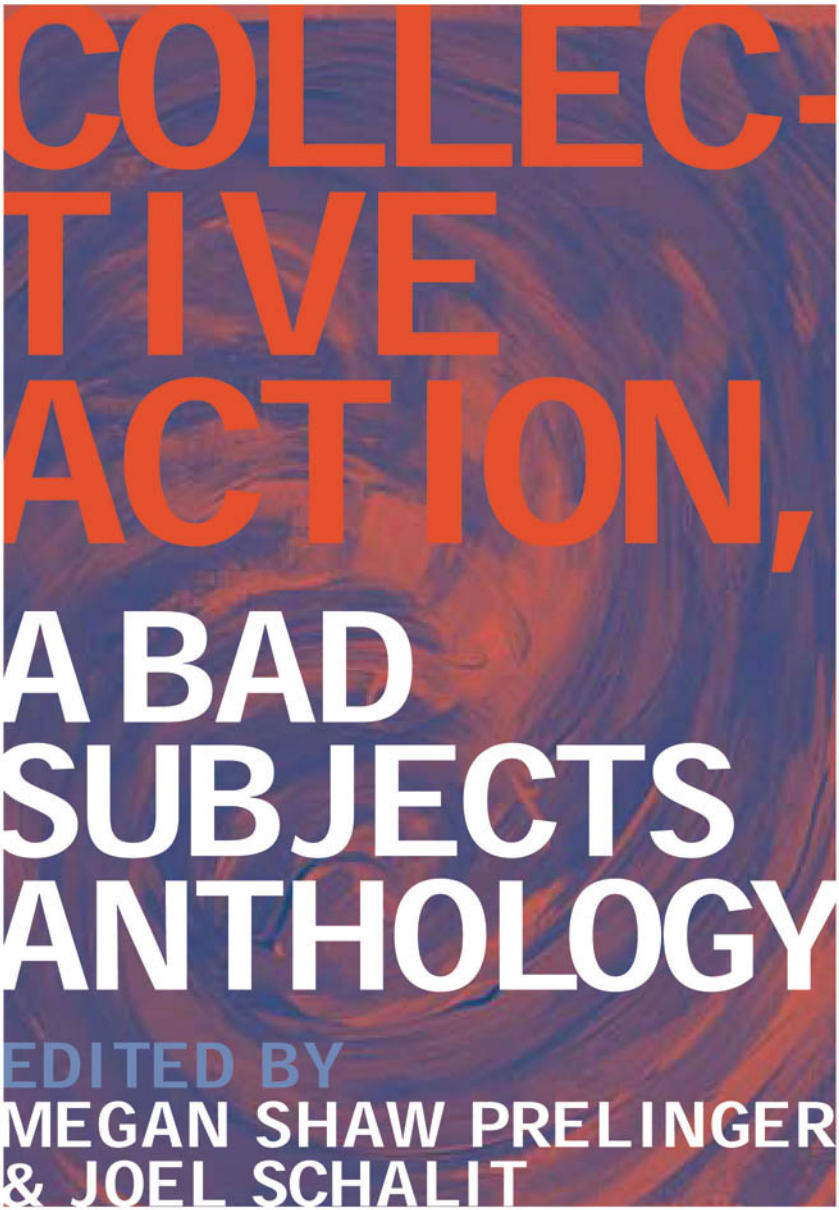
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TIVE
ACTION,
A BAD
SUBJECTS
ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY
MEGAN SHAW PRELINGER
& JOEL SCHALIT

Collective Action

A *Bad Subjects* Anthology

Edited by
Megan Shaw Prelinger and Joel Schalit

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My Dad Kicked Ass for a Living

Zack Furness

When I was a little kid I used to have a ritual designed specifically for days when I was home sick with the flu. After consuming a modest amount of buttered toast and tea, I would plant myself in front of the television screen and watch a consistent pattern of recorded movies including *Mary Poppins*, *Star Wars*, and several films that documented the adventures of *Herbie the Love Bug*. On one such occasion when I was enjoying the benefits of a newly settled stomach, I watched static fill the screen after one of Herbie's wild escapades and I lazily drooped off of the couch with a finger extended toward the stop button on the VCR.

Suddenly the static disappeared and the screen was overtaken by a swarm of football players, green Astroturf and the audible banter of Brent Musberger, a quasi-legendary sports broadcaster. Among the scattered bodies of Houston Oilers and Pittsburgh Steelers I immediately picked out the black and gold embroidered number 64, and realized for the first time that I was watching my dad on television. And holy shit, there he was in the flesh and blood! He was chasing the Oilers around the field using his body like some medieval ramming device, clubbing his opponents with taped fists and padded armor, grabbing at jerseys with his crooked football fingers. After several minutes of action he received a 15-yard penalty for slamming the quarterback to the ground after he had already thrown the ball.

During a replay of the penalty the announcers were offering up their formulaic doses of commentary, saying things like, 'Furness should have known not to take that penalty,' and, 'You don't expect those type of mistakes from a veteran player,' and other statements that were intended to decry my dad's bone-crushing hit on the quarterback. The camera then switched from the reply to a close up shot of my dad, a man who only hours earlier had read me a story before bed, and here he was the subject of the almighty close up shot of the NBC cameras—a shot that either meant you had done something exceptional or you had fucked up. In this case, the camera angle was attempting to create a sort of multifaceted mug shot of the temporary villain … the man who could have given that poor quarterback a concussion … the man who should have known better … the man who kicks ass for a living … the man I call dad.

Through his facemask and enormous beard I could tell from his stoic expression that he was proud to play this modern role of half-villain, half-hero, and he certainly wasn't showing any visible signs of remorse. And although I knew the intricacies of this man's life, had eaten his breakfasts, had watched him lift weights, had hung from his extended arm like a small monkey, here he was being *created* by the television set. His actions were framed, admired, dictated, and conformed to the spectacle of the screen his character was developed through instant replays, audience noises, and violent clashes with the Houston natives. While my house was plastered with black and white stills of him making a tackle or standing on the sidelines, it was not until I saw him on the screen that it all added up to greatness in my mind. On that day, my dad became immortalized alongside the likes of Darth Vader, The Great Grape Ape, and other such characters that lingered in my four-year-old television world of mystery, action, and enchantment. But on that day, he ceased to belong only to me and became part of a much larger world that I could have imagined only in terms of crowds I had seen at the mall or the local amusement park.

Over the course of my pre-teen years I witnessed the development of my TV dad on a number of different occasions—usually during dinnertime. When he appeared on television, I would watch intensely as he offered brief statements concerning the Michigan State football team, or more specifically the defensive players that he coached. On the screen, his mustache would bounce up and down with the rhythm of his lips as he talked, and his green athletic gear would give off an aura of prestige and respectability that seemed naturally to evoke the term 'coach.' What was even more uncanny is that I often watched this TV personality together with the real life version of my dad, becoming ever more enamored by his presence as I passed him the peas. During our years in East Lansing my friends would tell me when they saw him on television. Some of them even remarked that he looked like Magnum P.I., which was a pretty badass compliment in the mid-1980s. Given my age at the time, I sometimes wondered whether Magnum P.I.'s family ever saw my dad on television and thought about how their dad looked just like Steve Furness.

Throughout the next ten years I became more familiar with the life of my TV dad by watching his eloquent statements about leaving Michigan State, his eventual return to the Steelers as a coach, and his thoughts on being fired from the Pittsburgh job a few years later. I watched this character with a keen interest because I had never heard these exact thoughts articulated to anyone within my immediate family, and I always found it remarkable how the living room background of these miniature press events looked so much like my own. Still, there was a gap between these two lives, these two characters that I had become so familiar with over the years. They gave different reasons for major life decisions, they spoke to different audiences, they wore different types of hair products, and they expressed different emotions.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this situation was the attempt to extrapolate some type of authenticity from these various televised segments. Which decision was the *real* one? Which comment was truthful and which one intended for an audience? I began to realize that one of the distinguishing features of my TV dad was his ability to deliver a particularly TV-style series of comments concerning his situation. His speech was informative but to the point, confident but also humble, and willfully constructed with a series of specific nods and eyebrow movements. An awkwardness would sometimes emerge after such TV moments when my real dad would say something to one of us and I could swear that it had been rehearsed before a TV audience at some previous time. Because of the apparent disjunction between my real life and TV dads, I became acutely aware of the screen's ability to conform reality to its own selfish standards. Each of us has witnessed these effects firsthand when we gauge our tragedies, heroic acts, or amazing feats through experience of the screen, leading to eyewitness accounts of people who describe a given event as 'surreal'—'like I am watching TV.' Most of us realize that the screen possesses no motivation of its own, however we undoubtedly grapple with the effects of the screen like cavemen might have initially grappled with their shadows.

While we attempt to dissociate ourselves from such comparisons, it is all too evident that our ability to distinguish between the real and the reproduction has not, and will not, come to fruition within our lifetimes. Yet, we operate under the assumption that such decisions will inevitably have to be made if our species will continue to thrive. Our lives thrive within, evolve from and are inextricably bound to what Philip K. Dick calls 'irreal' relationships and mediated life-forms. For Dick, life is an irreal presence that thrives within the seamlessly jagged juxtapositions of the natural and the mechanical—forces that simultaneously imitate one another with no beginning or end in sight. Perhaps I learned the lessons of irreality so early on that I couldn't keep track of where my life ended and the screen began. Like many of Dick's characters, I could never identify the exact separation of the real from the irreal and I eventually gave up trying.

Sometime after I first had to confront these bizarre circumstances, my TV dad became movable, controllable, and pixelated within the video game world of John Madden Football—a virtual conglomeration of various TV dads from different eras whose speaking parts were swept away in favor of repetitive motions and 16-bit touchdown dances. I played his character on several occasions, watching his movements, examining his build, comparing his athletic prowess to my memories of the real version. They just had it all wrong in the game though. He could rush the passer much better in real life and he was quite a bit faster. However, his extra point blocking ability on the screen was Herculean in nature, providing thousands of people with a false sense of what his strengths

and weaknesses were like during the heyday of the Steelers. But on the other hand, he won my friend Brian $25 when his last-second-kick-blocking skills prevented an overtime victory against the 1985 Bears—a team that was assembled long after his retirement. Several months later I taught my dad how to play the video game and remembered to tell him that Brian said 'thank you' for the money. During the 15-minute game I clobbered my dad with the video version of himself, leaving us in near silence, partially amused, partially confused, but definitely entertained.

Unlike the experience of watching my TV dad on a newscast or sports show, the video game version of him was not all that unsettling. One might imagine that the game's distortion of his figure, skills, size, or complexion would have provoked some uneasiness on my part, but the synthetic quality of the game actually created a more succinct split between my real dad and the creation displayed on the screen. Because older games lacked the ability to create a realistic image, they were also stripped of the pretenses associated with regular TV—a format in which the editorial procedures, make-up applications, lighting coordinators and out-takes are hidden in the attempt to reproduce/produce reality for mass consumption. In the most basic sense, we weren't meant to believe that the little, square-headed people of SEGA's world were real. They didn't drink water, they didn't sweat and they didn't get tired … these were the conditions that were not only acceptable, but desirable.

For a two day span in February 2000, the discrepancy between the real and TV versions of my dad became fully realized as the former departed quickly from this earth, while the latter was exalted through video clips, photo stills, and polished commentary from several different Pittsburgh newscasters. I watched the television when I returned home from the hospital, disappointed to find my TV dad so cramped within the MTV-style editing of various games played throughout the 1970s. The quick shots attempted to summarize particular eras of his life within seconds of video footage, but it couldn't reproduce the blissful sensation of seeing him pulverize that quarterback some 20 years earlier. Still, I relished the experience of seeing my dad receive a television eulogy—apparently the highest honor that media can provide. All of his television pasts were spliced together in order to create an immortal TV superhero who wore his jersey with pride and made his family proud.

Every year when it comes time for the Super Bowl to be played, I inevitably receive a late night call from one of my friends who has spotted my TV dad within the hours of old Super Bowl footage that ESPN runs in order to keep all pot smokers and insomniac football fans entertained for the three days preceding the game. I always take a few moments to share in the nostalgia with my excited friend and take solace in the idea that somewhere in a far off video game, highlight reel, or rerun, my dad still kicks ass for a living.