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# Mediation in David Milch's *John from Cincinnati*

## ABSTRACT

*David Milch's short-lived HBO series John from Cincinnati (2007) has an unexpected political premise that was largely ignored or misunderstood when the show aired: that the American population has been conditioned by the logic of television serials to expect closure to political events and thus will demand genocidal retribution for the next terror attack after 9/11. This article explores how Milch explains his intent with reference to the concept of mediation and compares Milch's use of the concept to Richard Grusin's premediation.*

## KEYWORDS

David Milch  
*John from Cincinnati*  
mediation  
premediation  
television  
ideology

Mike Davis recently glossed Imperial Beach, California for the readers of the *London Review of Books* as the 'last exit before Tijuana and the site of the hugely subversive and accordingly short-lived HBO series, *John from Cincinnati*' (2013). Creator David Milch's decision to emphasize *mediation* was its most subversive aspect. Milch's expansive comments about the series reveal that he wanted to explore and counteract episodic television's ability to simplify and distort political reality. *John from Cincinnati* (2007) was probably cancelled for insufficiently impressive reviews.<sup>1</sup> Milch describes *John from Cincinnati* as an exploration of the mediated American response to 9/11, an interpretation far from obvious to the casual viewer. As an important television writer, Milch's ideas about television and ideology contrast revealingly with contemporary theoretical assessments, including Richard Grusin's concept of *premediation* in particular.

1. As *John from Cincinnati* originally premiered after the series finale of *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), viewership numbers are difficult to assess, but critical opinion was generally not positive. One negative example in an influential organ was Nancy Franklin's *New Yorker* review (2007). Horse deaths were

the less conventional reason for the cancellation of his next HBO series, *Luck* (2012).

2. The 'clown' refers to Milch's Yale fraternity brother George W. Bush.

After analysing two of Milch's reflections about the role of mediation in the series, I will describe how the concept works in *John from Cincinnati*'s pilot episode. The title character's miracle-working and other paranormal abilities follow directly from Milch's theory of political aesthetics. Finally, Milch's commentary on the dream sequence from the sixth episode is read in light of his insistence that it is the key to understanding the series' mediated dialectic of apocalypse and salvation.

## MILCH AS EXPLAINER

The first of Milch's explanations comes from a *New York Times* article on its early production:

The subject of the group writing session was where John is from – Cincinnati and/or outer space – but the discussion quickly turned to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, a message to the great beyond from which John is bringing back a response.

'9/11 is big,' Mr. Milch, 61, said to the unusually large crowd in the room. He was lying on the floor – a bad back is his curse – next to a microphone. He was just getting going. 'What part of 9/11 is big? If the future continues to reinterpret the past, it could be argued that 9/11 provides irrefutable proof that unless there is some other way that we learn to deal with our technology or deal with our brothers and sisters, it is goodbye as a species. That genie does not leave that bottle'.

(Carr 2006)

The second is from a recorded seminar given at the University of Southern California:

This was about, in the aftermath of 9/11, whatever God is becomes aware of that we have become so infantilized, we have been made such children by our addiction to media which doesn't sink its roots deep, that we have become capable of a genocide. [...] As I'm watching the planes go into the building over and over, I'm thinking 'it's enough.' I want my old programmes back. I don't want to look at that crap all the time. So, my president, he's talking to his programmers, and what the president says is, let's give them a twelve-episode mini-series, at the end we'll pull down the statue. [...] We stage the invasion of Iraq as a change in programming for an audience so narcotised by their addiction to television. [...] What's going to happen the next time there's a terrorist attack? There's going to be a charlatan who makes this clown<sup>2</sup> look like Mother Teresa, who's going to say 'we want to kill every Muslim in the world?' [...] Whatever the spirit of the universe is feels that this civilization is tending towards a genocide and dispatches its representative to try to change the American psyche. And the only way that the spirit of the universe feels that the American psyche can be changed is if the spirit manifests itself as a child with enormous powers. And, if this spirit begins by addressing the absolutely fucking stupidest people in America, which are the surfers. So that was *John from Cincinnati*.

(Milch 2008)

For Milch, television and mass media inevitably isolate their consumers. They make them demand tidy resolutions to difficult social problems, thereby increasing the potential for unimaginable violence by insulating viewers from its consequences. Milch's observations are similar to the 'compassion fatigue' argument.<sup>3</sup> Though not novel ideas by themselves, these explanations clarify *John from Cincinnati's* otherwise murky plot. John is an angel sent from the 'spirit of the universe' to convince humanity to liberate the potential of this degraded art form and thus save itself.

The similarity of Milch's ideas about mediation to Richard Grusin's is particularly revealing because of Milch's much different frame of intellectual reference. Milch was a student of Robert Penn Warren's at Yale in the early 1970s, and a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature – the James family in particular. Milch often refers to William James in describing his aesthetic ideas; the character of Reverend H. W. Smith in *Deadwood* (2004–2006) was in many ways a walking recapitulation of James' arguments against 'medical materialism' in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902: 15). And Milch's ideas about art and religion echo Warren's and American New Criticism in general much more than post-structuralism. Thus, I argue that the similarities between Grusin's and Milch's ideas, despite their great conceptual differences, demonstrate the widespread concern with the mediated nature of reality after 9/11. Grusin derives *premediation* from the concept of remediation developed in Jay David Bolter and Grusin's *remediation*: premediation works 'to prevent citizens of the global mediasphere from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack' (2010: 2). Grusin proposes that premediation progressively immunizes against future trauma, whereas Milch claims that the logic of the television serial, with its satisfying closure,<sup>4</sup> affects the audience's response to televised, non-serial news.

The irony of a television series itself depicting the beginning of humanity's liberation from the degrading effects of television is not lost on Milch. And many of his own television serials have resisted or undermined expectations of closure. *Deadwood* is the best example of this, because of Milch's conflicting explanations of why the series ended prematurely. He perhaps contradicted himself to avoid overtly blaming HBO for its cancellation, though some of the interviews reveal a great deal of bitterness over not being able to finish the story. The concept of 'closure' here is closely linked to what Jason Mittell has described as 'narrative complexity': 'Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres' (2006: 32). The 'miniseries' that Milch describes as deliberately oversimplifying reality would do so not just because of their limited narrative ambitions but also because their length is known in advance. The shows that Milch has worked on have had runs dependent on ratings, critical reception and other financial factors. Their narrative complexity and insistence on avoiding closure is both an aesthetic decision and a direct consequence of financial uncertainties, which might explain Milch's interest in the concept of *mediation*.

Other aspects of Milch's biography highlight these conflicts between commerce and art. After spending more than ten years working as a lecturer at Yale and intermittently on his own writing, Milch began to write for television. He became so successful that he dedicated himself entirely to the medium and has not published the novels or poetry that his mentor, the novelist and

3. 'Compassion fatigue' is analysed in news coverage in Lillie Chouliaraki's 'The mediation of suffering and the vision of a cosmopolitan public', especially through her categorization of 'ecstatic news' (2008: 377).
4. Though Milch did not specify what television series he had in mind that provided expectations of unrealistic closure, both soap operas and indeterminately ending 'quality' television series such as *The X-Files* (1993–2002) and *Lost* (2004–2010) resist closure for reasons different than the aesthetic ones Milch has in mind (Newman and Levine 2012: 92). For a Bourdieuan analysis of the legitimating role of 'quality' television, see Newman and Levine (2012). For a discussion of closure in the soap opera, see Mumford (1995: 47–66).

5. He told an interviewer that he had written a script five years before called *John from Elsewhere* that was set in New York and had no surfing background (Shister 2006).
6. There were several media reports that he and Michael Mann, the co-producer and director of the first episode of *Luck*, clashed over Milch's high level of control over editing decisions. For an account of the rise of the 'auteur' concept in television, see Newman and Levine (2012: 38–58).
7. Amanda Klein has written an article devoted entirely to *Deadwood's* credit sequence, for example (2006).

poet Robert Penn Warren, thought that he would from a young age. Milch's television writing has been as critically successful as anyone's and often very commercially successful as well. There have been failures as well from both standpoints, with *John from Cincinnati* being one of the most notable ones. He recognizes, however, that few would still award the same cultural distinction to television writing. When Milch was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, he annoyed Richard Yates, one of his professors, with his sense of entitlement and arrogance. Later, after Milch had become successful as a television writer, he offered patronage to Yates, who resented him for it (Bailey 2003: 561). Milch admitted to Yates' biographer that he may have been unconsciously provoking Yates with his financial success. Even now, in what many believe to be a golden age of television, it is rare for writers in the medium to achieve the same recognition as novelists. But television generally reaches a much wider audience and occupies a much larger place in the public imagination.

As Milch's earlier quoted comments confirm, his stated motivation in creating *John from Cincinnati* was to diagnose and to heal the collective wound to the American psyche caused by 9/11. There were other influences, however. Kem Nunn, who had written several novels in the 'surf noir' genre set in Southern California, wrote for *Deadwood* and was brought on to flesh out Milch's idea for the series. HBO had also acquired the rights to the story of the Fletcher family, a surfing dynasty (Martin 2006). Thad Ziolkowski describes the parallels between the series Yost family and the Fetters:

[*John from Cincinnati*] is based on the story of the irrepressible Fletcher surf clan. Herbie, a top-ranked competitor in the '60s who is credited (or blamed, depending on one's affiliations) for the renaissance of the longboard, was an early maker of surf videos and an energetic promoter, through those videos, of his two prodigiously talented sons, Christian and Nathan. (Fletcher's wife, Dibi, herself comes from a noteworthy surf family.) Christian Fletcher is remembered as a punky, irreverent pro who in the late '80s added height and flair to the aerial, a maneuver first performed in the late '70s; he also played in death-metal bands and developed a crack habit. Christian's son Greyson is now a highly-regarded 'grom' – a preteen-to-early-teen surfer – and plays his counterpart, Shaunie, in the series.

(2007)

So Milch took this pre-existing framework of the family surfing dynasty and added his ideas about aesthetic mediation and salvation.<sup>5</sup> Much of what I will argue here takes for granted that Milch is an auteur as far as the television format allows: that, in other words, he has almost total creative control over the scripting of the show.<sup>6</sup> Milch himself would likely disavow such credit for practical and aesthetic reasons. The practical ones involve his tendency to give writing credits to staff who have comparatively little input in the actual scripts of each show, and the aesthetic reason would be his belief that the artist is a vessel for larger social energies and thus should be reluctant about overvaluing individual contribution.

## MEDIATIONS IN *JOHN FROM CINCINNATI'S* PILOT

Many recent HBO series have unusually sophisticated opening credit sequences,<sup>7</sup> and *John from Cincinnati's* is no exception. Its credit sequence reveals the show's underlying structural principle. The camera begins



*Figure 1: Opening shot of John from Cincinnati's credit sequence.*

underwater with bubbles rising to the surface. Then what seem to be clouds are revealed, as the sky turns from light to dark. Waves come out of this elevation and turbulence. Then, in a montage of Super-8 footage with deliberately retained splotches and hitches, we see a series of surfers riding the waves followed by lovers on the beach. Then there is what seems to be a stellar explosion, but the starlight is reminiscent of insemination. Two children play on the beach in wetsuits, followed by a boy riding a skateboard down a street. Skateboarding is surfing on land, and this skateboarder rides in a sinuous curve. The subjective camera now has shifted to an automobile. We see a sign announcing the city of Imperial Beach, California, some rubbish, an electricity pole and a man wearing a hat. The next scene is of the larger bullfighting coliseum in Tijuana across the border. There are fences, and people climbing the fences. Next comes a brief glimpse of Mexican wrestling (several references to Mexican wrestling in Milch's commentary indicate that he had planned for this variety of entertainment to feature more prominently in the series plot, had it continued) and of a skater in a skatepark. The skater flies into the air, just as a surfer launches himself into the air in the next shot. There are waves, and then there are people skating along the road, with the camera's subjective eye surveying the border in an automobile now. The next shot is of the skater riding in a skatepark's bowl. Again, the emphasis is on the transition between physical and spiritual waves, with surfing mediating the two. And skateboarding becomes a further mediation and technological degradation of the original sport. The final shots show surfers again, and the concluding scene is of the waves crashing against the pier at dusk.

The song that accompanies these images is 'Johnny Appleseed' by Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros. The second and third verses of song are edited out in the version used in the credits: The first verse is 'Lord, there goes Johnny Appleseed/He might pass by in the hour of need/There's a lot of souls/Ain't drinking from no well locked in a factory'. The historical Johnny Appleseed was an itinerant Swedenborgian preacher and naïf, details reminiscent of the show's main character, John Monad. The chorus of the song is somewhat variable, but its last two lines are some variant of 'If you're after getting the honey, hey/Then you don't go killing all the bees'. What this means in

8. Milch makes a comment in the director's commentary about deliberately choosing actors who were best known for other roles. Though he does not expand on his reasoning, it seems that this is another sign of his interest in mediation. The actors best known for other roles who appear in the series are Rebecca De Mornay (Milch specifically mentions her 'giving a hand-job to Tom Cruise'), Luke Perry (*Beverly Hills 90210* [1990–2000]), Mark-Paul Gosselaar (*Saved by the Bell* [1989–1993]), Ed O'Neill (*Married with Children* [1987–1997]), Howard Hesseman (*WKRP in Cincinnati* [1978–1982]) and Jennifer Grey (*Dirty Dancing* [Ardolino, 1987]). Many of the other actors have worked on previous shows with Milch – including many of the supporting actors from *Deadwood*: Garret Dillahunt, Jim Beaver, Paula Malcomson and Dayton Callie.



Figure 2: Linc Stark (Luke Perry) surveys the beach.

the context of the song is clear enough: do not let greed destroy a renewable resource. For Milch, however, 'getting the honey' refers to art. In particular, Milch believes that art is the means by which humans achieve universality and communicate, in essence or desire, with the divine. Such a process would not be fully conscious or intentional on humanity's part, just as the collective behaviour that produces bees' honey (and other social behaviours) is beyond the capacity of any single bee. While humans would seem to have much more autonomy and ability to live in isolation than bees, Milch argues that this is a delusion. The belief in the delusion of separateness is his defining aesthetic principle.

The other verses of 'Johnny Appleseed' mention 'black sheep of the angels', and this could describe John Monad (Austin Nicholson), the title character. The word 'monad' carries complex semantic associations, but the most relevant to the preceding discussion is of the 'individual human' (OED 2b). The angelic Monad is created with human form, but without any human cultural associations, including language. He is only able to repeat phrases that he has learned to associate with certain behaviours. Also of importance is the general idea of Monad being a singular entity, discrete relative to the spiritual body of humanity. Leibniz's definition of the monad was of an entity without shape, extension or parts capable of perception. John is a monad made flesh.

The first episode begins with an SUV driving down the beach in the morning. An embittered and weary man, Linc Stark (Luke Perry),<sup>8</sup> gets out of it with his eyes on a solitary surfer. He walks to the beach, continuing to view him with a mixture of pity and contempt. Suddenly, a man appears behind him, smiling and dressed somewhat incongruously. This figure is John Monad (Austin Nichols). He walks up to Stark, and proclaims, 'The end is near'. Stark's nonchalant response to this query is 'Amen, my brother'. Some men are seen walking in the bush near the beach. Stark explains to Monad that for these 'illegals', it is a day just like any other. Mitch Yost (Bruce Greenwood), the surfer, walks on the beach. John tells him he should 'get back in the game'. Yost responds that he should mind his own business and invites Stark to 'go fuck himself'.

Even in this opening dialogue, we see many of the series themes in miniature. The ‘end’ that John speaks of is only hinted at obliquely in the show itself, but Milch was quite specific about what he had in mind. Milch proposes that the United States will use nuclear weapons to annihilate an Islamic population centre after the next large-scale terrorist attack. (Later John will tell Linc Stark’s employee, a film-maker named Cass [Emily Rose] that the ‘fucking towelheads are going to get themselves eradicated’.) So John Monad’s mission on Earth is to start a gospel through what will become a series of miracles involving a surfing family in Imperial Beach, California. That is why Mitch Yost needs to get back in the game (he stopped competitive surfing because of a knee injury). Linc Stark, we soon learn, is the founder of Stinkweed, a surfing apparel company that made a considerable fortune off Butchie Yost’s (Brian Van Holt as Mitch Yost’s son) self-destructive public image.

So we have several levels of mediation operating in just the opening scene: Milch’s belief in a mediated war-lust and in the ability of the same commercially degraded art form that produced it, the television series, to resist and to satiate that urge. Stark’s exploitation of the Yost family will use the same media influence to spread John’s message. Mitch Yost, the patriarch of this surfing dynasty, has developed an inward, narcissistic spirituality, which will manifest itself in his levitation. Paradoxically enough, Yost’s belief in the supernatural validation of his own distinctiveness and superiority will eventually bring his fragmented family together. Yost’s levitation is the first of the series overt miracles, and we see it soon after Yost encounters John and Linc Stark. Stark now assures Mitch that he did not send the ‘space cadet’ to him. Earlier, Stark had tried to size him up as a competitor and threatened John just in case. He tells Mitch that his grandson had sent him a DVD of his surfing, hoping to get sponsored. Mitch remains angry about Stark’s role in the corruption of his son. He steps on a syringe as they are walking back to the car, and here we learn that Butchie has become a heroin addict.

## STINKWEED, OR ADVERTISING AS MEDIATION

The pilot shows how mediation prevents the characters from being self-aware. It also allows Milch to present his marginalized characters as agents of revelation. The remainder of the series proceeds as follows. Shaun enters the surfing competition, where he falls and breaks his neck. ‘Steady’ Freddie, the heroin dealer Butchie was threatening on the phone, flies to California and accosts Butchie, just as he learns of Shaun’s injury. Rather than killing him for this threat, as he planned to, Freddie drives Butchie to the hospital and stays outside to observe. The family gathers in the hospital, as do Linc Stark, Cass, John and retired policeman Bill Jacks. As the doctor explains to them that Shaun’s injuries are life-ending, Bill Jacks brings the resurrected bird Zippy to Shaun’s room. After the bird kisses Shaun, he awakes, healed completely. Doctor Smith (Garret Dillahunt) advises them to leave the hospital, as the hospital’s bureaucracy will have no means to process what has happened to them and will correspondingly not have Shaun’s interests at heart. Dr Smith ends up resigning his job and accepting all liability. He will visit the family at home and think about opening a free clinic at the motel that is now being renovated by Barry and Ramon.<sup>9</sup> Smith’s character starts off as a proud and aloof member of the medical establishment<sup>10</sup> and is understandably humbled by the nature of Shaun’s recovery.

9. Milch mentions in the director’s commentary on the last episode that he intended to reveal that Ramon was harbouring a number of Mexican children with cleft palates caused by toxoplasmosis in the motel. Dr Smith would begin treating them. Another character, Dwayne (Matthew Maher), who operates a website devoted to the Yost family, also has this condition.
10. Milch’s father was a physician, and he has a strong interest in the history of medicine.



*Figure 3: Zippy gives Shaun a kiss.*

Mitch does not stay at the hospital to learn of Shaun's recovery. After an argument with his wife, he accepts Cass' offer of a ride. They end up going to their hotel room and sleeping together. Cass is mortified the next morning by what she has done, and she will eventually tell Mitch that he needs to go back to his family. Disobeying Stark causes him to fire her, and she is recruited by John to make a documentary to help spread his message. Before John goes to stay with Cass, he goes to Kai's trailer. He had ingenuously told Kai that he wanted to 'bone her', repeating one of Butchie's suggestions. She is intrigued by John, who is handsome if obviously not normal. After she takes him home, he tells her to 'see God'. She has a vision of Butchie failing to get high after injecting heroin in his motel room, and she also feels her piercings heat up. Butchie will have the same experience with his skull implants, and he apparently also shares the vision. It is important to note that the vision displays the interconnectedness of this group of people, and, by extension, of all humanity.

The next major development in the plot is the return of Shaun's mother, Tina Blake (Chandra West). Blake is a prostitute and well-known adult film star. She is recognized on the street by people and apparently by the bartender at the hotel where she meets Linc Stark. Cissy Yost (Rebecca DeMornay), Shaun's grandmother, hates and fears Tina with considerable fervour, and she thinks that she has come back to town to try to cash in on Shaun's miraculous recovery. Shaun, for his part, knows of his mother's career but wants to know her as a person, understandably enough. His grandmother's ferocious resistance to this idea hurts his feelings very much. Tina also becomes involved in a plot by Linc Stark's business associates to blackmail him. Linc hires Tina as an escort, knowing who she is, but he does not reveal his identity right away. He is attempting to see whether she can be used to help him sign Shaun. After Shaun's accident, however, even Linc feels moved by Tina's regret about not knowing Shaun and her desire to know him. The other executives at Stinkweed, a global surf-wear distribution firm, feel that Stark is becoming unreliable. It is not his ruthlessness about signing prospective new sponsors that concerns them, however. It is that they do not feel that Stark has acclimated to the new media atmosphere and how it affects brand marketing.



Stinkweed's spread into the global marketplace has obviously increased Stark's personal fortune, but he still manages to feel that something authentic about surfing has been lost. And Stark faces an insurgency from his other executives because of his resistance to the new data-mined marketing methods. They enlist Tina to blackmail him. Blake goes to Stark with their proposal, however, and he has her turn the tables on him by recording his business partner Jake Ferris (Mark-Paul Gosselaar) suborning false testimony. He then proposes to allow himself to be bought out of Stinkweed for \$65 million. Stark will eventually be brought back into the fold, however, and Stinkweed's global media empire will be used, so it would seem, to promote John's message.

The series culminates in a parade orchestrated by Stinkweed to promote Shaun Yost. They market a camouflage wetsuit with him. Shaun and John were wearing this design when they miraculously reappeared in the waves of Imperial Beach after disappearing for a day. Before Shaun and John disappear, John goes to great lengths to tell his family and friends that 'Shaun will soon be gone'. No one understands this, however, and it creates substantial panic. Bill Jacks and Steady Freddie develop a grudging friendship when Zippy (who also disappears when Shaun does) communicates telepathically to Bill that he should befriend him. Bill, as an ex-cop, does not much care for the obvious criminal Freddie, who reciprocates these feelings. They both take turns violently interrogating John about the meaning of his pronouncement, but they come away only with verification of his physical invulnerability.

Earlier, John had been picked up while wandering one of the roads near the border by a group of men intent on robbing him. When he maintains eye contact with the driver for too long, he is stabbed and left to bleed to death on the side of the road. Vietnam Joe picks him up and takes him back to the motel, all the time apologizing for not being able to help him. John assures Joe that he did in fact help him, and that he also did everything he could when he had to leave a comrade behind during the war. This incident has clearly been haunting Joe, and it seems that the entire incident was engineered by John in order to help Joe overcome it. John's wound has closed completely by the time they arrive at the motel.

## THE RADIO'S VOICE

After Shaun tells his grandmother that she hurt his feelings by insulting his mother, Cissy feels suicidal. Bill Jacks, Vietnam Joe and John are watching for signs of the men who stabbed John. A radio advertisement comes on. Then all the men fall into a trance, and John appears to Cissy outside her kitchen window. Cissy has a gun and is contemplating shooting herself with it. John, using the cadence and rhetoric of the radio advertisement, tells Cissy why she is feeling suicidal and all the reasons why she should not in fact kill herself.<sup>11</sup> John absorbs his speech from his environment, which can include both vocalizations and thoughts. He also has access to at least three pre-generated phrases: 'the end is near', 'Mitch Yost should get back in the game' and 'some things I know and some things I don't'. In addition to these and the phrases he learns from others, John functions as the mediator of a prophetic or revelatory voice. The entire scene where he bi-locates and appears to Cissy is mediated by this 'spirit', to use one of Milch's key words. The fact that he borrows the abased language of radio advertising to communicate his quite urgent message to Cissy is yet another reflection on how art can transcend even its own degradation.

11. The main reason for Cissy's unpleasantness and aggression, we learn, is that she blames herself for how Butchie turned out because she manually stimulated the 13-year-old Butchie while she was hallucinating.



Figure 4: John confronts Cissy.

John addresses Cissy in her moment of crisis as an advertiser. He makes her an offer and it is not altogether an attractive one. She will continue to suffer guilt for what she has done, but the benefit is that she will live to continue to be part of Shaun's life. As John will repeat later, 'in [his] father's words', Cissy did not molest her son; Barry was not molested in room number 24 of the Snug Harbor motel. The reconciliation of this father's word, or the elevated status of the aesthetic, with the sordid reality confronting these Imperial Beach residents is what John Monad will attempt. He mediates the aesthetic transformation of reality.

Perhaps Milch's most carefully formulated statement on this aesthetic approach appeared in Mark Singer's *New Yorker* profile:

'I believe, at a very fundamental level, that words are electrical,' he said. 'The generation of words is an expression of electrical energy. The reason storytelling engages us perhaps more fully than other kinds of communication is because the words in a story can mean in different ways. They contain their opposites. In that scene – 'Swearengen!' 'Cocksucker!' – we understand how provisional the meaning of a word is and that its fundamental meaning is contingent upon the energy with which it's endowed by the speaker. Energy is a gossamer and intangible and variable commodity, and words in a story are more clearly contingent and variable than words in a proof. The highest form of storytelling, it seems to me, is mathematics – where literally the signs contain within themselves the most violent and basic form of energy. Einstein understood that if he was able to sign correctly he would experience the secret of energy. He was telling himself a story with those signs, and he said, 'All I want to understand is the mind of God.' Now, I don't want to understand it; I want to testify to it. I believe that we are all literally part of the mind of God and that our sense of ourselves as separate is an illusion. And therefore when we communicate with each other as a function of an exchange of energy we understand not because of the inherent content of the words but because of how that energy flows.

(2005)

Milch proposes several ideas here. One is that the semantic extension of words in storytelling is greater than in ordinary usage. They are more likely to contain their conventional meanings and their opposites, depending upon the dramatic situation and the nature of the utterance, in other words. It is certainly true that the generation of words is an electrical activity. Much neurological activity is electrical. Milch clearly means something more, however. He adopts a pragmatist position on semantics, which is not surprising given how often he cites William James as a formative influence. Andrew Russ sees a connection to the theology of the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Georg Hamann in this passage (2013: 275).

Milch mentions the 'mind of God' being a motivation of many physicists, including Newton in particular. Einstein may or may not have conceptualized his work this way, but the idea has considerable resonance in the history of post-Galilean physics. Whether conceptualized theologically or as an ideal abstraction designed to reveal underlying laws, this mathematization and theorization of physics produced the greatest scientific breakthrough in human history. He claims not to want to participate in this discovery through narrative, however. He wants to testify to it, instead. The word 'testify' has a religious connotation, but it could also mean that Milch sees the role of the storyteller as an abstractor of social values. A deliberate simplifier, in other words, who reduces complex political reality in order to understand it and diagnose it. The energy that flows in the mediated world of social reality is captured and reflected upon the viewer in the televised entertainment. These very same entertainments have, in Milch's view, created the conditions for genocide by making the audience demand easy resolutions to complex problems.

By way of comparison, here is Richard Grusin on the same cultural dynamic:

unlike the double logic of remediation, which seeks a kind of perpetual immediacy either through the transparent remediation of past media formations or through the hypermediation of present ones, premediation seeks to remediate potentialities, future events, or occurrences which may or may not actually happen.

(2010: 59)

The potential event that premediates the series is a nuclear attack against an Islamic population. While it may seem somewhat perverse to argue that Milch is actually deliberately simplifying complex social reality in this narrative, given how disjointed, suggestive and obscure the series was to most of its viewers, *John from Cincinnati's* political argument is that the public has been conditioned to demand quick resolution of complex problems, no matter what the cost, by television. Milch, who argues strongly for the ability of narrative to represent universal truth by abstraction and simplification, presents a counter-narrative to this prevalent understanding. He does so by showing how the tidy resolution emerges and how the 'spirit' counteracts it – in an occluded, symbolic and difficult manner. Nothing illustrates this process better than the dream sequence of Episode 6.

## **A WAKING DREAM**

There are effectively two dream-like sequences in this episode. The first is when John appears to Cissy to persuade her not to commit suicide. Since Milch explained his creative intentions for the second dream sequence so thoroughly



*Figure 5: An unusual stairway.*

in the special feature 'Decoding John: The Making of a Dream Sequence', my analysis will rely heavily on it. For example, John begins his speech by speaking of the development of symbolic representation. Human discoveries – furs, fire, the wheel – lead to (or are inspired by, as is more archaeologically plausible) symbolic representation. The line and the circle that John mentions are described by Milch as being invested with mystical power because of their abstraction. He interprets cave paintings as a form of sympathetic magic that protected the denizens from these animals. A more common interpretation is that the figures gave power over them for hunting purposes or transferred their power to the human hunters in the case of the carnivores.

The significance of the development of symbolic representation into art is that it allows humans to communicate with God. In Milch's aesthetic theology, God does not know of humans as a species until they develop the capacity for symbolic representation. Once they can transfer their thoughts to each other in ways not reliant upon immediate context, they can know each other. The connection of all living things is God in Milch's understanding. The therapeutic aspect of art – its ability to reshape traumatic experiences – is what allows the illusion of separateness to be penetrated. But art has been corrupted through commerce. Commercial art objectifies human relations. Cass, an aspiring film-maker, has directly prostituted herself in service of this principle. And Milch makes clear that the impending genocide he envisions is a direct result of the commercialization of storytelling. For Milch, the trauma of the American reaction to 9/11 came from the disruption of their media consumption. Without the combined effect of the generic narrative expectations of commercial art and media coverage making the audience want a tidy resolution (Milch compared the event to a miniseries [2008], for example) and the actual disruption in normally scheduled programming, the effect would not have been as great. Furthermore, he suggests, the next time that it happens only a genocidal attack will placate the American public. Such a disaster is what John has been sent to Earth to prevent.

The irony of such an argument being made in a commercial television programme is not at all lost on Milch. He resolves this apparent contradiction by arguing that the explanation of the process in the very medium

being criticized will allow viewers to understand it and immunize themselves against it. The insignificance of the characters – the ‘stupidest fucking people on Earth’ as Milch affectionately referred to them – may be intended to mirror an audience that Milch suspected would never be very large.

John ends his speech by echoing the Gettysburg Address. Milch refers to this as ‘confusing every voice of authority’. After the waking dream is over, Palaka (Paul Ben-Victor) mentions that his birthday is the same as Lincoln’s, apparently an unconscious memory of the forgotten speech. Though the group will not remember what John has said, his words will unconsciously affect their subsequent behaviour, which over the final three episodes will be largely determined by John. He announces that ‘Shaun will soon be gone’, and the friends and family react strongly to this perceived threat. The violent men, Bill Jacks and Freddie, threaten John with violence and in so doing realize the limitations of this reaction. When John and Shaun do disappear, it brings the group even closer together.

The season (and series, as it was to turn out) finale shows what happens when John and Shaun return. They appear on surfboards out on the ocean, and they are wearing camouflaged wetsuits. Linc Stark will approach Stinkweed with the idea of marketing this wetsuit with the Yost family. We can infer that this marketing campaign would be the start of John’s salvational message. With this final image, Milch again shows the political transformation of advertising as a commercialized, degraded art form. Like television, it can become authentic if it unifies the audience and liberates their symbolic energy.

In a 2011 interview, Milch was asked why audiences hated *John from Cincinnati*:

You’re asking the wrong guy. I never know. That’s the affective fallacy. I don’t define the worth of a thing according to the way it was received. I did the best I could with that story. You’re always working within certain constraints. That was a series they demanded within three months of *Deadwood* going off the air, and they imposed certain disciplines on it. You try to do the best you can under those circumstances and move on.

(Piafsky 2012: 140)

The ‘certain disciplines’ he mentioned likely refer both to budgetary constraints and to HBO’s pre-existing intellectual property of the Fletcher surfing family’s story. Milch was ambivalent about the surfing scenario, as he doubtless was about HBO’s transmedia efforts to promote the series.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is tempting to explain the series’ political arguments as Milch thumbing his nose at the producers of HBO, who he felt were unwilling to support his artistic experiments. Deliberate sabotage of the commercial potential of *John from Cincinnati* is not the subversion that Mike Davis had in mind. But whatever his motivations, David Milch created a radical critique of mediation and commerce in the TV serial.

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12. Consisting of replicas of the fan website made by Dwayne, a Stinkweed website, videos of Milch on set, and interviews with the fictional denizens of Imperial Beach, the intent was clearly to build audience participation and direct the viewers to an archive of transmediated documents. The archive is available at <http://http://jfcexperience.com>, accessed 12 May 2014.

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