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Media Review

Jonestown on Television

Lynn S. Neal

ABSTRACT: This media review adds to existing scholarship about Peoples Temple by examining Jonestown's presence in television history—from 1980 when actor Powers Boothe won an Emmy Award for his portrayal of Jim Jones in the CBS-TV movie *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones* to current programs in production by HBO and A&E. In addition to these docudramas, “Jonestown on Television” also addresses explicit and implicit references to Jonestown that have occurred on episodic television. Analyzing these television sources highlights how the events at Jonestown are being told, visualized, and remembered, and, as such, shaping Americans' cultural memory of the past.

KEYWORDS: Jonestown, Peoples Temple, television, documentary, cultural memory, narrative, re-enactment

More than a year prior to the fortieth anniversary of the deaths in Jonestown, headlines proclaimed that director and producer Vince Gilligan—famous for his work on *Breaking Bad*—had teamed with HBO to air a six-episode miniseries focused on Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. Entitled *Raven*, the series' name and its interpretation rely heavily on the perspective of journalist Tim Reiterman, who accompanied Congressman Leo Ryan to Guyana in 1978 and wrote about his experience in *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People*.¹ A&E has also publicized a miniseries in the

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works. Actor Jake Gyllenhaal's production company is creating an anthology series with each season highlighting "major American cult personas." The first season will concentrate on Jim Jones. According to one interview, Gyllenhaal stated, "We want to focus on the undeniable magnetism of zealots and the danger of that kind of charisma."² At the time of this writing, no broadcast dates for these latest visions of Jonestown have been released, but if the historical trend continues, then we will see them on the small screen in the fall of 2018 or in spring of 2019.

Each year television networks mark the anniversary of Jonestown by airing new representations of the events and re-airing old ones. These shows range from adult animated cartoons to police procedurals to television documentaries, and their numbers increase around each major anniversary. In this media review, I examine dominant patterns in the television portrayal of Jonestown over the past forty years. Providing this broader television history will help scholars and viewers contextualize the newest interpretations that will soon be airing. Further, I suggest that examining this history will better equip scholars to identify if, how, and why depictions of Jonestown are changing.

In April 1980, CBS aired the earliest television portrayal of Jonestown, *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones*, a miniseries that earned actor Powers Boothe an Emmy for his portrayal of the Temple's leader. In many ways, this early interpretation set the stage for subsequent television productions. Notably, the episodes blurred the boundary between the historical and the fictional, a trait that characterizes much of the television coverage of Jonestown over the past four decades. For example, as the miniseries begins, the viewer sees and hears: "The film you are about to see is a dramatization of the life of Jim Jones." While this text includes the word "dramatization," the subsequent sentence, "This is his story," along with a map of Guyana and realistic-looking jungle footage, reinforce the sense that this 192-minute show has more in common with documentary film than fictional television. This trend continues in more recent efforts, such as the History Channel's *Jonestown: Paradise Lost* (2007) and A&E's recent *Jonestown: The Women Behind the Massacre* (2018). These television documentaries seamlessly weave together archival film, interviews with scholars and survivors, and extensive reenactments in ways that elide the distinction between historical sources and representations of history.³ The blurring of fiction and nonfiction elements also appears in television dramas, such as *Criminal Minds* (2008), *Numb3rs* (2008), and *American Horror Story* (2017). Episodes in these and other series incorporate elements of Jonestown's history to further their cult-centered plots.⁴ While these visual methods are not new or unique to depictions of Jonestown, they draw our attention to the ways "images," whether historical or imagined, "enter into the production of knowledge" about the events at Jonestown and shape our cultural memory of Peoples Temple.⁵

This recognition urges us to analyze what images and elements of Jonestown's history are prominently featured in television programming. Of the many possibilities available, two dominate: images of Jim Jones and his life, and "cult leader" characters modeled on ideas about him. As the introduction to *Guyana Tragedy* states, "this is his story," a proclamation followed by an extensive recounting of his religious extremism, drug addiction, sexual escapades, and financial misdeeds.⁶ This depiction establishes Jones' deviance, reinforces the cult leader stereotype, and emphasizes his culpability for the violence that ensued. It assures viewers that Jones' religion was illegitimate, a guise for his madness and misdeeds, and that his followers were victims, idealistic folk misled by the consummate charlatan. This framing pervades television coverage, whether nonfiction or fiction. Television docudramas and documentaries chronicle Jones' troubled childhood, his deceptive showmanship (particularly the fake healings at services), and his increasing power over his followers. Jones' theological commitments go unexamined and any emphasis on the idealism he once had is eclipsed by the focus on his deceptive manipulations.⁷

In addition, fictional television episodes featuring cult-oriented plots often utilize Jones as a model, implicitly and explicitly. In an episode of *CSI*, lead investigator Gil Grissom states, "Jim Jones and Charles Manson used sex to manipulate followers" to explain "cult" sexuality to a colleague.⁸ Other episodes refer to Jim Jones, "the Kanye of leaders,"⁹ to establish a frame of reference for the villainous religious leader portrayed, which simultaneously reinforces the cult leader stereotype and assures viewers of its verisimilitude.¹⁰ Even shows that do not explicitly mention Jones evoke him through other plot elements.

References to or reenactments of White Night exercises and mass suicide rehearsals (or the threat of them) evoke the specter of Jones and Jonestown. In a 1999 episode of *Touched by an Angel*, Brother David and his followers drink cups of red liquid as a "practice." Later in the episode, the dry run threatens to become a reality until angel Monica reveals her superhuman status and David's followers throw their cups of Kool-Aid away.¹¹ In this instance and others, Jim Jones is not explicitly mentioned, but the depiction of this Peoples Temple rite makes the historical referent clear.¹² Other episodes are more direct. In *Criminal Minds*, cult leader Benjamin Cyrus tests the loyalty of his followers as they drink cups of red wine in a communion-like service. During this ritual Cyrus informs his faithful that "though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil," while government agents debate whether or not "the people just took poison." Viewers soon learn that this was a loyalty test and that "Jim Jones pulled the same stunt."¹³ Similarly, while investigating an instance of poisoning at Patmos Church, the team of *Numb3rs* quickly contextualizes the event: "Jim Jones. Instead of cyanide in the Kool-Aid, it's arsenic in the java."¹⁴ In

fictional television cult leaders, White Night alerts, and the threat of suicide function as a kind of stereotypical shorthand for Jim Jones and Peoples Temple.¹⁵

Fictional and nonfictional television share these emphases but diverge in two important ways. First, television documentaries focus specifically on Jonestown and typically draw on historical sources (interviews, news reels, archival footage), in addition to reenactments. Fictional television episodes, though, blend elements of different historical groups together in a single episode to create an imaginary cult. For example, the “Minimal Loss” episode of *Criminal Minds* mixes the White Night drills of Jonestown with the standoff near Waco, while the “Shooting Stars” episode of *CSI* combines the cosmology of Heaven’s Gate with the sexual ethos of Jones.¹⁶ This mixing not only encourages “viewers to interpret the fictional and the historical in light of one another,” but also “fosters a homogenization” of these movements.¹⁷ Viewers are encouraged to understand subsequent cult events, whether the Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, or the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints community at the Yearning for Zion Ranch, through the lens of Jonestown. At the same time, the history of Jonestown is refracted and re-envisioned through selective and decontextualized elements.

Second, these television forms differ in their endings. In fictional television episodes featuring Jones-like leaders and suicide run-throughs, often the threat of mass suicide is averted or limited to the cult leader and/or a few true believers. History is rewritten as followers throw away the poison and fight back against the threat of death or are rescued by government agents.¹⁸ When episodes do feature the death of some followers, the plots usually reframe the cause of death in terms of deception and murder, rather than suicide.¹⁹ Others emphasize the deluded state and youth of the true believers deceived by exploitive conmen. This reframes these believers as victims and depicts their subsequent deaths as tragedies, rather than suicides. Thus, fictional television avoids death or confers a “good” death upon the cult’s victims and reinforces notions that religious suicide is an implausible act.²⁰

Television documentaries, though, cannot rewrite the ending of Peoples Temple. Unlike fictional television, they must address the magnitude of the mass murder-suicides. Do they, therefore, participate in what scholar Jonathan Z. Smith calls the “pornography of Jonestown”—focused on body counts and “the details on the condition of the corpses”?²¹ Do they move beyond the objectification of bodies and humanize the members of Peoples Temple? The starting and ending points of television documentaries provide one way to begin answering these questions. For example, *Jonestown Massacre: As We Watched* (2018) begins with aerial footage of Jonestown, followed by close-up shots of the vat of Flavor-Aid and the bodies, while a voice recounts that “the stench

was horrible.” The remaining forty minutes focus on Jones’ depravity with little discussion of his followers and their lives. It ends again with the body count and “the horrible task” the mortuary team must face. The documentary’s final quote frames its perspective: “In modern history there is still nothing like Jim Jones—a monster who exerts absolute control over thousands of people. The danger of such a man, obsessed with power and demanding unquestioning loyalty should never be forgotten.”²² Despite the passage of time and the emergence of more information, *Jonestown Massacre* offers nothing new and contributes to the pornography of Jonestown.

Other television documentaries, though, have attempted to disrupt this pattern. *Jonestown: Paradise Lost* begins with a reenactment of an older African American woman walking amid the bodies of her fellow Peoples Temple members, which introduces elements of a pornographic perspective. It ends, though, with images of Peoples Temple members enjoying life, accompanied by the words of Stephan Jones:

Ask yourself, what would someone have to tell you or what would someone have to do to you to get you to do something that you couldn't possibly believe you were capable of and examine that. Learn from it. Don't judge it. Don't stand separate from it. Be willing to stand in the shoes of the people you are judging. And I hope that 900 plus people . . . that they died and the way they died might offer us something so that their lives won't be in vain.²³

While some elements in *Jonestown: Paradise Lost* rely on stereotypes and the problematic juxtaposition of actual interview footage and dramatic voiceovers with reenactments, its ending humanizes Peoples Temple members and prompts viewers to question simplistic portrayals of the movement. *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006) has even greater success in challenging the pornography of Jonestown. It begins and ends not with Jones or images of death, but, rather, with footage and photographs of Peoples Temple members living life.

As newer representations of Jonestown emerge around its fortieth anniversary, scholars should consider how these efforts engage with recurring patterns in Jonestown’s television history—the blurring of fictional and nonfictional elements, the focus on and portrayal of Jim Jones, and the depiction of Peoples Temple members (in life and in death). Will these patterns continue, or will alterations occur? Recent television episodes have introduced some new complexities into this television history. Episodes of *Code Black* (2016), *Madam Secretary* (2015), and *American Horror Story* (2017) have all utilized the cult leader stereotype and references to Jones; however, they also show the leader to be sincere (even if deluded) in his beliefs. For example, throughout an episode of *Madam Secretary*, Rev. Wesley Finch, the head of a “doomsday cult,” remains steadfast in his beliefs. His theological conversations with

biblical scholar Henry show the audience that Finch is misguided, but not a con artist.²⁴ Similarly, the doctors in *Code Black* diagnose Paul Wentworth, the leader of a suicide cult, with a brain tumor, which provides viewers with the preferred explanation for his behavior; yet Paul interprets his tumor as a gift from God and continues to believe in his revelations.²⁵ Similarly, in the “Drink the Kool-Aid” episode of *American Horror Story*, movement leader Kai sees himself in the lineage of Jones, a position reinforced by a vision in which Jones blesses him with a kiss. This depiction upholds elements of the cult leader stereotype, but, at the same time, emphasizes Kai’s belief in his own message. These subtle shifts in representing the cult leader as deluded, but more than just a swindler, open up space for at least some of their followers to be “true believers” as well. If the leader can be a deluded but “true believer,” then so, too, can his followers. In *Code Black* one devotee commits suicide for her religion, as do some followers of Reverend Finch in *Madam Secretary*.²⁶ Will upcoming episodes of fictional television continue to introduce nuances and complexities into the television representation of Jonestown, or will they employ the typical cult and cult leader tropes?

Given some of these small shifts, we must also ask whether television documentaries will repeat old narratives or introduce new stories and framings of Jonestown. The recently broadcast *Jonestown Massacre* (2018) recycles the standard narrative of depravity and victimization; however, A&E’s latest, *Jonestown: Women Behind the Massacre* (2018), provides a slightly different account. The documentary highlights the early social justice work of Peoples Temple, the important role of women in this ministry, and how some women exercised powerful leadership within the community. These elements humanize Jones’ followers and emphasize the multidirectional ways power flows. The title of the documentary, though, and its ultimate point—the expansion of blame for the murder-suicides from Jones alone to Jones and his loyal inner circle of female followers—returns to the theme of victimization at the hands of powerful abusers.²⁷ The final images shown are the caskets of Peoples Temple members.

The theme of power and abuse constitutes an important part of the story of Jonestown. It has dominated the nation’s cultural memory of the event in television since *Guyana Tragedy*. Upon the fortieth anniversary of these events, we must ask: Will television offer any different stories or perspectives on Jonestown? Are there new stories to be told? A number of television shows will, I suspect, continue to offer rescripted histories in which tragic results are averted and blame is easily assigned. However, given the medium’s artistic ability to (re)envision life and tell stories, perhaps some anniversary efforts will provide us with new ways of grappling with the maxim that religious studies scholars must

continually confront when studying Jonestown: “nothing human is foreign to me.”²⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Courtney DeWitt, “Vince Gilligan Talks About His ‘X-Files’ Past and New Show About Jim Jones,” VICE, 24 July 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pad4mk/vince-gilligan-talks-about-his-x-files-past-and-new-cult-leader-show. Tim Reiterman with John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2008 [1982]).

² Elizabeth Wagmeister, “Jake Gyllenhaal Developing Cult Anthology Series for A&E,” *Variety*, 16 January 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/jake-gyllenhaal-anthology-series-for-ae-1201673357/>, accessed 22 February 2018.

³ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject,” *Critical Inquiry* 35:1 (Autumn 2008): 72–89; Jonathan Kahana, “Introduction: What Now?: Presenting Reenactment,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. 1/2 (Spring and Fall 2009): 46–60; Carl Plantings, “What a Documentary Is, After All,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 105–117.

⁴ For more on the portrayal of cults on television, see Lynn S. Neal, “‘They’re Freaks!’: The Cult Stereotype in Fictional Television, 1958–2008,” *Nova Religio* 14, no. 3 (2011): 81–107.

⁵ Linda Williams, “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 11–12.

⁶ *Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones*, directed by William A. Graham and teleplay by Ernest Tidyman, aired 15 April 1980 on CBS.

⁷ *Jonestown: Paradise Lost*, directed by T. Wolochatiuk and written by Jason Sherman, aired 15 January 2007 on History Channel; *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, directed by Stanley Nelson Jr. and story by Marcia Smith, aired 9 April 2007 on PBS American Experience.

⁸ *CSI*, “Shooting Stars,” Season 6, Episode 7, directed and written by Danny Cannon, aired 13 October 2005 on CBS.

⁹ *American Horror Story*, “Drink the Kool-Aid,” Season 7, Episode 9, directed by Angela Bassett and written by Adam Penn, aired 31 October 2017 on FX.

¹⁰ *Criminal Minds*, “Minimal Loss,” Season 4, Episode 3, directed by Felix Enriquez Alcalá and written by Andrew Wilder, aired 8 October 2008 on CBS. *Numb3rs*, “Atomic No. 33,” Season 4, Episode 16, directed by Leslie Libman and written by Sean Crouch, aired 2 May 2008 on CBS. *Madam Secretary*, “The Time is at Hand,” Season 1, Episode 18, directed by Anna Foerster and written by Joy Gregory, aired 29 March 2015 on CBS. *Cold Case*, “Blank Generation,” Season 2, Episode 11, directed by David Barrett and written by Chris Mundy, aired 9 January 2005 on CBS.

¹¹ *Touched by an Angel*, “Into the Fire,” Season 5, Episode 20, directed by Timothy Van Patten and written by Brian Bird, aired 4 April 1999 in CBS.

¹² *Flashpoint*, “The Farm,” Season 2, Episode 19, directed by Érik Canuel and teleplay by Melissa R. Byer and Treena Hancock, aired 18 June 2010 on Ion

Television. *Family Guy*, “Chitty Chitty Death Bang,” Season 1, Episode 3, directed by Dominic Polcino and written by Danny Smith, aired 18 April 1999 on Fox. *Code Black*, “1.0 Bodies,” Season 2, Episode 8, directed by P. J. Pesce and written by Kristen Kim, aired 23 November 2016 on CBS.

¹³ *Criminal Minds*, “Minimal Loss.”

¹⁴ *Numb3rs*, “Atomic No. 33”; also, see *Madam Secretary*, “The Time is at Hand.”

¹⁵ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12–13.

¹⁶ *Criminal Minds*, “Minimal Loss”; *CSI*, “Shooting Stars.”

¹⁷ Lynn S. Neal, “Rescripting the Past: Suicide Cults on Television,” *Sacred Suicide*, eds. James R. Lewis and Carole M. Cusack (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 267–68.

¹⁸ *Touched by an Angel*, “Into the Fire”; *Flashpoint*, “The Farm”; and *Criminal Minds*, “Minimal Loss.”

¹⁹ *CSI*, “Shooting Stars”; *Cold Case*, “Blank Generation.”

²⁰ Neal, “Rescripting the Past.”

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

²² *Jonestown Massacre: As We Watched*. First broadcast 25 February 2018 by American Heroes Channel. Produced by Pamela Mason Wagner.

²³ *Jonestown: Paradise Lost*.

²⁴ *Madam Secretary*, “The Time is at Hand.”

²⁵ *Code Black*, “1.0 Bodies.”

²⁶ *Code Black*, “1.0 Bodies”; *Madam Secretary*, “The Time is at Hand.”

²⁷ *Jonestown: The Women Behind the Massacre*, produced by Nicole Rittenhouse, aired 26 February 2018 on A&E.

²⁸ Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” 111.