"'It's Rock and Roll, Man'"
Competing Visions of History in Reviews of HBO's *Vinyl*

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Abstract

In this article, the author analyses the ways in which competing views of history shape cultural interpretations of television's representations of past events and people. Drawing on Memory Studies to critique and highlight the limits of more conservative, traditional definitions of what history is, the article argues that history is not a "fixed" truth but is, instead, constructed through the retellings of the past. If history is positioned as a singular "truth," we miss opportunities to understand the ways in which particular historical representations index cultural issues that relate both to the time period being represented as well as the current cultural moment. Through an analysis of the critics' reviews of HBO's historical drama Vinyl*, the article highlights the benefits of a new view of history and the impact of this view on our understandings of histories' significances.*

Keywords: *Memory Studies, historical representations, critical media, television series*

In his review of the first season of HBO's new historical drama *Vinyl*, Sullivan (2016 web) argues that "the first thing any rock critic thinks when approaching cinematic rock is veracity: Does this seem real? Does it rock?" He responds to his own question with a resounding "Yes": "The answer, quite simply, is that Vinyl rocks, right from the get-go. You can feel the texture, the visceral rawness" (Sullivan 2016: web). However, an overwhelming number of media critics do not agree with Sullivan's assessment, arguing that the show is "bloated," "unrealistic," and more an office drama than a story about the history of rock and roll during the 1970s in New York City. In fact, Farber (2016) writes that "the HBO series seems less like a cherished piece of vintage vinyl than like an 8-track tape, *destined for the dustbin of history*" (web). Critiquing the inauthenticity of the historical representations in the series, Farber and other critics contend that *Vinyl* fails to capture the "truth" of a particular historical moment. Some

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critics even provide a list of the changes that they recommend for the second season in order to achieve the veracity that Sullivan claims the show already has, including a reduction of the amount of cocaine the lead character consumes to the development of richer, more in-depth roles for women and black jazz/blues musicians in the series.

The suggestions for revising the second season made sense earlier in 2016, when HBO announced that it was renewing *Vinyl* for the second season. This announcement came shortly after the airing of the pilot, even though the viewership for it was low (750,000 viewers) compared to other historical dramas like HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (4.81 million viewers of the pilot) and AMC's *Mad Men* (1.65 million viewers of the pilot) and the initial reviewers of the series were negative. Based on this announcement, it seemed that Alexander's (2016) claims about HBO stand true: "HBO doesn't care about ratings. It doesn't have to. HBO cares about three things: awards, critical acclaim, and above all else, fostering exclusive relationships with some of the biggest talent in history. So, no, HBO doesn't care that people don't care about *Vinyl*" (web). The series has a good pedigree, too, with Terence Winter as head writer (who was also the head writer for the critically acclaimed *Boardwalk Empire*) along with Mick Jagger and Martin Scorsese as executive producers, and given that the series was initially renewed seems to suggest that HBO was okay with lower ratings because, despite them, it continued to commit large amounts of money to the show ($100 million). However, new HBO director of programming, Casey Bloys, clearly re-evaluated the predominantly critical reviews of *Vinyl* because in late June 2016, he announced that *Vinyl* was, in fact, being cancelled. Bloys offered the following statement to explain the cancellation: "After careful consideration, we have decided not to proceed with a second season of *Vinyl*. Obviously, this was not an easy decision. We have enormous respect for the creative team and cast for their hard work and passion on this project" (Andreeva "Vinyl Cancelled"). Outgoing programming director Michael Lombardo explained that "'*Vinyl* didn't launch in the way we were hoping it would; it's disappointing, but it happens'" (Adreeva "Vinyl Cancelled" 2016). It seems as if HBO does, indeed, care about the things – like ratings and critics – that Alexander says it's not interested in.

Why was *Vinyl* cancelled? And what does this cancellation indicate about current cultural expectations of historical representations in dramas like *Vinyl*? The easy answer is that Bloys wanted to redirect the money allocated to *Vinyl*'s second season and apply it to other projects that would help him quickly make his mark on HBO's programming. However, if we

carefully analyse the negative reviews published throughout the run of Season 1, we see a pattern across them that highlights another crucial answer: The cancellation of the show highlights the conflicting interpretations of what counts as effective representations of the past. In Memory Studies theories, authenticity and "realism" are not necessarily the criteria or goals advocated; instead, "for anyone interested in history on film the chief importance of these works may lie less in their accuracy of detail…than in the way they choose to represent the past" (Rosenstone 1988: 1183). Further, as Hoskins (2004: 335) argues, "the process of remembering is not about retrieval (as the common myth would have it), as there is no 'fixed' moment to recall. Rather, to form a memory requires a (re)construction of an event, person, or place, which is ultimately contingent on (or rather, in) the present. Memory is infused with time. 'Here and now' is inextricably part of what constitutes the 'there and then' rather than the converse being the dominant case". Instead of embracing these views of history, though, popular critics of *Vinyl* largely rely on the idea of history as "truth" and, as a result of that view, judged the series precisely because it did not capture that "truth." The critics' response to and interpretation of *Vinyl* had a distinct impact on its continuation –or lack thereof. It seems that the critics' views of the series were significant in guiding the network's decision to cancel the show. Although this view is critiqued by Memories Studies scholars, the cancelling of the series is evidence that in dominant popular culture, the interpretation of history as "truth" holds more weight than the view of history as selectively and interpretively constructed in the present moment to reflect the anxieties and issues that are common to the past and current culture alike. Therefore, no matter how progressive scholars of history and Memory Studies may be, the dominant view of history and the way historical representations are judged is seen primarily through the lens of authenticity "truth." What we miss if we use such lens as a predominant one, though, is a critical engagement with the historical representations of an exciting, transformative time period. If we use the criteria of "truth" to evaluate the series, we judge it to be inauthentic and not worthy of continuation; if we use Memory Studies criteria, though, we see the ways in which current audiences use the history represented in the historical dramas.

In this article, then, I analyse the dominant views of history in our current popular culture through an analysis of the critics' reviews of *Vinyl*. I then illustrate the limits of this guiding view of history and recommend that we use Memory Studies theories about history to produce alternate

readings of the series, ones that highlight how *Vinyl* indexes our current anxieties about the music business. Finally, I raise the question of whether the theorists' critiques can have an impact on the dominant "story" of history in our culture.

HBO's Vinyl:

"Transcendence, music, sex, drugs, capitalism, and the American soul – that's the stuff of which HBO's *Vinyl* is made," claims Zurawick (2016: web). *Vinyl* follows Richie Finestra (Bobby Cannavale) as he tries to remake his record company, American Century Records, into a fresh, forward-looking one that, at the same time, recalls a passion for music that is inspired by past great musicians like Bo Diddley and Howlin' Wolf. As Richie enthuses at one point in the series "It's all about the songs, guys. Can you hum it? Will you remember it tomorrow? Does it make you want to call the radio station and find out who the band they just played was? Think back. Think back to the first time you heard a song that made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up." In another point in the series, Richie expresses a similar theme: "Rock & roll, man. Like the first time you heard it. It's fast, it's dirty, it smashes you over the head." As Andreeva ("Vinyl Show Runner" 2016: web) describes him, Richie is "really on a quest to make good his desire to find something new and do something that makes an impact on his business. When we meet him in the pilot, he's so anesthetized to music, he doesn't even go to clubs anymore. But then that electricity he feels at the Dolls show and the way he comes out of the pilot is the thing that fuels him for the rest of the series." Throughout the episodes, Richie struggles between economic forces that shape the music business and this passion for the music itself. The pilot episode, in fact, illustrates this tension. When the show opens, Richie and his partners are preparing to sell American Century Records because it has grown stale and is not making very much money. Like the company, Richie's relationship to music (and his life, more generally) has gone stale as well. During a scene where Mercer Center collapses during a New York Dolls concert, Richie has a musical – and spiritual – revelation, and he is once again infused with the passion for music that originally encouraged him to join the music business. Literally rising from the rubble of the Mercer Center, blown away by the music of the New York Dolls, Richie begins a quest for translating that passion into a successful business again, and, in the process, steps back into the conflicts between art and commerce

that are a key theme woven throughout the show. Richie is ever hopeful, insisting to all who will listen that music's passion will win out.

This drive is a central force of the show. *Vinyl* is set in the music scene of 1973New York City, a time which is represented as a culture being in transition. The writers and producers have "constructed a series set at the nexus of vast musical change, where rock and roll was evolving not only with the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and David Bowie, but also embracing glam rock, punk rock, and hip hop. As a series, it had a lot of fertile ground to cover" (Goodman 2016: web). Twenty years in the making, *Vinyl* is the brain child of Mick Jagger (whose son, James Jagger, plays the lead singer of the Nasty Bits, the fictional band Richie signs) and Martin Scorsese, both of whom lived through the show's time period and events. As Jagger explains in an interview, "'I thought 1973 a perfect moment in time,' Jagger says. 'New York was very dangerous, gritty, but also very musically exciting. It is a sweet spot for early proto-punk, rock'n'roll, R&B, and disco was on the brink of being discovered" (Polay 2016: web). Like the music scene, Richie is also at a turning point in his career and at a point of transition in his life. "Richie is at a crossroads, personally and professionally, and so is the music industry. That parallel is one of the best storytelling strengths of the series" (Gilbert 2016: web).

Surrounding Richie is a cast of characters who work for him, are married to him, and/or want to bring him "down" for a crime he commits early in the series. He meets iconic figures from that era, both "real" characters played by actors like Elvis Presley, Robert Plant, Stephen Stills, Mama Cass, and Andy Warhol along with "fictional" characters like Hannibal (a sort of Sly Stone character) and the Nasty Bits (the punk band he grooms for the new label, Alibi). His relationships with his family, friends, and co-workers are strained throughout the series as he punches his business partner and best friend Zak (Ray Romano), gets left by his wife Devon (Olivia Wilde) who moves to the artsy Chelsea Hotel, and is on the "outs" with many of those he works with. These relationships illustrate the tensions that Richie faces/has created in his life, and the series illustrates how he works through these challenges, all within the context of historical representations of a vibrant music scene.

Critics' Views: Traditional Definitions of History

Sullivan's (2016) quote that this article began – "Does this seem real? Does it rock?" (web) – reflects the heart of the traditional conceptions about history. How "real" gets defined is contextual, but for many critics of

Vinyl, "real" seems to be based on a judgment of whether or not the history represented in *Vinyl* is "true." This view of the "truth," though, suggests that there is a singular historical truth that just needs to be accurately captured and represented in historical dramas like *Vinyl*. Zelizer (1995: 217) points out that these more traditional views "presumed that memories were at some point authentic, credible recountings of events of the past". Further, Hoskins (2004: 340) argues that a central aspect of traditional views of history is "the preservation of the past", a view that argues there is a singular past that needs to be preserved through accurate historical representations. This view of history leads critics to use the criterion of authenticity as one of the main evaluative frameworks when analyzing historical dramas. Drawing on living history museum theories, Handler and Saxton (1988: 243) argue that, for those who embrace more traditional views of what counts as history, "an authentic piece of living history is one that exactly simulates or re-creates a particular place, scene, or event from the past". The goal of "authentic history," then, is to "replicate rather than interpret the past" (Handler and Saxton1988: 243).

How impactful is this traditional view of history? Based on an analysis of the critics' reviews of *Vinyl*, it is clear that our culture's dominant perceptions about historical representations is still located in these traditional views of history as a "singular" truth of a fixed moment in time. When we analyse how critics evaluate *Vinyl*, we see the ways in which history is privileged as a "real" thing whose representation should be judged on the basis of how authentically the historical drama presents the "reality" of the past. Reviewers who value the show as well as those who critique it use this view of history to evaluate and analyse the show. While authenticity was used as a common lens through which to analyse all aspects of the show – characters, plotline, setting, etc. – one of the most significant topics considered in reviews was the music. In the next section, I focus closely on the ways that the music included in the show is critiqued through this lens, showing the ways in which this view of history gets taken up and enacted in our current cultural moment in popular media.

Music Reviews: Accuracy of Representation

Given that *Vinyl* focuses on the music business in 1973 NYC, it is not surprising that many reviews of the series particularly scrutinize how music is included throughout the series. Some critics praise the authenticity of the music, arguing that the series captures the dynamism of the time period in which there was a range of exciting music being

introduced to the music scene. For instance, Hinckley (2016), argues that the show provides viewers an "immersion into the music of the 1970s – not the irritating top-40 pop that has given the decade its bad reputation, but the music that was bubbling under the surface. Punk, rap, R&B, the more creative early disco" (web).Thus, Hinckley emphasizes that the musical choices are authentic to the time period. Other critics also praise the types of music that are included in the show. Phull (2016) writes

> Pay close attention and you can hear excerpts of super-obscure but meticulously chosen music woven into almost every scene, including Detroit Punks Death, Influential British psych outfit the Pink Fairies, and R & B Chanteuse Sylvia Robinson… These are the kind of names that would flummox even the most studied (and lonely) record store clerks. Music supervisors Randall Poster and Meghan Currier are clearly create-diggers of the highest order and have taken care to make Vinyl an immersive, multi-faceted music experience. (web)

Phull (2016) suggests that *Vinyl*, in this way, serves an education purpose, teaching about music through a historical narrative in a way that expands viewers' knowledge of the music during that time period and, by implication, does so in an authentic way (web).

But other reviewers argue that the series is based on the false premise that NYC in 1973 was where the music business was hopping, i.e. where significant innovations were being created. Morava (2016) argues that "the New York music scene in the 70s is not necessarily dead, but arguably fading and more important events are happening elsewhere. No disrespect to the New York Dolls, Lou Reed, the Velvet Underground, but that's not a revolution. KISS, Steely Dan, Television, and Blondie are awesome, but not comparable to what's happening in London, Detroit, Chicago, and LA at the time" (web). Farber (2016) offers a similar critique about the anachronisms in the series, arguing that "a far more problematic stretch involves one of the series' pivotal characters – Kip Stevens, front man of the Nasty Bits, played by Mick Jagger's kid James Jagger. Bizarrely, this full-on 1977-style British punk has been transposed to New York four years earlier" (web). Others argue that Richie's insights into the next, new thing is suspicious. Paskin (2016) writes that "Richie is a kind of musical Zelig; there is no sound lost on him. He gets the blues, he understood the Velvet Underground and Led Zeppelin, he's hip to the power of punk, he hears hits in ABBA, and he is even alive to nascent hip-hop. There is something phony about the flawlessness of Richie's miracle ear and its proclivity for legends. He doesn't just have taste; thanks to the show's

writers, he has the benefits of hindsight" (web). Thus, Richie's "ear" for music is seen as suspect because of its lack of authenticity. Others argue that Vinyl pays too much attention to past musicians and less to the up-and-coming music that is part of the 1973 music scene. Instead of focusing primarily on the newer music that is cropping up in 1973, "at its heart, Vinyl loves Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis and Buddy Holly way more… Vinyl needs to stop winking at the future and make us believe that Richie would actually like the fictionalized punk band, the Nasty Bits" (Goodman 2016: web).

While their main arguments about *Vinyl* are competing, what both groups share, is that they use authenticity as a primary criterion to evaluate the series' effectiveness.

Music Reviews: Effects of Using Impersonators to Represent the "Real"

Another aspect of the music scene that critics focus on in their reviews of *Vinyl* are the performances by real bands and musicians who are played by actors. For instance, Led Zeppelin (particularly Robert Plant and the band's manager, Peter Grant), David Bowie, and Elvis are all woven throughout the story lines in *Vinyl* episodes. There is mixed reaction to this production strategy, all of them sharing the concept of "authenticity" as a central marker of what works and what doesn't in the representations. A few critics have valued the fictional representations of real musicians: "The period specifics might even be the best reason to watch the show. If you get a kick out of seeing actors interpret Robert Plant, or Howlin' Wolf, or Robert Goulay, or KoolHerc, then many kicks you shall have" (Kornhaber 2016: web). The inclusion of such historical representations are valued because through them, viewers are taught about the "truth" of the time period. As Kornhaber (2016) writes "Perhaps the best thing about the cosplaying aspect of Vinyl is its reminder that the diverse proper nouns that people think of as 'the 70s' really did exist at the same time, often in dialogue with each other. Bruce Lee, Andy Warhol, and Richard Nixon all made an impression on a nation listening to ABBA, Black Sabbath, and Grand Funk Railroad" (web). Plus, these representations add to the entertainment value of the series. As Matthews (2016) intones, "The show is never more entertaining than when it drops in actors playing younger version rock stars and other boldface names from the era – Robert Plant, Lou Reed, Andy Warhol and more. The effect is like time travel" (web).

While the majority of critics who commented on the representation of real musicians praised their inclusion in the series, the reasons they give

for their praise is because of the verisimilitude of their presentations. So, these critics, too, are using "veracity," "authenticity," and "history as truth" as the lens through which to evaluate historical representations.

Music Reviews: Authenticity of Setting and Context of Dream-like Sequences

In addition to performances by historical representations of real bands and musicians, *Vinyl* also includes dream-like sequences – hypnotic interludes that focus on the "greats" that led to the rock and roll music scene that the series is depicting. For instance, at Richie's surprise birthday party, the camera pans from what is actually happening at the current moment to a mythical scene of Bo Didley playing a guitar similar to the one that Devon buys Richie for his birthday. In another scene, an almost celestial Karen Carpenter rides along in Devon's car as she daydreams about her life before her marriage and her children. Carpenter is singing "Yesterday Once More," reflecting Devon's state of mind. In other scenes, Howlin' Wolf performs "Smokestack Lightning" on a fire escape and Jerry Lee Lewis plays "Breathless" on an almost celestial piano. A few critics find this strategy effective. For instance, Edwards (2016) points out the uniqueness of these visuals: "Where most series would be content to play the song on the soundtrack to evoke both a mood and a time in Richie's life when life was simpler, Vinyl stages a performance. It's not just story telling for an A.D.H.D. audience; it's a power move" (web). Despite it being a "power move," the critics' feedback on these scenes is almost overwhelmingly negative. For instance, Long (2016) argues that the show feels inauthentic because of the feverish, almost mystical scenes in the show: "Rock star impersonators of all stripes keep popping up in bizarre places. Suddenly Bo Didley is playing by a swimming pool, or Karen Carpenter is sitting in a car as a character drives along. What?" (web) Others argue that the scenes interrupt the flow of the shows: "The frequent fantasy cutaways to late musical legends performing songs vaguely relevant to the characters' state of mind – these things are already obvious from what we've just seen and stop the show dead in its tracks every time. Musically, they could just as easily be slipped into the soundtrack instead of unconvincingly staged by lookalikes in some celestial nightclub" (Collins 2016: web). Also, if the purpose is to create an experience of listening to that kind of music, the scenes do not achieve that either, according to critics. As Collins (2016) explains, "A good song can transport you to another place, but is that place ever an empty room with a lone, blindingly backlit performer? When you really connect to a song, it draws you in, weaves its way into your brain,

and becomes a part of who you are. It doesn't leave you in the audience while the singer does their stuff" (web). So, because the dream-like sequences are not necessarily "realistic" and since they interrupt the flow of the story line of the "true" history, critics largely deem them to be problematic for a truthful representation of this time period.

In the next section, I explore alternative approaches to evaluating historical dramas. Drawing on Memory Studies theories, I illustrate what gets lost when authenticity is the primary criterion used to review historical dramas and point to the benefits of embracing a different view of history and its production.

Alternative Approaches: Memory Studies and *Vinyl* Analysis

Memory Studies:

A rethinking of the way to interpret representations in historical dramas is needed because of the limits of the framework provided by the more traditional interpretations of those texts and history more generally. The traditional view, which emphasizes "truth" and authenticity, oversimplifies the process of memory making and fails to take into account the purpose served by particular historical representations. Instead of judging series like *Vinyl* through the lens of authenticity, we should consider drawing on Memory Studies theorists who ask important, large-scale questions like *what is history?* and *to what use is history put by both producers and consumers of these historical dramas?* As Kansteiner shows, what Memory Studies theorists are interested in is finding out "what stories about the past matter to whom and how they have been distributed" (2002: 195). How people's versions of histories are constructed and for whom along with how these historical representations get used by consumers of them is a central focus for Memory Studies theorists. They argue that authenticity is a limited criterion to use in evaluating the effectiveness of historical representations. Nieger et al (2005: 4) state that "collective memory cannot be considered as evidence of the authenticity of a shared past; rather, collective memory is a version of the past, selected to be remembered by a given community (or more precisely agents in it) in order to advance its goals and serve its self-perception". When a historical event is represented in the current moment, it is brought back into our culture's consciousness, not as a "fixed" singular truth but as one (and sometimes multiple competing ones) that is constructed through the lens of present aims, values, and goals. As Garde-Hansen (2009: 2) insists, "another, perhaps more useful, way of characterizing memory is to consider that every time it is remade in the

present it becomes 'active'". Each time we retrieve a memory, she argues, "we do so in a later, temporal position – a new context. Moreover, every time we represent an aspect of the past to ourselves, we inevitably change it" (Garde-Hansen 2009: 2). So, the very act of representing a historical event actually constructs new views of that history, rather than simply capturing the "fixed" past. Quite often, the representations of the past index current anxieties and issues. Edgerton (2000: 9-10) argues that "more popular uses of memory have less to do with accuracy per se, than using the past as a kind of communal, mythic response to current controversies, issues, and challenges. The proponents of memory studies, therefore, are more concerned with how and why a remembered version is being constructed at a particular time… than whether a specific rendition of the past is historically correct and reliable above all else". The use of the historical representations, then, are crucial to our understanding of how histories are working in the current moment. As Zelizer (1995: 218) argues, "the study of collective memory, then, is much more than the unidimensional study of the past. It presents a graphing of the past as it is used for present aims, a vision in bold relief of the past as it is woven into the present and the future".

These views offer a different way of conceptualizing history and our uses of it, focusing more on the "how" and "why" and less on the "what." Approaching historical dramas like *Vinyl* through a Memory Studies lens, then, will highlight different aspects of the series that are overlooked when authenticity is the sole criterion used to evaluate it. Through this lens, we can see the ways that the historical stories presented in series like *Vinyl* provide us with insight about what stories matter in our current moment—both in terms of memory makers' conceptions as well as in the consumers' reception of particular representations. In the next section, I use these theories to analyse a common anxiety/issue that is indexed by *Vinyl*—the tension between art and commerce. Doing so provides us with insights not only into the historical moment of the NYC music scene in 1973 but also our culture's ongoing engagements with this tension. As will be made clear, this sort of analysis challenges the traditional views of authenticity and truth as the main framework through which to evaluate historical representations.

One Theme, Rather than a Comprehensive Story:

If critics want *Vinyl* to provide a comprehensive "truth" about the 1973 NYC music scene, then they will be disappointed – as many of the critics

were. But if we adopt a Memory Studies view, we begin to see the strategies that the producers used to convey a core theme that runs throughout *Vinyl*'s multiple story lines – art versus commerce**.** This key theme gets taken up in multiple ways in the series, ascribing to an idea put forth by Peter Davis--60 Minutes' producer – that a historical drama or documentary should focus on one theme—and focus on it deeply – rather than trying to represent the "whole" (Joplin 1988: 1213) because, as Memory Studies theorists argue, the "whole" is a constructed myth that serves to oversimplify the process of memory making**.** *Vinyl* itself focuses on the way the tension between art and commerce gets played out. Reading the series through this dominant theme illustrates a different kind of significance for telling stories of the past; it shows that when we tell a past story, we are activating the past in new ways and exploring issues of how the "there and then" is shaped by the "here and now."

The theme of art versus commerce is dominant in the *Vinyl*'s representation of the music business. Kip, the lead singer of the Nasty Bits, struggles with maintaining what he sees as his and the band's integrity while still desiring to be a success and make money. He rails against the need for him to create a biography of himself, to fire the lead guitarist of the original band, and gets frustrated with the photo shoots that the band must participate in. A key moment in the series that shows this tension is when Julie Silver (Max Casella), A & R Director, makes the band play a re-vamped Kinks tune rather than playing their own song during their audition for Richie. When it becomes clear that the song is not working to capture the raw passion of the band, Kip and the band start playing their original song and, as a result of this switch back to their original music, capture Richie's ear. Thus, the representation of the Nasty Bits emphasizes the tensions between art and commerce from the perspective of the artist. In this instance, art and commerce are reconciled. The Nasty Bits can be successful without fully "selling out" to "the man."

On the other hand, Lester Grimes' (AtoEssandoh) story illustrates what tragedy can happen when someone refuses to sell out and art and commerce are not reconciled. When Richie first got into the music business, Lester was his first client, but when a company wanted to buy Richie out, they insisted that they keep Lester on. While Richie valued Lester's blues music, the new owners of the company did not and requested that he change his name and sing pop songs, rather than sticking to the blues that was his passion. When Lester refused to sing the songs the company wanted him to, it hired mobsters to crush Lester's voice box so that he

could never sing again. Lester sinks into despair and when we see him in 1973, he is a superintendent of a sad, run-down building. Richie serendipitously meets back up with Lester and tries to find a way to make up for what happened to Lester. As a result, Richie wants Lester to sell old tapes of his recordings, but Lester burns the tapes right in front of Richie, out of anger over what Richie has done to his career as well as out of a resistance to Richie's desire to commodify Lester's music. In an interview, Essandoh explains Lester's character in this way:

> I think that Lester, sort of archetypally, represents the pure musician, especially the African-American musician back then, especially the blues guys. There were a lot of them that were taken advantage of, and the music was essentially stolen from them. I think part of my thinking in this character was representing a little bit of that because I think Lester is not a business guy. He doesn't know any of that stuff. He just – as he says in the pilot—he just wants to play the blues. He's just that pure of a musician. (Cobb 2016: web)

In the quote, Essandoh paints an image of an "authentic" musician who does not "sell out," but who was "sold out." His character in the show represents the dark "truth" of the music business in a way that highlights exploitation and violence. When asked in an interview how "truthful" he felt his character's representation was, Essandoh responded that he feels *Vinyl*'s representation of the exploitation is "pretty accurate for what I know of how people behaved back then. It still happens today. The music industry, like every industry, has a problem with exploiting artists. Right now people are not getting paid for having billions of streams on, let's say, Spotify or so forth" (Cobb 2016: web). Interestingly enough, by the end of the show, Lester has taken on the role of the Nasty Bits' manager, locating himself squarely in the music business that he resisted so vehemently in the 50's. As Essandoh explains, when Lester gets involved in the music business, "he looks at himself as a sell-out, but it's actually a good business move to do something like that. Because, unfortunately, whether you like it or not, art has to be mixed with commerce if you want to eat" (Cobb 2016: web). Thus, Lester's story highlights the complexities of the "selling out" and the ever shifting balance of power that has characterized the music business for decades. While the "truth" of the history of African-American musicians is important because it raises awareness of exploitation and deceit, it is also important to study the contradictions in Lester's story in order to understand that there isn't one true history of those musicians or their plight/situations. The art versus commerce issue is definitely woven

throughout his story, but Lester's actions never fully resolve the issue, instead showing the complexity of the problem.

This theme of art versus commerce is a common anxiety even today. According to many music critics, we are once again in a transitional time period where the issue of art versus commodity is becoming a central concern because of the way that a myriad of technological changes in the music industry is making it harder for artists to financially survive only through selling albums. Because of streaming music and fans' changing listening habits, many artists are looking for other ways to make a living so that they can continue to make their music. McMartin (2005) explains the tension in the current moment in the following way:

> Even if someone writes their own material or brings in songwriters, there is always an inclination to come up with something catchy, new, and relevant that has the possibility of becoming a hit. You cannot blame an artist wanting to make a living from creating music and wanting to spread their music to as many people as possible. That's every artist's goal but sometimes during the pursuit of success, the music is compromised (web).

One area where this tension is currently being played out is in corporate advertising. Analysing the impact of musicians allowing advertisers to use their songs, Parkinson (2014) muses: "So, is it now completely acceptable for bands to market their songs to advertising companies? It might be the case that with declining record sales and the increase in online streaming, there is little money to be made from music these days… Artists are having to find new ways to earn a crust – most of their income now comes from touring, merchandise, and, yes, advertising. It may well be that artists are simply doing what they need to in order to survive" (web). She determines that there is a change in the air, with artists who refuse to use their music in advertisements and other corporate endeavours being "no longer the default position" (Parkinson 2014: web). But, as Richards (2015) argues, the new generation of younger listeners do not necessarily see these practices as "selling out." "Completely aware that yesterday's music industry is now rubble, younger listeners no longer feel that the integrity of the experience has been violated when their most beloved artists pitch products or sell their songs for TV commercials. When music can no longer sell itself, it scrambles to help sell other stuff" (Richards 2015: web). For example, "Drake has made it his job to sell more Drake – through rapping, through singing, through Nike, through Sprite" (Parkinson 2016: web). But if this "selling out" means that an artist's music is more widely available and that the artist continues to make music, many in the younger generation are

okay with these practices. Brownstein (2009) points out that "because as music fans – as consumers – there is nothing more appealing than something that is boundless. Therefore, we don't really care what an artist's intention is as long as his or her product is accessible to us. And corporations and their commercials are often the ones bringing songs to us, curating our experience and means of exposure or giving our favourite musicians the most money, so that they can continue making the music we love" (web).

Other rock and roll critics, however, argue that this commodification of music ruins the music: "if advertising becomes a prime venue to discover and experience music, how long before too much music starts sounding too timid and too dull? Will the fear of losing an endorsement or licensing deal make tomorrow's artists less adventurous? (More so than back in the day when artists were competing for record contracts instead?)" (Richards 2016: web). Artists rail against the new tendency as well, with Adele stating that "'I don't want my name anywhere near another brand. I don't wanna be tainted, or haunted, and I don't wanna sell out in any way. I think it's shameful'" (Parkinson 2014: web). And McGovern (2012) argues that savvy listeners will not tolerate this newer trend well: "Ultimately, when an artist's music is shoved in the faces of principled music fans with standards and appears as a product as opposed to an individual piece of art, fans will reject the music. While the implications of selling out may have changed in the new millennium, the traditional meaning of the accusation still holds. When a band begins to sound more accessible and marketable at the expense of artistic integrity, those dedicated fans will be ready to scream 'sell out'" (web). The issue of art versus commerce continues to be a tricky one, but "one thing's for sure, the relationship between commerce and music is strengthening" (Parkinson 2014: web).

Clearly, these are similar anxieties that are reflected in *Vinyl*'s representation of the music business, except that *Vinyl* takes it to a more dangerous position, where violence is actually done to artists who refuse to sell out and the mob is at the heart of the music business. These plot lines may have been included to add to the dramatic feel of the show, and/or they can reflect the largesse of the problem of art versus commerce. But what is clear is that the theme of art versus commerce is clearly a current-moment anxiety and is open to as much debate as it was in the '70s – as represented in *Vinyl*.

Conclusion

So, why is it important to study a show like *Vinyl* through the lens of Memory Studies? Analysing the reception of the show helps us see the ways that particular views of history shape not only how we interpret historical dramas but also how we approach history in general. If we see history as a fixed "truth," then there's really no reason for us to actually engage with history making. According to traditional views, history is already made and it is the task of producers to present the "correct" history. Memory Studies theorists, though, encourage us to rethink our positioning towards history. From their view, history is a constructed rendition in the current moment, pointing as much to current issues as to those in the past. Looking at the uses to which histories are put help us understand the significance of recalling and re-engaging with particular histories and their particular representations. Memory Studies helps us see that the past is layered onto the present and when we re-activate a past event, we are doing so through a contemporary lens. Studying the series through this view of history helps us see how the history of 1973 NYC music scene is being represented rather than viewing Vinyl as providing a textbook definition of what that history was. Memory Studies approaches allow us to examine an issue that was historically and currently impacting the music business in significant ways. So, instead of expecting historical dramas like *Vinyl* (or any representation of a history) to provide "the" story, what an analysis of *Vinyl* does is show how the series tells "a" story – an invested story, a perspectival story – but definitely not "the" story because, as Memory Studies theorists show, believing that there is a singular story to tell is fictional. Although "we have come to expect conventional history, not innovative approaches to looking at the past," (Joplin), Vinyl actually approaches history through an innovative lens. And if we use Memory Studies to study it, we can see the power of that lens – not only for interpretations of historical dramas, but also for our uses of/engagements with histories in general.

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