Watching Baywatch/Waving, Not Drowning

or

Lacan Sur La Plage: Swim At Your Own Risk

As a lad who loved reading, I was drawn to literature classes. Unfortunately, this was before the new wave of critical theory enlightened serious readers. Thus, years of reading and education in now passe' modes of analysis and writing have left me unable to discuss literature (or anything serious) with those who have followed me to the academy. Since my partner has enrolled in graduate school, however, I have been the beneficiary of countless hours of discussion that have provided me with a glimmer of all that I have missed. This paper is my first attempt to work with critical theory and re-establish my credentials as a sentient being. I caution that while I have made headway with some of the concepts of theory, I have not yet broken through the language wall, and after all, that's the crux of the entire enterprise. I will admit that in moments of despair I have muttered about the ironic elitism of this use of language and the notion that it might be a way of mystifying the fact that no theorist understands what any other theorist is saying but is afraid to admit it. That's just my own fear and inadequacy talking, of course, but I just wanted to apologize for the clarity with which this paper is written. I'm just a beginner.

Baywatch is a syndicated television program about lifeguards. It is the most popular television program in the world. I provide this explanation because I'm sure that no serious theorist has heard of it nor would watch it because it is "politically incorrect" to do so. The program takes place at a Los Angeles area beach and follows the adventures of several main characters: Mitch Buchannon, the career head lifeguard and excellent single dad; C. J. Parker, the spiritual, multiply surgically endowed female lifeguard; Garner Ellerbee, the African-American police chief of the beach and all-around nice guy; Stephanie Holden, Mitch's former lover and now arguably his superior; Hobie, Mitch's son; and a succession (over the years) of younger lifeguards of both genders. The program focuses on both the job-related activities and social interactions of these characters. As such, they are seen as whole people, having working class concerns and responsibilities that need to be balanced with their more spiritual/sexual/intellectual concerns. It is my argument, however, that Baywatch is about nothing less than the meaning of life. This is true on a mundane level, at which Baywatch suggests that a return to a pluralistic pantheism offers even modern life both meaning and fulfillment. When one reads Baywatch against itself, however, one can descry an argument about true, linguistic meaning, and this is clearly the reason for the show's incredible worldwide popularity. This paper will demystify some popular

preconceptions about this television program and apply the work of Foucault, Freud, Lacan, Bhaba and Bersani to the question of meaning in Baywatch.

When I was in college, I never would have considered analyzing a television program, much less Baywatch. Those were the days of the capital L in Literature, and so I would analyze plays of Shakespeare, for example. Now, however, we read "texts" and must respect all of them equally. This enables the critic (or the aspiring critic in this case) to maintain a much closer connection with popular culture, which sounds awfully attractive to us as leftists and has the benefit of counteracting the effect of the language the critic must use to express him/herself adequately. In the case of this essay, this broadening of the critical focus allows Baywatch, probably the closest extant connection among the people on this planet, to receive the analysis it is due. This expansion of texts appropriate for analysis has opened my eyes: what does Shakespeare have that Baywatch lacks? Shakespeare's plays always have a plot and subplot, and so it is on Baywatch. In plays like The Tempest, Pericles and Twelfth Night, people are saved from the sea, and so it is on Baywatch. Due to the fact that all the actors were male, there must have been lots of fake breasts in Shakespeare's plays, and so it is on Baywatch. The wisest people in Shakespeare's plays are frequently fools, and so it is on Baywatch. The parallels are endless. In any case, I am certain that more people have seen Baywatch since its inception five years ago than all of Shakespeare's plays combined in their four hundred year history, so why not analyze something influential?

When Baywatch is discussed in popular culture, it is most often as a video version of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, long on attractive flesh and short on ideas, drama and social value. In the United States, it is almost always discussed as a show other people watch. On the surface, this St. Peter-like denial of Baywatch by its North American adherents reflects our society's sexual repression. Such taboos against the show do not exist in other parts of the world where people are pleased to publicly sport Baywatch t-shirts or attend David Hasselhoff concerts. Ralph Reed, Jr. need not worry his little brain: the sexual values of the religious right are far more ingrained in our psyches than are those of the sexual revolution. This analysis falls short, however, when one recognizes that there is virtually no sexual content on Baywatch. Everyone knows that the show features attractive bodies in tight bathing suits (what should lifeguards wear?), but for all of their good looks, few of them are sexually active. Baywatch may be the most celibate show on television. Even those characters who are sexually active are not explicit about it on camera. If one can play voyeur for much more skin and sex on a show like NYPD Blue, which generally is lauded in popular culture as intelligent and realistic, we must look

elsewhere for the true appeal of Baywatch. In doing so, the surprising lack of sexual activity among the show's regular characters provides a clue.

Physical appearance cannot be the reason for the lack of sexuality of the regular cast members. Rarely does a show go by when our attention is not focused on at least one non-regular who is attracted to a regular character's looks. Nor can the answer be personality, as all but a couple of new cast members are without noticeable personality flaws. The clue, I think, is that when they do have sexual encounters, they are either among themselves, in which case they receive some explicit attention, or they are implicit and over immediately. This suggests that the regular characters, the lifeguards, are of a different order than the non-lifeguards. In short, the lifeguards of Baywatch are gods, and the attraction of the show is, on one level, religious.

In what sense are these lifeguards gods? We are dealing with a pagan conception of god on Baywatch. It is pantheistic and pluralistic, and as ratings numbers demonstrate, it is addressing a need in the worldwide psyche.

We can begin with the obvious indications. Physically, all of the lifeguards are worthy of Greek statues. Garner is a bit chunky, but he isn't a lifeguard; I will argue, however, that he has an essential place in the Baywatch pantheon just as Hephaestus or Zeus did alongside Apollo and Aphrodite in the Greek pantheon. The characters can only sustain relationships among themselves; "mortals" with whom they mingle sexually immediately disappear, much as Semele did but without the fireworks. Significantly, the lifeguards who do have sexual relationships among themselves (not *in illo tempore*, to borrow Mircea Eliade's phrase, but in show time) are the younger characters who come for a season or two and then go to make way for others. They either arrive, have a relationship and go in pairs (the significantly named Summer and her boyfriend Matt arrived at the same time, just after the departure of another pair) or the male pairs up with C. J., the quintessential Great Mother archetype, before he disappears (as Matt did after Summer's departure). These scenarios are clearly suggestive of vegetation gods and goddesses of the type first described by Sir James Frazer in The Golden Bough. These characters also have the power of life and death, but it is significant that on Baywatch, they always grant life. They are in a very real sense lifegods, not lifeguards. Here we begin to get the measure of the Baywatch enterprise and thus can begin to demystify it.

In no other religion do the gods always grant life. From the earliest religious expressions of mankind, the inevitability of death is acknowledged. This is the message of Gilgamesh some four thousand years ago, and death is clearly represented in burials and cave paintings far earlier than that. Why is Baywatch opposing the tendency of all religions

toward getting us to face disturbing truths (even when they are just distracting us from the honest horror of these truths)? Why, in its own medium, is Baywatch going against the tendency toward more realism (i.e., deaths and errors of main characters) on shows like Hill Street Blues and E.R. and back toward the days of the doctor shows in which patients were never lost? Baywatch is clearly swimming against the current here, and there must be a reason. Again, it would seem to be the religious attraction of the show: the promise of completely loving, appropriate and effective gods, and better than that, a pluralistic pantheon of gods working together and setting us an example. Thus, we haven't just discarded Jehovah and set Jesus in charge; we have elevated Mary and Mary Magdalene and added Mohamet and others as well. In looking at the composition and interaction of this pantheon, we can see the reason for Baywatch's break with religious and television traditions: the yearning for the ideal. Baywatch privileges Platonic idealism in its world view. People are sick of realism not only in texts but in religion. They don't only want answers: they want the answers they want.

In most ancient pantheons, there was a clear hierarchical structure. On Baywatch, what seems simple and clear is deceptive. What appears to be hierarchical is really a team. Everyone uses his/her differing abilities to the fullest, and everyone succeeds all of the time. At first glance, Mitch is in charge: a nicer Zeus or Odin. He's younger than the traditional head god, though, being about forty, and this is significant. He's old enough to have everyone's respect, given his personal warmth and excellent skills (not to mention great hair, mentioned on occasion and clearly a symbol of virility), but he's not old enough to be distant. The younger vegetation guards feel free to joke around with Mitch. Also, there's considerable question about whether he is in charge. When Stephanie Holden appeared (and was revealed as an ex-lover of Mitch's), she told him that her new job made her his boss. He disagreed and pointed out that he was in charge of the beach and she was in charge of the headquarters. On the extremely revealing and post-Modern later episode when a television crew comes to the beach to film a pilot for a series about lifeguards, she still describes herself to the writer as Mitch's boss, but Mitch has never said he agrees with this characterization. To further cloud the situation, Mitch had to approve Stephanie's transfer before she could get this job. Thus, even if she is his boss, she owes her position to him. This situation is unresolved, but it isn't a problem because Mitch and Stephanie work together amicably and well, even when they disagree on occasion. They may go through a bit of harmless debate, but the correct solution is found before anyone's life is lost. Further mystifying the power structure is Garner Ellerbee. Garner may be the only character on television who is as nice as Mitch. As police chief of the beach, he certainly would outrank Mitch and Stephanie in certain situations, and on many shows this would be used to create

tension among friends, but this never happens on Baywatch. They work effectively as a team to make both rescues and decisions.

Mitch isn't even thoroughly in charge at home. While he has the love and respect of his son Hobie, Mitch is a good listener and will sometimes even take Hobie's advice. A good example was the show when Mitch didn't want to hire a young Swedish woman named Elke as a housekeeper. Hobie knew it was because Elke was too attractive and would distract Mitch, and he pointed out that this was discrimination and against Mitch's principles. Mitch eventually sees the correctness of Hobie's argument and hires Elke on a trial basis. He is open to suggestion and advice; he is used to being a team player, and his team is inclusive. Groups traditionally disempowered by hierarchies (women, African-Americans, minors) work and or make decisions on an equal footing with Mitch and have his respect. (I should note, with regard to Elke, that although she was a great housekeeper, Mitch felt that having her there took the place of activities he and Hobie should do, together, for themselves. His solution was to let her go as housekeeper at the end of the trial period but then to go out with her. She disappeared, of course, immediately afterwards. While she was very attractive, she wasn't a lifegod.)

Mitch isn't the only lifegod who works well with power-sharing. When Stephanie makes an inappropriate change of assignment to protect her sister Caroline from sleazy new lifegod Logan Fowler, Caroline goes to Mitch, and he speaks to Stephanie. She admits she was wrong and changes the assignment even though, as we have seen, she thinks she is Mitch's boss. This spirit of cooperation and power sharing is reinforced by the graphic image that ends the opening credits and is shown behind the show's logo at commercial breaks: the lifegods walking down the beach with their arms around one another.

Only one character threatens this cooperation among the lifegods, a recently introduced character named Logan Fowler. Signifier matches signified here; his job is as fouler of the nest. A friend suggested after reviewing this paper the connection between Logan and Loki, which is apt. Logan is from "down under," i.e., he approximates the devil. His sleazy actions with women and money continually bear this out. While this sort of dualism has worked well for Christianity and other religions, it seems to be a failure on Baywatch. After a season and a half, Logan is a minor annoyance. His role seems to be fading. Even his girlfriend Caroline really prefers the new vegetation guard. One suspects Logan will be headed back "down under" before long. It seems that the devil can't succeed amid cooperation and respect or perhaps, in reality, that the audience prefers Baywatch without discord. This season, a new female character, Neely, was introduced as a sort of female Logan. While she's been more effective so far, one suspects we'll find out that she has a

heart of gold and is just misunderstood. She has already made peace with her archenemy C.J. and has shown her concern, competence and teamwork in helping to rescue two drowning girls in a cave. In fact, that episode suggested more than anything that Neely is just worried about being accepted into the group.

These lifegods function primarily as a group, as an example of pluralistic cooperation, but how do they function as individuals? I will briefly discuss Mitch, C.J. and Garner before applying theory to get to the root of this analysis.

Mitch carries the paternal load, but in keeping up with the times, he is the perfect single parent. He has time for his son, and he even fires the housekeeper in part because he feels she stops him from doing things like cooking and cleaning with Hobie. A friend of mine, a research scientist at Intel, recently described Mitch as "the best father anyone could want." He perfectly mediates all of the hard decisions a parent must make and maintains his son's love and respect. His numinous nature and pre-eminence as a father are well illustrated during the seminal episode in which Mitch's ex-wife appears to tell him that she is remarrying and wants custody of Hobie. Her fiance is tall and handsome. At first glance, he rivals Mitch in godliness. He can even do nifty card tricks that catch Hobie's eye. He is fabulously wealthy and has his own jet. When Hobie is taken to Mexico on the jet for the wedding, however, the plane crashes into the ocean, and Mitch must save the day. Inside the sinking plane, Hobie strives heroically to save his injured mother while his potential step-dad worries mostly about himself and doesn't know how to extricate them. To Hobie, used to Mitch's omnipotence, this behavior is unacceptable and confounding, yet we can't blame this man too much for getting a little jittery in a sinking plane or not knowing how to remedy the situation. His real sin is hubris: thinking he could take the place of a lifegod. He is Phaeton: his winged chariot is hurled from the heavens when he attempts to stand in for a god. Hobie's mother realizes this after she is saved by Mitch, first dropping her plans to remove Hobie from Mitch and then calling off her wedding when she realizes that her fiance can't measure up to Mitch. In a poignant scene at the end, the flawed fiance tells Mitch that he's not a coward, but he's not a hero. This is a vital line, and it is true. His behavior, except in trying to replace Mitch, wasn't abnormal for a human; he just failed at replacing a god, not to mention the world's best dad.

The parental aspect of Mitch's character complements that of C.J., who easily could be described as the Great Mother described at length by Eric Neumann in terms of Jungian archetype. Her physical characteristics, particularly her large breasts, fit this archetype perfectly. In fact, breasts are what everyone knows about Baywatch, and while there are many on display, C.J.'s take center stage most of the time. The opening credit shots

certainly emphasize them. Even C.J.'s roommate, Stephanie, will admit this; on the episode about the television pilot mentioned above, C.J. gets cast to play Stephanie. Stephanie had wanted to play herself, and she moans somewhat uncharitably but certainly accurately, "You just got the part because of your blonde hair and . . . how you're built." C.J. is offended, but the audience knows it's true. Most people think breasts are prominent on Baywatch because the show is seeking to draw male viewers who are obsessed with breasts. Nothing could be further from the truth. According to this analysis, the prominence of breasts serves an entirely different function. C.J. and her breasts are the maternal part of this pantheon. The whole show is about safety and protection, and thus C.J.'s Great Mother role, along with Mitch's paternal role, is vital. C.J.'s divinity is emphasized in several episodes. In one, the parting kiss of a magician she saves (his magic fails, but she is, as ever, efficacious in matters of life and death) leaves her with a puzzled look until she withdraws an egg from her mouth: a clear sign of her status as a fertility goddess. In the episode about the Santa Anna winds, one of many in which her spiritual side is stressed, a psychic named Destiny is reading a pyramid of tarot cards in hopes of finding a leader when C.J. walks by. The wind whips up and the cards are scattered, with the top card of the pyramid landing face up on C.J.'s chest. Destiny proclaims it the priestess card and C.J. her leader in the quest for spiritual peace. C. J. seems pleased but says that she must keep doing her job, i.e., saving lives. Destiny sees no inconsistency, and C.J. goes about her business.

This maternal/paternal divinity status is apparent in the show's opening song. It begins by telling us that "Some people stand in the darkness, afraid to step into the light," but then goes on to talk about others who "need to help somebody" and who can assure that "you're gonna be all right." It then intones over and over: "I'll be there, whenever you need me." This is a clear evocation of both parenthood and divinity, of rescuing the child from the dark and rescuing the modern, post-religious person from unbelief into the reassurance of faith.

Baywatch doesn't buy into what Homi K. Bhaba refers to in an uncharacteristically lucid phrase as "the polymorphous and perverse collusion between racism and sexism as a mixed economy." Baywatch instead inscribes women and African-Americans as positive, powerful members of the team, reifying an American beach as it could be rather than portraying it as it is. The privileging of this pluralistic message is reinforced by the treatment of individual lifegods. C.J. is, in a sense, the "manufactured maiden" of whom Hesiod wrote. C.J. clearly has had both breast and lip augmentation; she might as well have been constructed by Hephaestus, as Pandora was in Hesiod. This identification is crucial because the two characters are used in opposite ways. Whereas Pandora is used to

carry forward Hesiod's misogynist enterprise in a depiction of a curious woman letting all evil, including death, loose upon the earth (with the obvious parallels to Eve), Baywatch's manufactured maiden is a life saver. She is woman as both mother (in the sense described above; she's not an actual mother in the show) and active, effective worker. She, Stephanie and Caroline now seem to form a triad of goddesses: C.J. as Great Mother, Caroline as Kore (maiden) and Stephanie as a more active, modern sort of principle who is powerful like Hecate. While they do have occasional sexual relationships with the vegetation guards, their main relationships are among themselves and, in a sisterly way, with Mitch. Women are thus central and empowered in Baywatch's religious concept.

In keeping with this "mixed economy" of pluralism and empowerment, we have in Garner an African-American authority figure who is also part of the team. In a sense, he may be the solution to race for which white America subconsciously longs: making up for slavery in a painless way. Whites subconsciously long to have Garner in charge, to make slaves of them, because he would never do anything unfair or harsh or even reasonably retributive. He's not unaware of being African-American, but he shows no anger or consciousness of racism and therefore can be counted on by white America to be in charge, to be one of their lifegods (or police gods), without really changing anything that would make them feel uncomfortable. Seeing him work with the team makes American feel good in the same way that electing Colin Powell president would: we could feel good about our color blindness and remain blind to most racial injustice and most racial problems. (Both Garner and President Powell would suggest some changes, but they would be things about which most people would agree, in keeping with the Baywatch spirit of cooperation.)

Thus, the "economy" Baywatch is hawking features a pluralistic pantheon of lifegods offering us protection, teamwork, reassurance and, to quote the opening song, a chance "to step into the light." Have we really reached illumination in this analysis of Baywatch? We can read Baywatch against itself to see just how reified these deities really are. In endeavoring to gaze at Baywatch through critical theory, beginning with Foucault, a look at Mitch's near remarriage is crucial.

A couple of seasons ago, a while after the flawed fiance fiasco, Mitch almost remarried his ex-wife. Of course, Mitch and his wife had been married *in illo tempore*, not in show time. The plans were all set, Hobie was excited to have his parents back together, and the time for the ceremony came, but it never happened. Why? Mitch wasn't there. In fact, none of the lifegods were there (even though they were all invited). Ostensibly, they were off performing their duty as deities, saving lives, but if we critique this crucial absence more rigorously, it may help us to demystify the entire Baywatch enterprise. What is this most

palimpsestic of episodes telling us? In actuality, this most attractive religious vision, this promise of cooperation, pluralism and eternal life, is illusion. Tower 12 is empty. God is dead. It's the panopticon!

That crucial episode is telling us that if there is, indeed, a pluralist pantheon out there, it doesn't get involved in our lives. When the former Mrs. Buchannon wanted to join the team, as it were, when she wanted to connect with that world, the lifegods disappeared. When Mitch saw her later and offered to go through with the wedding, she repeated, "You weren't there." This wasn't an accidental piece of dialogue; it clearly refuted the promise viewers had heard repeated over and over at the beginning of every show: "I'll be there." This was the crux of her argument, and in it, she represents us all. In terms of our own personal fulfillment, the beneficent spirits of the universe, the spirits of cooperation and teamwork and the forces of painless pluralism, just don't exist. Society sets up laws and customs like the towers that dot the Baywatch beach, and assuming we're being watched, many of us wait an hour after eating and don't surf between the flags. Support for this position appeared this year when Baywatch spun off Baywatch Nights, a sister text. Garner quit the police force to become a private eye, and Mitch joined him in this profession as a night job, hence the title. This reinforces both the authority and absence aspects of the panopticon. Mitch, both texts' protagonist, now has two jobs as watcher from which he's constantly absent. His tower is empty by night, and his gumshoes are empty by day. (I will apply Zizek to Baywatch Nights in a future paper.) Further evidence of Baywatch's embrace of Foucault is found in that densely packed theme song, in which another refrain, directly preceding "I'll be there," is "I won't let you out of my sight." Thus, each installment's introduction to the Baywatch text features this clear inscription of the panopticon followed by a repetition of its omnipresence. The gaze is on us and will not be broken; we are in its thrall. The panopticon restrains us and keeps us civil on the surface; it is reified as the border between self-control and self-indulgence. Even in our reification of the lifegods and the gaze they (do not) emit, their eyes are shaded by sunglasses, further mystifying the enterprise. Thus, the gaze, which exists only in our minds, is hidden and, in fact, filtered even as we reify it and react to it. The gaze is control, concurrently creating conformity and mystification, which is pretty damned good for a reification. Thus watching Baywatch, we're watching ourselves being watched by absent watchers in non-existent sunglasses. We are watching ourselves create our own conformity and trying to inscribe it in the guise of lifegods who don't exist.

In fact, if the lifegods don't exist, as now seems proven, the ocean, shimmering and inviting throughout the show, is really an anamorphotic smear. Our reification of the lifegods privileges this environment as safe and breaks down the border with the more

familiar "land," but once the lifegods are demystified as illusory, the ocean is re-inscribed as a place of danger and death, alien to land (life). Thus, the lifegods are reifications that serve to mediate the border between life and death, allaying our fears just as the theme song tells us "it'll be all right." That's all well and good except that we're all going to die. Perhaps Gilgamesh is the more worthwhile text after all. Is the show purposely lying to those who don't approach it with a theoretical orientation? If so, why is it providing us with clues that undermine this enterprise?

While Baywatch's evocation of the panopticon and of the ocean as an anamorphotic smear and thereby its demystification of social and metaphysical reality is the most crucial and effective in modern popular culture, the Baywatch enterprise is even more significant. Baywatch is really about the basis of language itself. The central image here is not the breast but the phallus. Understand that the phallus here doesn't mean penis because no good theorist would use a word to mean what it is understood to mean when he/she can use it to mean something else. The phallus is here used in the Lacanian sense of the bar between/uniting the signified and the signifier. How does this come up on a show about lifeguards, or even about lifegods? It's actually the most constant visual image on the show. The problem, significantly enough, is that I can only describe this image because as much as it is used, its true name is never given. As the bar itself, it needs no permanent signifier.

I am referring to the portable life buoys that line walls, trucks and towers and that the lifeguards always carry about and bring into the water with them. We see these objects constantly in the opening credits and throughout the show. In some cases this is crucial to the ostensible life saving situation, but why then the centrality of the disembodied hand tossing this object in the opening credits each week? The disembodiment in this crucial image provides another clue to the non-existence of the lifegods even as it emphasizes the essentiality and reality of the object itself, which is a rectangular orange device made of buoyant material. It is about a foot and a half in length with a harness attached. One of the important initiatory tests young lifeguards must take is their ability properly to wield this object. When a character isn't cut out to become a lifegod, he/she will invariably become tangled up in the phallus's harness. In Freudian terms, this would seem to indicate a repressed sexual conflict. In this sense, it is significant that the nickname of this object is "the can," also the nickname of a room fraught with Freudian possibilities. In constantly taking the can into the water, the lifegods are cleaning not only "the can" in the sense of the bathroom but also cleaning genitals and thus helping us resolve our concurrent attraction and repulsion toward them and their various functions. This prepares us to move

from the oral stage, at which Baywatch is fixated, to the emergence of meaning through language at the genital stage.

Of course, we have moved beyond Freud and know from Lacan that what is essential here is linguistic. Most significantly, the phallus/can is used in rescues both to help the victim and separate him/her from the lifegod. The Lacanian function of the bar/phallus is to split the signifier from the signified in the act of, what else, castration. (This may help explain the surprisingly limited sex lives of the lifegods.) A clear evocation of this Lacanian castration occurs in those oh- so-significant opening credits. One of the visuals that has stayed constant over the years, even this year when the character pictured (Newmie, the balding lifegod with the mustache) seems to have disappeared, is that of a lifegod running into the ocean and diving in. As he does so, his "can," attached by the harness, flies away from him and out of the frame. Thus the phallus and signifier are separated, to be reunited in the grouping signifier/signified with the phallus as the connection. With castration central to this action, it is important to note, with Bersani, the essential masochism of the victim/signified. The victims never listen to the lifegods' warnings and thus become victims. This indicates a masochistic desire to drown, to be lost, to be adrift in a Lacanian sea of signifiers, to lose one's identity and thus, perhaps, meaning. In a subconscious sense, this is completely logical as the victim/signified must be lost/castrated to bring about union with the lifegod/signifier around the central image of the can/phallus. While Saussure would argue that this victim/signified existed before union with the signifier, he's passe'. For Lacan, the victim/signified can only achieve any sort of existence through this castration in the great sea of signifiers. The victims/signifieds must be separated from the privileged lifegods/signifiers to create the eventual union that signifies the reification of meaning. Doubters will recall the seminal story that Lacan related of being in a boat with Petit Jean when a *can* floated past. At this point, Petit Jean must have been stunned when Lacan expressed great angst. Had he erred in his pronunciation? Had he brought the wrong wine on the boat trip? No, even worse: the plucky Frenchman astounded Petit Jean (and true theorists ever since) by pointing out that the can couldn't see him. Sacrebleu! Once again, the *can* appears as the mediator of significance: of existence itself. The ephemeral nature of existence and meaning, of castration and union, is emphasized by its being a sardine can, containing tiny phalluses of the most flaccid variety. Thus, the contents of Lacan's seminal *can* symbolize fertility and impotence at once and highlight the contradictory nature of the can, castrated yet impossibly ejaculating meaning at the same time. In achieving distance along with connection across the can/phallus, we can understand ourselves through our experience of the lifegods/signifiers, which of course don't really exist. (Remember Foucault?) The non-existence of our frame of reference for reality isn't really that problematic, however, because according to Lacan, we can't

approach or understand reality in any event. One can ponder whether it's really masochism to submit to this loss/castration when the results that spring from it are so productive of (illusory) meaning and thus the chance of fulfillment.

Where is this activity happening? In the ocean. What is the ocean but Jung's collective unconscious. Scratch that; Jung's passe'. What is the ocean aside from the Lacanian flow of signifiers, not to mention an anamorphotic smear? Perhaps it is the unknowable. Drowning "in the darkness," as the title song has it, the signified (the passive element) is joined to though still separated from the signifier (the active element) by the phallus (bar), which in Lacanian terms has sliced them apart. This sense of both separation and yearning for connection is powerfully reinscribed in the chorus of the song that covers the closing titles: "You gotta reach out, take hold of my hand; You gotta reach out till you're safe on dry land . . . " In the mundane Baywatch story, all we see is a life saved, but what this really signifies is coherence: in reuniting the signifier with the signified, it is not life but meaning (a reification, but one that makes us happy) that is saved. Perhaps it is both because life is at best problematic without meaning. Thus Baywatch privileges a powerful and crucial linguistic argument: life does not exist without meaning, and meaning does not exist without the phallus-mediated fission/fusion of the signifier and signified. This sexless yet sexual union amid the vast gaping wound of chaotic ocean makes meaning possible. We move across the border from isolation/lack of definition to communication/meaning through the phallic medium, which at the same time provides the separation that retains our identity as individuals. This wonderful object mediates our previously dichotomized yearnings for individuality and community. The lifegods, as signifiers, really are numinous after all; as in all creation myths, they bring order out of disorder, meaning out of chaos, thus the theme song's emphasis on moving from darkness to light. As reified objects, our minds/lifegods/signifiers grant life/meaning/castration to us/victims/signified. What more can you ask from something that doesn't even exist?

Baywatch's positive message isn't the quasi-religious message initially posited; in fact, the show subverts that message in its evocation of the panopticon. While some viewers might find the show's post-Modern subtext discouraging, however, the truly positive aspect of the show is its inscription of the crucial role of language in the (futile) human search for meaning. The repetition several times each week of the saving clasp of signifier and signified, mediated by the ever present, life-giving phallus, is surely the subconscious lure for billions of viewers worldwide.

Cary Honig