night after night on the evening news was told from the reporters’ and politicians’ points of view, not typically from the soldiers’, and it forever changed the American perception of the military (p. 253).

According to Berg (1972), “uncensored television, through its capacity to vivify the grim details of combat, . . . produced a militant aversion to the Vietnam War” (p. 258). Ballard-Reisch (1991) supports this, explaining that negative television coverage of the war (the repeated exposure to that particular fantasy) created a national sense of disillusionment and guilt, which made the reintegration experience more challenging for Vietnam veterans than for soldiers of previous wars. Due to this, Vietnam veterans had a lot to deal with, emotionally, upon their return and during the years following the war, particularly guilt, which made reintegrating into civilian society a tremendous struggle. *Magnum, P.I.* presented a different side to the story, though, and it paved the way for other television series, such as *China Beach* and *Tour of Duty*, which helped change the public perception of the war and the soldiers (Ballard-Reisch, 1991; Owens, 2002).

Griffin and Sen (1995) reiterate the previously mentioned findings of McLuhan (1964), Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986), Livingstone (1992), and Murdock (1998), who all contend that media has a great influence on popular perceptions. Griffin and Sen’s (1995) study illustrates that communication of a war-related message through entertainment media does in fact affect how people attribute meaning to the war experience for veterans. Citing Austen and Quart, Griffin and Sen explain that post-Vietnam era portrayals of veterans, including *Magnum, P.I.*, tend to depict these individuals as being “in need of compassion and empathy,” rather than scorn and hatred, and that they are survivors whose wounds are “more a source of
moral strength and courage,” instead of scars that should elicit pity (p. 512). Such depictions changed public opinions in the 1980s, and the American public came to better understand and accept the plight of Vietnam veterans.

Rasmussen and Downey (1991) examine films, rather than television, but they reach the same conclusions about the influence of entertainment media. In a study of four films that focus on the American soldiers’ experiences of war, they determine that Vietnam changed the American public’s understanding of war, and this new depiction in film led to a new acceptance and tolerance of Vietnam veterans. The films they examine share the common theme of ordinary men immersed in the confusion and terror of war, a depiction that is far more accurate than the traditional, glorified portrayal of war (p. 177). This updated depiction also occurs in Magnum, P.I. Through their study, the authors conclude that for American Vietnam veterans, the focus of the war was survival, rather than honor or victory, and the true enemy they faced, and continue to face even after returning home, was the war itself (p. 179). Rasmussen and Downey suggest that further research should examine television series such as Magnum, P.I., Air Wolf, and Simon and Simon, all of which focus on individuals who are veterans, “protectors of society, . . . men strengthened by their experiences” in war (p. 191).

Haines (1990) studies both films and television series featuring Vietnam veterans. He begins with the premise that prior to the early 1980s Vietnam veterans had been silenced, forced to internalize and repress their experiences and any troubles they had developed as a result of their combat experience (p. 101). This was reinforced by their lack of representation in entertainment media. According to Haines, though, films and television shows such as Rambo: First Blood, Part II and Magnum, P.I. gave Vietnam veterans a new voice, an actual voice. Such pieces of entertainment media allowed veterans to take a “return trip” back to Vietnam to process
and comprehend their combat experience. It also allowed non-veterans the opportunity to gain a better understanding of “the war’s lived social drama” (p. 102). For both sets of viewers, the return trip brings “closure to the war” (p. 120).

Heilbronn (1985) further examines Vietnam veterans on television. In fact, he labels the Vietnam veteran as television’s “latest hero” (as of the mid-1980s) (p. 25). His examination finds that series such as Magnum, P.I., The A-Team, and Air Wolf present characters that are different from previous depictions of veterans because the military service of these men is not simply part of their back-story, but rather an influential element of their identity and part of the premise of the series (p. 26). Also, these shows present veterans working together as a team, as they did in the military, and using the skills they acquired in the military for the betterment of society (p. 28). Heilbronn concludes that the positive depictions in these series have highly influenced society’s opinion and increasing acceptance of Vietnam veterans.

Magnum, P.I.

The 1980s television series Magnum, P.I. follows the cases, adventures, trials, and tribulations of the title character Thomas Magnum, and his buddies and fellow Vietnam veterans Rick and TC, as well as Jonathan Higgins, the major domo of the estate where Magnum lives. Magnum is a former Naval Intelligence officer who left the military after serving 3 tours in Vietnam to run his own private investigation company. While Magnum has moved on from the military professionally, the audience watches him constantly struggle with the imprint made by his former career.

Magnum, P.I. was a popular and successful series when it originally aired, mostly due to the fact that the character of Magnum is extremely likeable and relatable to a diverse audience (Haralovich, 1991; Flitterman, 1985). Both male and female viewers were drawn to Magnum
due to his combination of masculinity and vulnerability, his athleticism and his kind heart (Flitterman, 1985). The presence of such a character not only attracts but also retains viewers. Magnum is a role model; a man other men seek to be like and a man women seek to be with, both on the show and off. He is an “everyman” character, because while he appears to live a charmed life on a palatial estate, driving a fancy sports car, those items are not actually his. He is “just your average tall, dark and handsome private investigator who leads an average existence” (Larson & Bellisario as cited in Haralovich, 1991, p. 127). He is a small business owner in the tough economic times of the early 1980s. He is constantly struggling to make ends meet and frequently in debt to his friends who do favors for him.

During its original airing, the series also appealed to a broad audience because the title character exhibited a certain sense of ethics that was common to his place in time. Following the Vietnam War and in the midst of an economic recession, the American public was wary of government agencies. *Magnum, P.I.* was one of several series featuring private detectives with a strong sense of honor, yet also a “situational” sense of ethics, meaning that Magnum knew the law and knew when to break it. Private investigators and independent contractors like Magnum and those appearing on *Simon and Simon, The A-Team*, and *Air Wolf* were able to solve the crimes that those in a more official capacity could not. This made these characters likeable and relatable.

Flitterman (1985) further explains the appeal of *Magnum, P.I.* by pointing out that Magnum is both vulnerable and fallible. He is not perfect, suggesting that any random viewer could be like him, could be his friend, or could be his love interest. Spangler (1992) also finds *Magnum, P.I.* to have wide appeal because of the realistic relationships Magnum has with his
buddies Rick and TC. They are men who formed a strong bond during the Vietnam War and continue that relationship even after the war has ended.

*Magnum, P.I.* episodes regularly draw “upon commonly held American ‘social memory’ of Vietnam” (Haralovich, 1991, p. 127). In fact, according to both Buxton (2011) and Owens (2002), the series was one of the first to regularly and seriously explore the impact of the Vietnam War on America and the veterans. It deals with “incidents triggered by memories and relationships growing out of Magnum’s past war experiences” (Buxton, 2011, para. 4), and each episode allows the audience to follow “the postwar reconstruction of a veteran’s identity” (Haines, 1990, p. 116). “The Vietnam experience pervades *Magnum, P.I.*, particularly addressing “how the characters’ Vietnam experiences affected their lives after the war” (Owens, 2002, p. 58). Thomas Magnum represents the “personification” of American society coming to terms with the Vietnam War (Buxton, 2011, para. 5).

Beyond just the presence of the war, *Magnum, P.I.* also presents a character whom was a Vietnam veteran but also a “normal” man, something that was rare in entertainment media prior to this series (Buxton, 2011; Haralovich, 1991; Heilbronn, 1985; Koseluk, 2004; Spangler, 1992). Magnum is a “well-adjusted veteran who works at remaining adjusted” while dealing with the struggles of both the past and the present (italics in original, Haines, 1990, p. 116). He does not turn to drugs or alcohol to deal with his past. He admits to having sought and received help, which shows that he was not mentally crippled by post-traumatic stress (Romas, 1993, p. 17). He is an average guy who just so happens to be a veteran. He is just like the majority of Vietnam veterans in the audience, and that fact did not go unnoticed. According to Koseluk (2004), “mail flooded the show from veterans happy to see the characters leading productive and normal lives” (p. 64).
Magnum, P.I. does not dismiss post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), though, because doing so would deny part of the reality of the average Vietnam veteran’s experience. Vietnam veterans were particularly susceptible to PTSD due to the nature of the war (tactics and setting), the rampant debate on the home-front regarding the virtue of the war, the negative response upon returning home, and the relatively brief deployment duration, which provided little to “no opportunity for processing [the] traumatic experiences or adjusting to dramatic lifestyle changes” (Hayman, 1987, p. 363). The series acknowledges PTSD, or “delayed stress” as the characters often refer to it in the series, “as a valid and serious affliction from which many veterans suffer” (Romas, 1993, p. 24). However, such an affliction is never used nor accepted “as an excuse for anti-social behavior” (p. 24). A handful of guest characters, mostly combat buddies from Magnum’s past, require Magnum’s help because they have gotten themselves into trouble due to their struggles with PTSD. The disorder is depicted as “a condition that can be alleviated through hospitalization, therapy, and counseling,” but more importantly, through the help and support of friends (p. 24). By helping his combat buddies with PTSD, Magnum guides them “off their self-destructive course and back into society” (p. 25).

Anderson (1987) explains that Magnum, P.I. differentiated itself from previous crime dramas, such as Hawaii Five-O, by examining such issues as the Vietnam War and PTSD, but also by employing a narrative sophistication (p. 118). Magnum, P.I. uses recurring themes and characters, symbols (such as Magnum’s unit ring and hat), and the narrative techniques of flashbacks, voiceover, and Magnum turning toward the camera to make direct eye contact with the viewer. All of these techniques connect the audience to the title character and to the experience they are watching. Thus, Magnum’s experience becomes a depiction of the collective experience of the entire audience.
Rationale

The literature discussed in this section examines symbolic convergence theory, the influence of television on viewers, media depictions of Vietnam veterans, and the television series "Magnum, P.I." The literature acknowledges that the medium of television generates a shared understanding and a sense of community amongst viewers through symbolic convergence. This capability is important because, following the Vietnam War, there was a cultural moment allowing for the positive depiction of Vietnam veterans in entertainment media, something that was not seen during the war, which led viewers to a new comprehension of these individuals. With the emergence of "Magnum, P.I." and the perspective it provided, opinions changed regarding Vietnam veterans. Audiences saw Vietnam veterans depicted as ordinary men and women who had undergone an extraordinary experience, one that they struggled to deal with even after the war ended.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the elements of fantasy present within a popular television series and which, through symbolic convergence, generated a shared understanding amongst viewers of the challenge of reintegration for veterans. The objective of this study is to perform fantasy theme analysis of the series "Magnum, P.I." with predominant focus on recurring themes, characters, and symbols, to establish what message the series conveyed to viewers about the struggle of veterans following the war.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of the Study

This study was prompted by the watching of the series *Magnum, P.I.* in its entirety and the identification of numerous recurring themes and symbols tied to Vietnam veterans and, particularly, those addressing the struggle of veterans to reintegrate into society after the war. While the influence of the series as a whole and each individual episode will be taken into account, this study examines 30 specific episodes with heavy content about Vietnam. Key themes, symbols, and dramatic elements are identified for each episode in order to construct the rhetorical vision and determine the inherent meaning of the episode. Conclusions are shaped around how the drama of individual episodes fosters an overall meaning for the series as a whole, as well as how that may have generated a sense of community and understanding amongst viewers through symbolic convergence.

Methodology

Rhetorical criticism is the most appropriate form of analysis for this study because television is a rhetorical artifact in the form of mass media. “Rhetoric usually assumes both an audience and an intention to convey meaning,” as does television programming (Berg, 1972, p. 260). Television series convey meaning through recurring themes, situations, and symbols. As such, fantasy theme analysis is the type of criticism that best fits the subject of this study because it addresses the concept of symbolic convergence by focusing “on the message symbols contained in rhetorical acts and the sharing of fantasies to explain experience” (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 98).

This method of analysis acknowledges that “public communication,” such as the drama depicted in a television series, is created and presented with the purpose of answering “the
questions: What is really happening here and what is the nature of our reality” (p. 86). Fantasy theme analysis dissects a rhetorical vision in order to discover the communication patterns of a particular fantasy, examine the elements of that fantasy, and explain “how and why the fantasy works for a particular group of people” (p. 90). These key elements can be further classified as the fantasy theme, the fantasy type, and the rhetorical vision.

Fantasy themes include all of the dramatic elements within a fantasy that “shape and organize [an] experience,” such as characters, symbols, and key phrases (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 90). A fantasy theme becomes a fantasy type when it “is a stock scenario that is repeated or shared over and over again” (p. 91). Fantasy types are dramatic triggers that summarize or reference a certain message with the intent of evoking a specific emotion (p. 92). The repetition of fantasy types is crucial because it “increases the teaching power” of the images or scenarios (Cortes, 2005, p. 57). The frequency of fantasy types contributes to viewers’ knowledge of the topic depicted and makes the overall rhetorical vision easier to understand and accept. A rhetorical vision is the “unified putting-together of the various scripts [fantasy themes and types] that gives the participants a broader” view of reality (Bormann, 1985, pp. 133). This broader view “contains the complete articulation” of a group’s shared fantasy (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 96).

The analysis of *Magnum, P.I.* that follows consists of the examination of these key fantasy elements, beginning with a thorough description of the rhetorical act in the form of a plot summary (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991, p. 23). Assessment of main characters, common situations, physical artifacts acting as symbols, and language will determine how these elements contribute to several recurring themes (p. 24). Evaluation of these themes will allow for “judgment about the quality and consequences of the rhetorical act” (p. 16).
Sample to Be Examined

In studying the Vietnam aspect of *Magnum, P.I.*, Romas (1993) divided all 154 episodes of the series into 3 categories: “those that dwell heavily on the Vietnam experience (n=25), those that contain a small reference to the Vietnam variable (n=32), and those that make no reference to it (n=97)” (p. 17). This study will replicate Romas’ study and examine the 25 episodes from the first group, as well as 5 additional episodes that are significant due to their depiction of the challenges facing Vietnam veterans following the war. A complete list of analyzed episodes can be found in Appendix A.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

This study focused on the coding and analysis of 30 specific episodes of *Magnum, P.I.* with heavy Vietnam content. The section that follows explores the key fantasy themes and types (recurring situations, symbols, and dramatic elements) identified for each episode, in order to construct the rhetorical vision and determine the meanings available in the series.

**Results of the Study**

**Plot summary.** The series *Magnum, P.I.* follows the adventures of the title character, Thomas Magnum, a former Naval Intelligence officer who left the military after 3 combat tours in Vietnam to open a private investigation company. Magnum lives on the palatial Hawaiian estate of novelist Robin Masters, where he serves as the head of security. He shares the estate with Jonathan Quayle Higgins III, the major domo, and a former Sergeant Major in the British Army. While Magnum and Higgins clash on many issues, their shared military backgrounds give them some common ground.

Magnum is constantly surrounded by his two best buddies Rick and TC, whom he met and formed an extremely strong relationship with in Vietnam. Orville “Rick” Wright is a former Marine door gunner and weapons expert. He is a man with connections, albeit some dubious, but he is always able to get Magnum the information he needs, whether he is tracking down a partial license plate, the location of a suspect, or the serial number of a gun. Rick is the manager of the King Kamehameha Club, a private beach club where Magnum often spends time and meets with clients. Theodore Calvin (TC) is a former Marine helicopter pilot who now operates his own helicopter charter company called Island Hoppers and has a variety of interests, including art, dance, and coaching a variety of youth sports teams. TC regularly flies Magnum around during the course of his investigations, which often results in damage to TC’s helicopter.
Magnum relies heavily on his friends. They are like family to him, and they always help, although sometimes begrudgingly because they feel Magnum does not always reciprocate or appreciate them. This is a regular point of contention amongst the three buddies, yet they always work things out in the end. They always show up to help one another. They always remain supportive. The experiences they shared in Vietnam, many of which are revealed to the audience through flashbacks, bound these men together forever, and they understand each other as no one else does.

They have a shared history that shaped who they are in the present, and while they are all civilians now, they do not deny nor conceal their military past. Throughout the course of the series, Magnum, Rick, and TC each face their own struggles prompted by their service in Vietnam, and each must process and deal with his experience in his own way. Although the Vietnam variable touches their lives, they each recognize that it does not completely define them.

**Fantasy themes and types.** In addition to Magnum’s reliance on his buddies, there are several other recurring symbols, situations, and narrative devices that shape the overall rhetorical vision of the series.

Magnum, Rick, and TC each wear a ring bearing the Cross of Lorraine, a double-barred cross that is the insignia of their unit from Vietnam. The insignia appears in all 30 of the episodes examined. Apart from the unit rings, the double-barred cross also appears throughout the series on necklace pendants, a hat, and a tattoo. It is the physical artifact marking the wearers’ participation in the war. It is something they wear regularly and display proudly. It represents a brotherhood with the fellow members of the unit, and it serves as a reminder of lost teammates. In addition to the unit insignia, other recurring physical artifacts of Vietnam include numerous photographs, including one of Magnum, Rick, and TC in their military dress
uniforms that Magnum has framed and displayed in his living room, the baseball cap TC wears that is emblazoned with “VMO2 DaNang” (the name of their unit), and the MIA bracelet and US Navy belt buckle Magnum frequently wears.

While their unit rings are a physical reminder of their combat experience, flashbacks of Vietnam serve as an intangible reminder. Flashbacks occur in 15 of the 30 sample episodes (Table 1). Magnum, Rick, TC, and a handful of guest characters who are also Vietnam veterans all experience flashbacks. They are typically sparked by stressful situations or exposure to a visual or audio cue that reminds the character of Vietnam, such as seeing a dead body, hearing helicopter rotors, or hearing news of someone from their military past. Flashbacks force the sufferer to re-experience a situation, one that typically was frightening and left a deep impact on their psyche.

Both Magnum and TC flash back multiple times to their experience in a POW camp. Taylor Hurst, a guest character in the season 2 episode “The Last Page,” flashes back to the death of his best friend. Karen Harmon, a former Army nurse Magnum knew in Vietnam who is featured in the season 3 episode “Heal Thyself,” flashes back to the bombing of her field medical clinic. Within the series, flashbacks are depicted as a normal part of the process of dealing with the war. They are not labeled as shameful, nor is the sufferer deemed weak for experiencing them. Often, the flashbacks prompt discussion amongst the characters, and the sufferer is encouraged to talk about his or her experience and seek clinical help, if needed.

Table 1 - Flashbacks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Magnum</th>
<th>Rick</th>
<th>TC</th>
<th>Other Veteran(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>X</td>
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Magnum’s military past regularly creeps into his present. For instance, certain characters in 10 of the 30 sample episodes use military language in their civilian world (Table 2). The most common occurrence of this is the regular use of the phrase “Victor Charlie,” or just “Charlie,” to refer to the bad guys chasing Magnum, Rick, and TC. The phrase equates their adversary of the moment to the Vietcong, the southern Vietnamese enemy of the American forces. “Victor Charlie” refers to the letters “V” and “C” in the phonetic alphabet, which is widely used by the military. Other examples include TC using the term “roger” to acknowledge that he understands and accepts directions, Rick referring to jail as “the brig,” and Nick Frangakis, a guest character in the season 3 episode “Wave Goodbye,” mistaking a Honolulu police officer for a member of the “NVA,” the North Vietnamese Army, simply because the man was wearing a uniform.

Table 2 - Military Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Magnum</th>
<th>Rick</th>
<th>TC</th>
<th>Other Veteran(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>2.19</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.15</td>
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<td>8.12</td>
<td>X</td>
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Beyond military language, Magnum’s former profession constantly helps him. His Navy SEAL training has made him extremely strong and athletic, and it provided him with a vast knowledge of weapons and hand-to-hand combat. Magnum would not survive many of his cases without these skills or his continued physical conditioning. His time spent with Naval Intelligence was also invaluable because of the investigative skills he developed and the connections with other Navy officers. Magnum regularly approaches these individuals, in particular Lt. “Mac” MacReynolds and Lt. Commander Maggie Poole, for help and sensitive military information, which they tend to give only hesitantly due to Magnum’s now civilian status.

One final recurring fantasy type of *Magnum, P.I.* is the use of narrative devices to connect the main character directly with the viewers. Voiceover narration is regularly used in *Magnum, P.I.* Rather than a distant, unseen narrator, though, Magnum is the one explaining the situation, clueing the audience into what is happening. He often begins his narration with the phrase, “I know what you’re thinking . . .” and then goes on to explain the rationale of his actions. He also frequently turns and looks directly at the camera/audience with a knowing
These techniques create a sense of familiarity and intimacy between Magnum and the viewers because such narrative devices lead the audience to believe that Magnum is not only speaking to them, but that he considers them friends. He is telling them a story, incorporating them into the narrative, and creating an opportunity for symbolic convergence.

### Summary of Findings

Analysis of these fantasy types reveals three recurring themes addressing the struggle of Vietnam veterans to reintegrate into society. These themes (the rhetorical vision) influence, through symbolic convergence, the viewers’ understanding of the post-combat experience for veterans. The recurring themes are: the war continues, processing the war experience is a shared burden requiring the support of a team, and the experience of war can steal the youth of veterans.

**The war continues.** Combat is a unique experience. It is stressful and intense. It exposes participants to a darker side of human nature, and it influences the way they view the world. War leaves an imprint on those involved, one that participants carry with them, even after the conflict ends. Whether it is in the forefront of their minds, or lingering in the background, the experience is a part of these individuals. For them, the war does not end when they return home from combat.

In the season 7 episode “Little Girl Who,” Magnum labels the Vietnam War “a chaotic time; a war that kept changing, even in retrospect,” and he says “every time I thought I’d put it behind me, it crept up and tapped me on the shoulder.” Within the first few minutes of the series’ inaugural episode, “Don’t Eat the Snow in Hawaii,” the audience is introduced to Magnum’s combat experience. After a long swim, Magnum rubs his sore shoulder, lingers over a scar, and flashes back to the cause of the injury. He was shot in combat in Vietnam, and that left him with both a physical scar and a stark memory. The war is not truly over for Magnum,
and several other characters, because they have regular reminders, such as scars, the unit rings, and memories, all of which extend the influence and impact of the war, and, in a way, extend the war, itself.

In the season 1 episode “Skin Deep,” Magnum explains, “I’d gone months without remembering Nam. Until this morning.” He is referring to a visit to the morgue to identify a dead body, a sight that reminds him of his combat experience. Remembering is not always easy, nor pleasant, and if he can, Magnum tries to avoid thinking and talking about the war, but sometimes remembering is unavoidable. In the season 2 episode “Memories are Forever,” he explains that he “made it a point over the years to avoid the part of Honolulu called Little Saigon, afraid it’d bring back too many memories.” However, as the episode’s title states, memories are forever, and they cannot be eluded. Another example of this occurs in the season 2 episode “The Last Page,” when Magnum is driving through a military cemetery and comments, “I read somewhere that the past is like a shadow: no substance, but always at your heels. Well, the cemetery was a reminder that Vietnam is awfully close to my heels.”

While Vietnam is a part of Magnum’s past, he does not allow his memories of it to consume him. Other characters are not quite so strong. The guest characters Nick Frangakis (season 2, episode 7) and Taylor Hurst (season 2, episode 19) are haunted by their memories of Vietnam. The season 3 episode “Heal Thyself” focuses on Dr. Karen Harmon, a former Army nurse. When faced with the stress of losing 3 patients and being blamed for their deaths, Karen’s memories of the war overwhelm her, leading her to have flashbacks of the bombing of her medical clinic in Vietnam. She tells Magnum, “there are things I remember so clearly. People and places from Nam, like they’re happening all over again. I’ve seen so much death and so much senseless pain. Other people can’t understand that.” Trying to reassure her, Magnum
replies, “many of us who’ve experienced the horrors of war have them indelibly printed on our minds, but that’s the only place they exist. The war is over.” For Karen this is not true. “Maybe it’s never over,” she says, “maybe we always carry the war around inside of us.”

The Vietnam experience is a part of the identities of Magnum, Rick, TC, and other characters in the series. For some, it weighs heavily on their minds, forcing them to make poor decisions, but for others, the reminders of the war make them stronger people. In the season 5 episode “Tran Quoc Jones,” TC talks to a young Vietnamese-American orphan about dealing with fear. He mentions his time in combat, saying, “I hardly ever think about the scary times back there [in Vietnam] anymore. But when it gets really bad, I think, I made it through that, didn’t I? I can make it through anything.”

In the season 6 episode “Going Home,” the reminder of Vietnam helps Magnum gain some closure. Returning to his hometown of Tidewater, Virginia, Magnum clashes with his stepfather over the loss of his half-brother, Joey, who followed Magnum into the military and was killed in Vietnam. Magnum admits to thinking about Joey every day, and that helps him process and deal with the loss of his brother. That acknowledgment also helps him come to terms with his stepfather’s anger toward him.

In the same episode, Magnum talks with a friend from high school who was injured in Vietnam and is now in a wheelchair. Despite losing the use of his legs, the friend has a very positive outlook. He shows Magnum a picture of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and encourages Magnum to visit it, saying that “it just has a feeling about it.” Having purposefully avoided the Memorial up to this point as a way of trying to ignore the pain and bad memories it might recall, Magnum does visit it at the end of the episode. He sees his brother’s name and cries as he processes the experience.
While Magnum often tries to avoid reminders of the war, truthfully, he fully accepts what he did and saw in combat. He willingly attended the Naval Academy and went to Vietnam; he was not drafted. He proudly served his country. Yet, the war continues for Magnum because he is often forced to justify his experience to others.

In the season 5 episode “Tran Quoc Jones,” Magnum is frustrated at his assignment to provide security for a politician who, years before, actively spoke out against the Vietnam War. Getting in a shouting match with this man, Mangum says, “don’t try to convince us that you’re such a wonderful person . . . Convince yourself. ‘Cause in my book, it can’t compare to the kind of courage it took to go over there [to Vietnam] and get shot at.” In the same episode, Magnum later tells Higgins, “I’ve been listening to these people for years, with their neat little version of how things were [in Vietnam]. It’s just not that simple, I guess.”

Another instance of having to justify his participation in Vietnam occurs in the season 6 episode “Déjà Vu.” The wife of one of Magnum’s former teammates, Geoffrey St. Clair, is horrified to discover that her husband was a sniper in Vietnam and killed several people. Magnum tries to explain the situation and put it in context for her, but eventually he says, “why am I trying to justify this to you? It’s a part of my life. A part that’s over, but I’m not ashamed of it.”

While the war itself may be over, the internal struggle of processing the experience continues for Magnum, a point exemplified by his words in the season 2 episode “The Last Page.” Speaking to the wife of a soldier who was killed in action, Magnum says, “sometimes it’s hard to be the one who came back.” The wife then turns to Magnum and says, “tell me, Thomas, when’s the war going to end?” Magnum replies with, “I don’t know.”
Magnum’s words are echoed in the conclusion of the season 2 episode “Memories are Forever.” The episode ends with news coverage of the return of the bodies of 6 missing-in-action American soldiers from Vietnam. In voiceover the newscaster says, “Vietnam is a war that will never end until all the boys come home, and for some, not even then.” During this scene, the camera focuses on the images of the newscast until the last few words, when the focus switches to Magnum sitting on his bed, looking dejected, drinking a beer, and watching the coverage alone in a darkened room. For him, the words ring true.

The war continues for Magnum and other characters because of numerous daily reminders that extend the influence and impact Vietnam has on their lives. At the end of the season 5 episode “All for One,” an episode in which Magnum, Rick, and TC return to Vietnam, Rick asks, “what if we hadn’t have gone,” a question referring to both the action of that episode and their original service in Vietnam. Magnum responds with “we did.” Their experience in Vietnam happened. It is and will always be a part of each one of them. The past cannot be erased or forgotten. It must be accepted and dealt with.

**Shared burden.** Magnum’s experience in Vietnam revolved around being a member of a team. A flashback in the season 1 episode “Don’t Eat the Snow in Hawaii” shows Magnum’s teammate Lieutenant Dan Cook saying to him, “you’ve put in your tour; you can get out.” Magnum responds to this with, “can’t do that . . . we’re a team, can’t split up the team.” The same holds true for his experience after the war, as well.

Dealing with Vietnam and processing the war experience is a struggle for Magnum and the other veteran characters, and the series reveals that it is a burden that they must share with one another. Moving on from the war, reintegrating into civilian society, and not being consumed by the past all require the support of a team. Nearly all of the sample episodes feature
Magnum and his buddies working together as a team, helping each other when one is struggling, regardless of the severity of the issue, and acknowledging that none of them is alone.

The shared burden of processing the Vietnam experience is particularly evident in 13 of the studied episodes, each of which feature veteran characters who are having a particularly hard time in the civilian world. The issues they face range from post-traumatic stress and drug use to struggling and failed business ventures and the loss of loved ones (Table 3). In each instance, the character initially does not want assistance, but most of them soon realize they require help from fellow veterans and friends in order to get their lives back on track.

Table 3 - Struggling Veterans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Eric Tobin</td>
<td>A special forces soldier who deserted the military because he disagreed with his assignments is sought by his superiors in order to cover up the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Joey Santino</td>
<td>Marine who deserted the military during Vietnam, turned to drugs, and now gets TC arrested for smuggling him back to the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Nick Frangakis</td>
<td>Veteran suffering from paranoia and post-traumatic stress, he separates himself from society and confesses to a crime he did not commit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>Kate Sullivan</td>
<td>A reporter injured in Vietnam, which derailed her career, she now chases questionable leads to get a good story, while endangering the lives of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>Taylor Hurst</td>
<td>Struggling with the guilt of returning from war when his best friend died, he seeks deadly vengeance for the death of his friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>TC</td>
<td>Suffering from paranoia and anger caused by the return of the Russian officer would held him as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>Karen Harmon</td>
<td>Induced by the stress of her current career, her post-traumatic stress returns and leads to a mental breakdown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>Rod Crysler</td>
<td>A compulsive liar who has served time in prison for drug use, he is now selling drugs and ropes Magnum into his web of deceit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>Induced by the death of his sister, his post-traumatic stress returns and leads to a mental break down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Leon Platt</td>
<td>After his business fails, turns to throwing boxing matches to make money off betting against himself with gangsters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Holly Hudson</td>
<td>Radio DJ who tracks down the soldier who jilted her in Vietnam with the intent of killing him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>Magnum</td>
<td>Opening his own business proves to be a challenge; he sleeps in his office and at a client’s house to save money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.12</td>
<td>Magnum</td>
<td>Devastated and depressed by the loss of his wife and daughter, he begins drinking heavily.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The clearest example of a veteran struggling with civilian society is Nick Frangakis from the season 2 episode “Wave Goodbye.” Nick is a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress and paranoia who confesses to a murder he did not commit. Having separated himself from society, he lives in a fort made of tree branches and scrap metal in the Hawaiian jungle. “I know I’m nuts,” he tells Magnum. “Out there, I’m gonna kill somebody, man. I’m gonna waste ‘em, just like I did before [in combat]. Out here [the jungle], I ain’t gonna hurt nobody.” Nick believes he is a danger because of his experience in Vietnam, so he separates himself from society as a method of coping.

Magnum understands Nick’s problems, explaining to the audience in voiceover that he knows Nick is not alone with his demons, “they are mine, too,” he says. Magnum knows that the struggle of dealing with the Vietnam experience is a shared burden, and he tries to help Nick, saying, “why don’t you come back with me. I know some guys who can help. They know what you’re going through.” Nick responds, “No, no, I’ve been there. Man, I have been in your hospitals,” and he has no intention of returning. By the end of the episode, though, Magnum convinces Nick to revisit the VA hospital and get the help he needs. Magnum reveals that he received help in the past, too, and he provides the moral support that Nick was previously missing.

Magnum also helps his good friend Dr. Karen Harmon in the season 3 episode “Heal Thyself.” Karen explains to him that she spent time in the VA hospital just after returning from Vietnam, and that helped her. “When I got back from Nam, I just felt empty,” she says. “There were no highs, no lows, no joy, no regret, just . . . just nothing. When I got to the VA hospital, that was good for me because it gave me time to regroup. That helped.” Magnum reassures her
that she is not crazy and encourages her to talk about the current stress in her life, and by doing so, she is able to regroup, again.

In the season 4 episode “Distant Relative,” Magnum explains the significance of the support of good friends when he says, “when you’re away from home and fighting a war, friends are the only comfort you have. In Vietnam, TC and Rick were always there when I needed them. Now that we’re all home and safe, we tend to take each other for granted.” In that episode, Magnum and TC realize that even though they are no longer in combat, they, and especially Rick, still need each other’s support. The episode begins with a visit from Rick’s sister, Wendy, but this happy visit quickly takes a turn for the worse when she is found dead in an alley.

Rick becomes incensed and loses control. He puts on his camouflaged gear, grabs an assortment of weapons, and seeks out the men who killed his sister. Magnum and TC are on his heels the entire episode, trying to console him and convince him that killing Wendy’s killers will not help him. They are eventually able to help him calm down and return to his normal behavior, but his erratic break is referenced in a later episode (season 7, episode 20), when Higgins, talking to Magnum, says, “it’s hard to say what people will do when someone they care about is threatened.” Magnum acknowledges that Rick “went off the deep end,” but with the help of his friends, he was able to deal with the experience.

In multiple episodes, the support of a team often stems from a sense of debt and gratitude. Magnum, Rick, and TC each have people who made a positive impact on them during their time in Vietnam. They are so grateful to these people, who they believe saved their lives in combat, that they jump at the opportunity to repay them and help them through their own tough times in the civilian world.
The season 1 episode “Thicker than Blood” begins with TC landing his helicopter on a ship out at sea and picking up a passenger, Joey Santino, who saved his life in Vietnam by pulling him out of a burning helicopter. Unfortunately, things go very wrong for TC: as he is refueling, drugs are smuggled onto his helicopter without him knowing, and on his trip back to Honolulu, he is apprehended and arrested by the Coast Guard for smuggling. Magnum questions why TC would risk everything he has worked for and loves for Joey’s sake, especially since Magnum assumes Joey is involved with drugs, and TC explains he has an obligation to this man. He is willing to risk his life to help Joey return to the United States, and he is determined to help Joey stay clean. TC understands that Joey needs a support system, a team, to tackle the pressures of civilian life.

The season 3 episode “By Its Cover” depicts Magnum doing something similar. Magnum feels a sense of debt to Rod Crysler, a friend of his from the Naval Academy, because Rod was particularly kind to Magnum’s mother while Magnum was being held as a POW. Unfortunately, after serving in Vietnam, Rod turned to drugs, spent time in prison, and is now actually dealing drugs. Magnum says in voiceover, “Rod wasn’t the same guy I’d known at the Academy, or in Nam, but, then, neither was I.” Rod repeatedly lies to Magnum and gets him in serious trouble by having him deliver a package that turns out to be several kilos of marijuana, yet Magnum goes out of his way to help Rod. Having a sense of allegiance to a fellow veteran and knowing that he needs the help of friends, Magnum is dedicated to getting Rod back on the right track, even setting up a sting operation to catch the dirty police officer who is forcing Rod to sell drugs.

In the season 3 episode “Two Birds of a Feather,” Magnum serves as the support system for a man he never actually met in Vietnam. During one of his combat tours, Magnum and several members of his unit were battered and pinned down in the Cambodian jungle, a place
they were not supposed to be, and Sam Hunter, a Navy jet pilot, provided cover fire until TC was able to evacuate the men in his helicopter. Magnum and Sam only spoke over the radio, so when they meet in the present, the two do not recognize each other, but both feel they know the other, and for reasons unknown to him, Magnum feels a sense of debt to Sam. He helps Sam get home for his son’s birthday, and he investigates charges against Sam, eventually proving his innocence.

TC also feels the need to help a man he does not know. In the season 4 episode “A Sense of Debt,” TC gets into a car accident that injures a pedestrian. The man, Leon Platt, is a Vietnam veteran, who after the collapse of his barbeque business, turned to bare knuckles boxing to make money and support his family. Due to the injuries caused by the accident with TC, Leon cannot fight and stands to lose a great deal of money from lost fights. TC notices a unit insignia tattooed on Leon’s arm, and realizes that Leon was a member of a Marine Corps unit that saved his life during the war. Feeling that he owes his life to this man, TC volunteers to box in Leon’s place. Leon objects, trying to down-play his participation in Vietnam and claiming that he was not the one who saved TC’s life. In the end, TC’s dedication to helping a fellow veteran prevails, and he earns Leon enough money to re-open his business.

Not all Vietnam veterans actually served in the military. The season 4 episode “The Look” features a character who was one of countless civilians who took part in the war effort. Holly Hudson, or “Holly Fox,” as she was known on Radio Vietnam (RVN), was an American radio DJ broadcasting to the troops. Her voice soothed their fears and gave them something positive to think about. As TC explains, “one of the things that pulled me through a lot of hard times was the sound of Holly Fox’s voice coming at me from RVN. It meant home. It meant, somehow, maybe, just maybe, I might make it back alive.” He, Magnum, and Rick all formed a
personal attachment to her during Vietnam, and they are ecstatic to discover that she is now broadcasting in Honolulu. After reconnecting with her, they are determined to do whatever is necessary to help her find the soldier she fell in love with and lost in Vietnam. When her search for her long-lost love turns out to be fueled by rage and revenge, after being jilted at the end of the war, Magnum, Rick, and TC dissuade Holly from killing the man she once loved. They then get her the clinical help she needs.

The transition from a combat lifestyle to a civilian lifestyle is definitely a challenge. Even Magnum is depicted as struggling upon his return from Vietnam. While in most episodes he is usually surrounded by the luxurious lifestyle provided by his employer, the season 4 episode “Dream a Little Dream” sheds light on Magnum’s struggle to open his own business after leaving the Navy. Before being hired by Robin Masters, Magnum lives in his shabby office, with broken blinds, and which he shares with a CPA, whose name gets top billing on the window. He drives a battered, sputtering Volkswagen Bug. His first client comes to see him because she sees his advertisement on a match book, and while they talk, the pencil Magnum is taking notes with breaks. Asking why the client trusted the match book, Magnum learns that a friend of his from the Navy confirmed his abilities and recommended him. Success in the civilian world is not immediate for Magnum, and it does not come without the support of a team of others.

**Stolen youth.** Leading a team of men in combat is a daunting task, one that takes maturity, whether it is inherent or developed through the experience. In the season 4 episode “No More Mr. Nice Guy,” Magnum explains that he graduated from the Naval Academy a few months after the 1967 Army-Navy football game, one of the last games he quarterbacked during his senior year. “I graduated, and a short time after that, I went to Nam. That experience
changed everyone who was in it. I lost my youth.” On multiple occasions, Magnum mentions that the Vietnam War forced him to grow up, and as the studied sample illustrates, one struggle Magnum faces in the reintegration process is this concept of being an adult.

While his buddies have successful, respectable, adult professions, Magnum often seems to be living in a perpetual state of childhood, simply playing in paradise. He lives in his employer’s guest house and does not pay rent. He drives a fancy sports car that also belongs to his employer. He is almost always wearing shorts or jeans, t-shirts, tennis shoes without socks, and baseball caps. He has a Velcro wallet, which is typically empty. He is regularly unable to pay his debts, particularly the money he owes TC for gas and repairs to his helicopter. He is also frequently running late. His living room is usually a mess, scattered with clothes, sports equipment, his gorilla mask, and his rubber chicken. And his typical meals include hot dogs, popcorn, and Fig Newtons with milk. He is made blatantly aware that others also recognize his childish lifestyle through Higgins’ regular chastisement of his behavior, as well as by the words of a psychiatrist in the season 8 episode “Pleasure Principle”:

You are afraid of having mature, grown-up relationships with your friends. I think everything about you says you’re terrified of growing up. . . The way you dress, your job . . ., you’ve created a fantasy world for yourself. Living off the good graces of [Robin Masters], wanting to chase down bad guys, bring justice to the world. . . Don’t you think it’s about time you begin to dress like a grown man, get a real job, buy your own car?

Magnum’s present lifestyle is a stark contrast to the life he knew in the Navy. Dressing in his Naval uniform to sneak into a secure military office in the season 1 episode “Don’t Eat the Snow in Hawaii,” Magnum says to his buddy Dan Cook’s sister “don’t let the uniform fool you, Alice. I’m not the same man I was.” She then asks him why he quit the Navy, to which he
responds, “one day I woke up age 33 and realized I’d never been 23,” a comment he makes again, verbatim, in the season 8 episode “Resolutions.”

As the series progresses, particularly in the seventh and eighth seasons, Magnum’s appearance and demeanor begin to change and mature. He cuts his hair shorter, he begins to wear slacks and suits more regularly, he organizes his paperwork and affairs, and he starts thinking about changing his profession. In the season 8 episode “Resolutions,” Magnum tells his friends and family that he is “thinking about a change,” and he asks them if they believe being a private investigator is just a way to avoid or delay growing up. By the end of the episode, he decides to rejoin the Navy. After several years of re-living the youth he lost, Magnum is now ready to accept adult responsibility, and he returns to the adult life he previously knew.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the television series Magnum, P.I. used recurring fantasy types to depict Vietnam veterans struggling with the challenge of reintegration into civilian society, and that depiction led viewers to a better understanding of the issue. Veterans struggle with reintegration because civilian life and military life are so different from one another, and, as depicted in the series, veterans are forced to live within the tension between these two worlds. Starting over, changing careers, and learning to operate under different constraints are difficult enough, but veterans also face the added strain of post-traumatic stress and the memories of war. For Magnum and several other Vietnam veteran characters in the series, reintegrating into society following their combat experience was a process. It required the support of a team, maturity, and the ability to overcome and not be ruled by the reminders of war.
The implications of this study suggest that if the series *Magnum, P.I.* can shape the shared understanding of viewers, other television series should have that capability as well, if they employ the same tactics. The rhetorical vision used in *Magnum, P.I.* was of high quality, and it succeeded for several reasons. First, the Vietnam veteran fantasy was presented in a fashion true to Aristotelian rhetoric, depicting a delicate and, to many, unpopular topic with sensitivity rather than in-your-face harshness. Second, and more importantly, the series appealed to a broad audience: men, women, Vietnam veterans, and non-veterans, alike, meaning that it was able to reach and speak to a large, varied demographic. Viewers connected with Thomas Magnum, they liked him and were emotionally invested in him, and they wanted to tune into the next episode. This yielded audience retention and introduced a large number of people to veteran’s issues, as told from a veteran’s perspective.

Regular viewers were repeatedly exposed to this rhetorical vision, giving them a shared understanding of the societal reality. That shared understanding is what Bormann (1985) labels a “symbolic convergence,” a group consciousness shared and accepted by the community of viewers (p. 131). With that consciousness, viewers were able to think differently about the issues plaguing society in post-Vietnam War America; issues that many Americans were not familiar with because their knowledge of the Vietnam War was based on grim news coverage that did not give the soldier’s perspective or tell the full story.

The series *Magnum, P.I.* was informative and instructive. It brought certain issues to light for the first time for many Americans, but it also let veterans know that they were not alone with their burdens. Thomas Magnum was an average, likeable, charming guy. He was a contributing member of society, and he was also a Vietnam veteran struggling in the civilian world because of his combat experience. Magnum is the series’ main character, the one telling
the story, the one with whom viewers are supposed to and do identify, which is why his personal struggles are significant.

As viewers related to Magnum, his experiences and challenges became a part of their shared reality, as well. Particularly through the use of flashbacks, the majority of which afflict Magnum himself, viewers were able to witness combat experiences first-hand, as well as the resulting psychological consequences. By acknowledging that he experiences flashbacks and that he has sought clinical help, Magnum tells his friends and the other veteran characters that delayed stress is normal and that there is no shame in getting help. More importantly, his words were also directed at the viewers. The story Magnum tells and the story viewers received merged to become a shared understanding of the Vietnam veteran experience.

This shared understanding, as often happens with media, permeated American culture in the 1980s. Individuals became aware of the hardships facing Vietnam veterans, including those caused by lack of support from the general public. *Magnum, P.I.* was a frontrunner for television series depicting the struggles of veterans. Its success paved the way for future series that also depicted Vietnam veterans in a positive way.

Under the construct of symbolic convergence theory, individual viewers of *Magnum, P.I.* became a community through the shared narration of Magnum’s experiences. They bore witness to the challenges he and his fellow veterans faced, giving them reason to not only be more sympathetic but to actually be empathetic to veterans (Bormann, 1985, p. 135). The occurrence of this symbolic convergence speaks to the power of entertainment media to inform, teach, and shape opinions. It also suggests that popular culture helps individuals deal with, understand, and process what is going on in the world around them.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

There were certain limitations to this study. Rhetorical criticism consists of analysis of the rhetorical act, often including the intentions of the rhetor. For this study, the rhetor would be the creator and producer of *Magnum, P.I.*, Donald P. Bellisario. Little is written about him, and no information could be found pertaining to his intentions with the Vietnam veteran fantasy. Additionally, the rhetorical criticism was done by one individual, and the findings are based on her interpretations and opinions alone.

Furthermore, the original airing of this series concluded 23 years ago, and no focus groups or interviews were done with members of the original viewing audience. Interviews involving watching recorded episodes in the present were also not conducted, as they may produce skewed results based on the subjects’ prior knowledge of the series or prior watching of individual episodes.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of this study create multiple possibilities for further research. While *Magnum, P.I.* addressed the issue of Vietnam veterans, the struggle of reintegration for veterans is an on-going issue, one that did not end with the Vietnam conflict. Reintegration is a narrative that needs to continue to be told, especially as modern wars drag on. In particular, a significant area of future study needs to address the effects that television series depicting veterans’ struggles have on real life veterans facing those same issues. Inquiry should address whether veterans feel the depiction is accurate, and if they are comforted to see someone else, albeit fictional, struggling with the same challenges they face. Such a study should also examine if a television series can therefore be used as a sort of support group to help veterans process their
own experiences. Examples for such a study addressing the struggles of current veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars might include the television series *Army Wives*, *Over There*, *Bones*, or *Grey’s Anatomy*.

Additionally, considering that television permeates American daily life and that popular culture has the ability to generate greater understanding, rhetorical visions should be used to increase awareness of other social issues, such as poverty, discrimination, and addiction. These rhetorical visions need to be infused into a framework for helping those in need and evoking social change.

Further research should also be done on Donald P. Bellisario, and whether he had honorable intentions to promote the welfare of Vietnam veterans or whether he was merely furthering his personal agenda and opinions on the military. This relates back to the philosophical basis of this study, the grounding in Aristotelian rhetoric. Bellisario is a former U.S. Marine Corps Sergeant who has created and produced several pro-military television series, many of which specifically address the struggles of Vietnam veterans. These series include *Airwolf*, *Quantum Leap*, and *JAG*, among others. Coming from a military perspective, Bellisario may simply be sharing his first-hand knowledge with society to raise awareness, but he may also be trying to forcibly influence society’s opinion of the military.

Another interesting study could address the actors of *Magnum, P.I.*, and their thoughts on the Vietnam veteran fantasy within the series. Inquiry would involve discussion of their preparation for and implementation of their roles, particularly whether they felt compelled to portray Vietnam veterans accurately and if they felt a personal connection to their role as a veteran. For instance, Tom Selleck, who starred as Thomas Magnum, was a former California National Guardsman during the Vietnam era, and following the series, he became involved with
a campaign to build an Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, displaying an obvious lasting association with the issue (Anonymous, 2009, p. 12). Such a study should also address whether the actors believe they contributed to changing attitudes about Vietnam veterans or if they believe their portrayals made a difference.

Conclusions

According to Bormann (1972), by participating in “the rhetorical vision of a community,” such as viewing the series *Magnum, P.I.*, “we have come vicariously to experience a way of life that would otherwise be less accessible to us, we have enlarged our awareness, we have become more fully human” (p. 407). Television is a highly influential medium, one that can spread knowledge and shape the beliefs of viewers through the process of symbolic convergence. Case in point, the series *Magnum, P.I.* generated a community amongst regular viewers by creating a shared understanding of the struggles Vietnam veterans faced while reintegrating into civilian society. Magnum, Rick, TC, and their veteran buddies all must move forward with their civilian lives while simultaneously managing their post-traumatic stress, determining where they fit into civilian society, establishing a support system, and staying financially afloat in the tough economic situation of the early 1980s. Repeated depictions of these scenarios allowed the rhetorical vision presented by the series to resonate with viewers and become an accepted understanding of reality.

The series *Magnum, P.I.* demonstrates to viewers that even though Magnum and his buddies are Vietnam veterans struggling with their past, they are also average, relatable, likeable people, and most importantly, stable, contributing members of society. Through the process of symbolic convergence, *Magnum, P.I.* helped create an atmosphere within popular culture and
entertainment media with an adjusted, more positive, more accepting attitude toward Vietnam veterans.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Magnum, P.I. Episodes Reviewed

Season 1, episode 1 “Don’t Eat the Snow in Hawaii”
Season 1, episode 5 “Skin Deep”
Season 1, episode 8 “Missing in Action”
Season 1, episode 11 “Thicker than Blood”
Season 2, episode 5 “Memories are Forever”
Season 2, episode 7 “Wave Goodbye”
Season 2, episode 12 “The Jororo Kill”
Season 2, episode 14 “Try to Remember”
Season 2, episode 19 “The Last Page”
Season 3, episode 1 “Did You See the Sunrise”
Season 3, episode 11 “Heal Thyself”
Season 3, episode 19 “Two Birds of a Feather”
Season 3, Episode 20 “By Its Cover”
Season 4, episode 1 “Home From the Sea”
Season 4, episode 4 “Distant Relative”
Season 4, episode 8 “A Sense of Debt”
Season 4, episode 9 “The Look”
Season 4, episode 10 “Operation: Silent Night”
Season 4, episode 15 “Paradise Blues”
Season 4, episode 20, “Dream a Little Dream”
Season 5, episode 9 “Tran Quoc Jones”
Season 5, episode 15 & 16 “All for One”
Season 6, episode 1 “Déjà vu”
Season 6, episode 6 “Going Home”
Season 7, episode 6 “Little Girl Who”
Season 7, episode 15 “Solo Flight”
Season 8, episode 1 “Infinity and Jelly Doughnuts”
Season 8, episode 2 “Pleasure Principle”
Season 8, episode 8 “Unfinished Business”
Season 8, episode 12 “Resolutions”