

Chapter 8

Intertextuality and metafiction
Genre and narration in the television fiction
of Dennis Potter

Ib Bondebjerg 1992

THE FICTION-MACHINE OF TELEVISION: A CHANGING SCENE

The mainstream products of television fiction are heavily industrialised, especially when we talk about TV fiction from the commercial super powers (networks in the US, the large national semi-commercial stations in the larger European countries, and the transnational satellite channels). Viewed in an abstract cultural perspective, this seems to establish a firm genre contract between the television industry, the actual sender or producer of programmes, and the audience. However, neither the genres nor the reception of television fiction can be considered as a simple process of production according to a fixed format, or a stereotyped process of reception.

Genre contracts should rather be viewed as floating structures that are negotiated between industry, text, and audience in a specific socio-cultural setting, and as such subject to historical change. The industrialised production process creates structures and formats that cross national borders and socio-cultural divides: genre products form a possible framework for cultural and ideological mainstreaming. But they are also embedded in diverse formations of pleasure and play: they are the basic material from which cultural and psychological negotiations create different forms of reception-texts.

The fiction-machine of modern television is both a mythical, a narrative, and a poetic machine. But whereas traditional critics have often – from the standpoint of elite culture – tended to stress the legitimating, mythical, and conventional narrative form of television fiction, 'postmodern critical theory' tends to claim

that the lines dividing elite culture, *avant garde* culture, and the so-called mainstream of mass culture are increasingly blurred: television creates a mixed culture where mainstream meets experiment, and the popular poetics merges with the forms of anti-narrative and meta-fiction.

Dennis Potter's television fiction reflects this situation very clearly. It is not just another version of the classical *avant garde*, now finally reaching television: rather his way of using television can be read as a symptom of a broader tendency in which mainstream and experiment are merging in a new way. The development of rock videos is an already fairly well-analysed example of the same phenomenon, which can also be found not only in European films, but in popular American cinema and American network shows. This phenomenon, then, is not just a European *avant garde* cultural trend, but a vital part of a more widespread cultural condition of the postmodern. However, we still need to distinguish between the more 'commercial' and the more 'critical' forms of popular postmodern aesthetics. Potter is an example of the latter.

Potter's television fiction is certainly an extraordinary example of a possible new tendency in television, but different critics such as Eco (1985), Grodal (1990) and Olson (1987) have traced similar tendencies in a broad range of popular, mainstream television narrative. For instance the TV series *Moonlighting* clearly works both on a heavily intertextual basis and on a meta-fictional level. Here the normal process of narrative decoding or constructing of the story and the normal ways of identification are bracketed by meta-fictional devices, playful references to the discourse, and intertextual repetition or deconstruction of classical genres and film. This does not necessarily give this construction a strong critical dimension, but it may also be seen as a way of legitimating ordinary fictional needs, for a new kind of audience who might otherwise feel they were being addressed as too naive.

The elimination of or play with this 'naive addressee of the first level' is discussed in a broader perspective by Eco (1985: 18), who sees a tendency now to address a 'sophisticated addressee at the second level' more explicitly. Olson (1987) follows the same tendency, with his notion of the matured audience, and the increased presence of meta-fictional devices in even commercial network television. He defines meta-television as a new form of popular postmodernism that can be found on at least three levels: *medium-reflexive structure*, *genre-reflexive structure*, and *text-*

reflexive structure. At the first level we find a growing audience awareness of the communication situation reflected at the diegetic level, and also an increasing number of inter-programme references. The second level points to an increased structural mixing, copying, quoting, and recycling of different genre cues within programmes, demanding schemata knowledge of a large variety of intertextual experience. The third level of meta-fiction can be characterised as the deliberate play with the basic narrative machinery of time, space, and style: a sort of play with the 'normal' construction of the story of classical narration.

The increased intertextual consciousness in the production and reception of television mainstream series and the use of a playful, meta-fictional dimension does not mean that (American) commercial television has become 'critical' or, as a whole, non-narrative. But it is most certainly a symptom of a new cultural situation, in which a kind of 'popular *avant garde*' is made possible. However, many of the meta-fictional and intertextual devices in popular postmodern television and film may be characterised as mere 'gimmicks' on a largely narrative background. Dennis Potter's television fiction clearly goes further: here the meta-fictional dimension and the intertextual clues are used to create a discussion of the fictional process in the relation between narratives and our lives, the processes of mind, body, emotions, and cognition in a narrative that has popular, realistic, modern, and postmodern features.

CULTURAL INDUSTRIES: THE CHANGING OF PARADIGMS

Andreas Huyssen has recently baptised the traditional Frankfurt paradigm 'the theory of The Great Divide' (Huyssen 1986: ix). He defines the great divide as a critical 'discourse that insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture' (Huyssen 1986: viii). The theorists of the great divide, above all Adorno (Adorno 1972), dismiss mass culture from jazz to American TV drama as an industrialised and debased art form. Moreover, the theory of the great divide considers the audience of mass culture to be naive dupes, and thus lays the foundation for a rather paternalistic project of emancipation.

In the new, critical, postmodern paradigm, which has been formulated not only by Huyssen (1986) but also, among others,

by Eco (1985), Hebdige (1988), and Collins (1989), this concept of both mass cultural products and of the audience has been changed. Huyssen defines the postmodern not as an aesthetic difference primarily between modernism and postmodernism, but as 'a new set of mutual relations and discursive configurations' in which modernism, *avant garde*, and mass culture come together. He elaborates on the hidden contradiction he sees in Adorno's writings, in which, after all, there are certain limitations to the reification that mass cultural products can inflict on the audiences. This resistance can only be related to a more active and open form of reception than that foreseen by the traditional, critical paradigm. And if this fact is established, the next step would logically be to admit that mass cultural products, on closer examination, reveal a greater multitude of discursive strategies and openings, which contradict the traditional image of conformity.

Much the same theme is discussed by Eco in his efforts to trace the relation between innovation and repetition in modernist and popular texts. He shows how the degree of intertextual dialogic, once supposed to be typical of experimental, *avant garde* art and a culturally sophisticated model reader, is now a broader phenomenon, part of a meta-fictional play in a number of widespread mass-media texts (Eco 1985: 171). Following this theme, Jim Collins' book on popular culture and postmodernism (Collins 1989) dismisses the notion of culture as a hierarchical master system that can somehow explain both production and reception (Collins 1989: xiii). This, however, should not lead to false notions of 'implosion' (Baudrillard 1985), in which narrative structures and coherent genre systems seem to vanish, and the overall meaning of anything is said to disappear. Stuart Hall has efficiently met this 'implosion-theory' with a more adequate 'explosion-theory' (Hall 1986). The coding of texts and audiences is as strong as ever, but the cultural codes are more plural, i.e. double-coded or multi-coded, and the connection between model texts and designed model readers is not the linear process from above assumed by classical critical theory.

Elaborating on this idea, Collins refers to Jencks' (1986) concept of 'imaginary museum' and the term 'bricolage', borrowed from French structuralism by Hebdige (1979), as a way of characterising a more active audience trying to make sense in a culture with a huge network of competing discourses and genres. Accord-

ing to the metaphor of the imaginary museum, the semiotic culture of the media more and more resembles not only a stockpiling of an ever-growing variety of products that are recycled in many ways, but also a crowded museum of people trying to make sense. There is an ongoing semiotic process where, on one hand, messages or arrangements of items from the museum are arranged in different ways to catch the attention of different audiences and individuals; on the other hand, the individual creates, selects, and actively tries to interpret the bombardment of various messages. The term bricolage in fact just underlines this last aspect of reception. As Collins puts it, '... [in] cultures where no overarching, pan-cultural distinctions between official and unofficial, mainstream and *avant garde* are in effect, bricolage becomes the inevitable response to semiotic overload' (Collins 1989: 145).

In a large number of empirical reception studies (Katz and Liebes 1986; Schrøder 1988; Morley 1980; Ang 1985; Jensen 1986), and in the revised cultural-semiotic perspective of Fiske (1987), a similar case is made for the semiotic power or even freedom of the audience, and the individual recipient, either to resist the power of media messages or to construct their own meanings. But although the empirical reception studies show a new audience concept at work which underlines the bricolage activity of the viewers and the differences in reception, it is important to point out that even though a centralised concept of control and uniformity may be abandoned, no subject is 'free' to construct meaning or to choose freely from the shelves of the imaginary museum (Jensen 1990). Texts work hard to construct their readers, and readers carry intertextual as well as cultural codes with them. So the selection and construction of meaning is of course strongly influenced by the intertextual and cultural codes already at work, by the textual signals, codes, and intertextual references set in motion by a particular text, and by the choices made possible at the different levels on which the imaginary museum can be nationally and transnationally organised.

POTTER, TELEVISION, AND THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY

Very few so-called 'serious' writers have decided to write primarily for television. Dennis Potter, however, is one of them: since 1965 he has been the author of at least 28 TV dramas, 3 original

mini-series with other directors, and 4 adapted mini-series, and in his latest mini-series he is both author and director. His mini-series have been seen by millions of viewers, not only in Britain and the rest of Europe, but also in the USA. An American critic recently named him the most resourceful innovator in British screen drama (Fuller 1989: 31). Although his plays and mini-series have not made the leap from the BBC and the European public-service culture to commercial, American network television, they have been aired on PBS channels. But even though Potter has not been shown on network television in the US, the outstanding success of David Lynch's new crime mini-series *Twin Peaks* clearly indicates that the line between experiment and commercial television can be crossed.

However, Potter has also engaged in a close encounter with the Hollywood cinematic apparatus, the mainstream cultural industry par excellence. He wrote the script for Michael Apted's 1983 film *Gorky Park*, a film with an intriguing, political thriller plot. As an author Potter thus has first-hand knowledge of the classical narrative tradition of the Hollywood thriller, which forms the background of the intertextual and meta-fictional play with crime fiction narration clichés in, for instance, his maze-like mini-series *The Singing Detective 1-6* (1986).

A transformation in the opposite direction is seen in Herbert Ross' American film version from 1981 of Potter's original six-part mini-series *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), the 'Hollywoodisation' of which tends to transform a sharp piece of social criticism and meta-fictional play with televisual and popular codes into mainstream musical and comedy. These examples show Potter's deliberate attempts to cross 'the great divide' between high culture and mass culture. He is afraid neither of embarking on the commercial vessel of Hollywood nor of using or referring to the products of television mass culture in his mini-series and plays. It is as if his Welsh, Socialist working-class background gives him a certain 'disdain for high art and a belief in the notion of a democratic culture' (Fuller 1989: 31). In many ways Potter's forms of television narration can be viewed as a daring experiment in the mixing of modernist and popular discourses in a sort of critical postmodernism or popular *avant garde* dialogue.

Potter constantly challenges his audience, not only by attacking the dogmas of naturalism and realism or the logic of classical narratives, but also by a multi-layered twisting of discourses,

plot-lines, and intertextual references and genre frames. Although his cooperation with Hollywood shows a more straightforward and narrative Potter, and although he has created clear-cut realist narratives, for instance his four-hour mini-series *Christabel* (1988), he is mainly characterised as a television narrator by his constant efforts to visualise the flow of a postmodern consciousness, saturated with popular culture and mass media. The mixture of fiction and reality that is often staged in his television fiction is thus a symptom of a postmodern condition, a world of what seems to be a 'hyper-reality' and communication based on 'floating signifiers'. The world and the mind are represented as a staged media-scene where both the protagonists in Potter's fiction and in the end the audience may wonder who is the author and master of the narrative. However, as we shall see, Potter is not a postmodernist in the uncritical or Baudrillard sense of the word: his communication has substance and meaning beneath the chaotic surface.

Since Potter wrote his first piece of television fiction in 1965 - *Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* - he has clearly been looking for a new kind of non-naturalist and non-realist TV fiction, and has also moved from single plays towards serialised fiction. Already in his speech at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 1977, he defined his strategy in opposition to the dominating realist form of TV fiction and the naive belief in fact or the trust in the direct relationship between the word and the world, the image and the represented. He did not dismiss naturalism and realism, but clearly wanted to create a new sort of television fiction that could also be seen as an intertextual play with all the formats and genres on the television screen and a meta-fictional play with the frame itself:

Most television ends up offering its viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally received notions of 'reality'. The best naturalist or realist drama, of the Garnett, Loach-Allen school for instance, breaks out of this cosy habit by the vigour, clarity and originality and depth of its perceptions of a more comprehensive reality. The best non-naturalist drama, in its very structures, *disorientates* the viewer smack in the middle of the orientation process which television perpetually uses. It disrupts the patterns that are endemic to television and upsets and exposes the narrative styles of so

many of the other allegedly non-fiction programmes. It shows the frame in the picture, when most television is busy showing the picture in the frame.

(Potter 1977: 37)

Potter has given another explanation of the dream-like, non-narrative technique of visual montage that he mostly uses:

All writers are aiming at a sort of realism, but naturalism assumes we sense the world out there to be exactly as it is – and I know that not to be the case. If they really examine themselves, most people know that their own aspirations, moods, memories, regrets and hopes are so tangled up with the alleged reality of the out there that it is actually interpenetrated by those feelings. Naturalism leads you to believe that you are just a creation of all the imperatives of the world – whereas the non-naturalistic dramatization of the inside of your head is more likely to remind you of the shreds of your own sovereignty.

(quoted in Fuller 1989: 32)

In consequence of this, he explains *Christabel* and his occasional return to the documentary or naturalistic discourse as 'a deeper need . . . to do a piece of naturalistic, chronological narrative as an act of writerly hygiene, just as you might wash your brain under the tap' (quoted in Fuller 1989: 33).

It seems that this brainwash – another metaphor for the psychoanalytical reading and deconstruction of narratives and identities taking place in all his works, not least *The Singing Detective* – has set free an even more radical TV writer lately. In his latest four-part mini-series, *Blackeyes* (1990), dealing with feminism and male desire in the construction of the feminine, he has developed his multi-layered soundtrack and visual montage of different narrative plots even further. It is told through the mind of not only one, but several writers. In this mini-series, of which Potter is both scriptwriter and director for the first time, he has surpassed himself and others. As Dunkley puts it,

Potter is so far ahead of the field in his use of television, that his story scarcely matters any more . . . this drama has a slighter narrative than *The Singing Detective*, but Potter is now using television as James Joyce used the novel and Van

Gogh used painting: as a multi-layered medium of intense self-expression.

(Dunkley 1990)

However, this might also indicate a new and radical *avant garde* position, a narrative process where discursive non-logic has killed any story-logic, and where a potential mass audience may be lost in Potter's television maze. *Blackeyes* is clearly a step away from a more direct positive dialogue with popular culture and genres, as it seems to deal even more subtly than before with the very construction of fiction, reality, and roles: a very advanced play with frames and a very complex sort of deconstruction, without the break into straight genre-pastiche of the two earlier mini-series.

NARRATION AND POPULAR POSTMODERNISM.

If the reception process of narrative fiction in a postmodern media culture can be seen as a kind of imaginary museum-work or bricolage, then the same can be said about the production of television fiction – of which Potter's is a very prominent example. The intertextual bricolage work and the loving deconstruction in the course of the narrative process of carefully selected genre codes is very intense in both *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Singing Detective*. One good example of this is that in both narratives popular songs are used to create a lyrical underlining of the narrative and at the same time a kind of punctuation or *Verfremdung* of the narrative process. The songs create an atmosphere of historical time in the stories, i.e. they have a referential sign function, and they are also realistically legitimated by the occupation of the protagonist in the two narratives. In *Pennies from Heaven* he is a salesman of sheet-music, and in *The Singing Detective*, as the title indicates, one of the levels of the narrative makes Marlow (*sic!*) a part-time crooner.

But the songs also point to the imaginary or symbolic layers of the narrative and work to create overloaded semiotic junctions in the text. This happens in a fairly simple way in *Pennies from Heaven*, where the conflict between the dull everyday life of the Depression and the dreams of a better life is expressed in the confrontation of the songs and the narrative, and in the way in which the singing goes from background music to the voice of

the characters. Alternatively it can be done in a more complicated way, as in *The Singing Detective*, where the songs have the same function as in *Pennies from Heaven*, but also glue the fragmented narrative discourses together in a more symbolic way, providing the viewer with a set of meta-fictional clues to the narrative and psychological puzzle.

A good example can be found in part 3 of *The Singing Detective*, 'Lovely Days', where the Mills Brothers version of 'Paper Doll' forms the background of a scene where a fatal separation between Marlow's father and mother is taking place in a flashback. This song, dealing with the image of 'flirty guys', and thus hinting that it is adultery by the mother that causes the separation, is sung first as a background-song; then by Marlow as the grown-up singing detective, searching backwards in his own life; then by the father, who was left behind; and finally by a group of soldiers in the train, taking the mother and Marlow as a boy to London and away from the father. This popular and rather direct song is thus clearly used to get us to move up and down the narrative layers. Simultaneously the development of an Oedipal conflict is explained by the combination of narrative, visual symbols and the song.

In *Pennies from Heaven* the songs also clearly function on both a narrative and a symbolic level. The realistic worlds portrayed in this mini-series are, on the one hand, the depressing lower-middle-class, suburban London culture during the crisis between the two world wars, and on the other, life in rural provincial England. The protagonist, Arthur, a salesman in sheet-music, travels between these two worlds, and we follow his more and more fatal love story with a (at the beginning!) very innocent schoolteacher. The morals and daily life of greater London and provincial England are contrasted, but what the two characters have in common is the way they relate to or use popular culture to dream about another life. For the female schoolteacher it is fairy tales; for Arthur it is the popular songs of the period. The worlds of the songs and the fairy tales are used metaphorically to contrast and comment on the realistic world, and at the same time they function as a distanciation mechanism or a sort of meta-fictional device.

In a way the different forms of popular culture are given a religious or Utopian dimension, as the title of this mini-series indicates: they point to the hidden meaning of life, to the good

ideals and the kind of love and good life that cannot be found in reality. But at the same time, of course, they are seen as commercial speculations and as unrealistic dream worlds: they are meant to give pennies, profit, to live on unfulfilled dreams, but they nevertheless come from 'heaven': popular culture has taken over the role of the old religious songs, as it is directly thematised in the figure of the tramp, who contrasts the fate of Arthur.

The meeting point between the realistic narrative and the dream world of popular culture is visualised in several symbolic ways: a special colouring of the scenes, the transformation of realistic space using, for instance, oblique angles, the use of double exposure, the movement between filmic and graphic techniques and the use of different popular genres that are suddenly inserted into the narrative. The titles of the individual parts are lines from popular songs: (1) 'Down Sunny Side Lane', (2) 'The Sweetest Thing', (3) 'Easy Come, Easy Go', (4) 'Better Think Twice', (5) 'Painting the Clouds', and (6) 'Says My Heart'. Also in the painted pictures used during the opening credit-sequences of each part we move around in a world changing between idyllic suburban houses, fairy-tale worlds, symbolic, mythological worlds and pictures of the city in either decay or below a slightly rosy sky. In this way popular codes meet with realistic codes and modernist codes, merging into a kind of very complex postmodern fiction machine. Also the ending of the series is characteristically ambiguous: Arthur is framed for a murder which the tramp has actually committed, and is hanged, but appears again to tell the audience that of course we have to have a happy ending as well!

Although the foregrounding of songs is a well-known phenomenon in the Hollywood musical, and also has a popular history in drama and opera, the use of songs in Potter's series, where we also find sequences that directly use the musical genre, is clearly a Verfremdung effect. The use of songs is therefore just a general symptom of the overall narrative structure of the text, or rather the way in which the narrative is made excessive and points to itself. The Metz/Baudry (Metz 1982) definition of the classical narrative film and the position of the spectator characterises it as a discourse concealing the marks of enunciation, a discourse disguised as story, a discourse in which the viewing subject is allowed a privileged but totally controlled position as

voyeur. The television narrative of Dennis Potter is clearly a break with this alleged invisible narrative contract between the classical narrative genres and the audience.

Meiz's psychological-semiotic theory of narrative cinema, supported by the Lacanian differentiation between the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic order, is a powerful theory of narrative reception, and it cannot just be dismissed, since it touches upon the more subconscious or emotional processes behind visual narratives. However, this view tends to overlook the more active and conscious processes taking place in the decoding of narratives. This has been demonstrated very convincingly by David Bordwell (Bordwell 1985) in relation to filmic narrative, and it is even more necessary to keep in mind when analysing narrative structures of television.

Where traditional semiotic theory talks about narrative in a textual, structural sense, Bordwell, from a cognitive point of view, defines a new term 'narration' as 'the process whereby the film's *syuzhet* [usually translated as 'plot'] and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator's construction of the *fabula*' (Bordwell 1985: 53). The concept of the invisible narrative contract of the classical narratives is probably only valid at a very superficial level, and the theory is based on a sort of underestimation of the mass audience of cinema and TV.

In dealing with narration as a dynamic process, as suggested by Bordwell (Bordwell 1985: 30), it is then necessary to see narration as a kind of cueing of the viewer, rather than a firmly constructed position, a cueing which gives the viewer a certain amount of freedom and a set of variable options for processing and decoding the narrative, depending on the narrative forms of the text in question. As regards the more subconscious perspective, this must also be understood as an important, active part of this process. In Potter's TV narration, subconscious/psycho-analytical cues and symbols are spread all over the narrative. So here a visual positioning of the viewer in a puzzle of visual stream-of-consciousness mingles with a very conscious cueing of the viewer through intertextual frames and competing narrative lines and discourses.

As mentioned above, this break with the concept of the passive viewer of Metz' theory of film-enunciation and reception is even more necessary when we analyse television narratives. Whereas the cinematic apparatus to a larger degree consists of closed

texts, and so to speak places the viewer in a special viewing position, creating a sealed-off 'fictive' space, television should rather be considered a channel inside everyday cultural practices. One of the reasons for the explosion of meanings in postmodern culture is precisely that an enormous flow of television forms – fiction, fact, and 'faction' alike – are now floating freely into the family sphere. The semiotic overload, the fusion and mixture of cultures, audiences, genres, and so on, is clearly a result of the way in which television has been occupying the communicative centre of most cultures over the last twenty years.

This 'semiotic glut' creates a gradually more knowledgeable audience and a diversified intertextual scene, which displays, on the one hand, a more meta-fictional form of popular mainstream fiction, and, on the other, a space for a poetic and experimental dimension in TV series and TV narration. *The Singing Detective* is an example of this latter type of double- and multi-coded television fiction: the mixing of mainstream and *avant garde*, of modernism and postmodernism, of genre-signals belonging to both the narrative and non-narrative traditions.

POPULAR AVANT GARDE TV: THE SINGING DETECTIVE

The Singing Detective is an example of a narration, in Bordwell's sense of the word, where the viewer will have to go to extremes in his use of schemata to construct the *fabula*. There is no straightforward linear and causal chain of events, and as far as agents are concerned, they seem to slide into each other's identities. Rather than narrative progress we see repetition, recycling of themes and visual segments: an associative web, eventually leading us towards a story. The *syuzhet* and the style both show signs of excess. The core of the narration in fact becomes the construction itself: the meta-fictional effect is precisely that as we try to construct the *fabula*, we are all the time forced back to the system of construction, and to a system of competing *syuzhets* or plots, and styles attached to these competing plots.

At one level, this is just the result of the intertextual frame and double narrative-line borrowed from the detective genre: we follow a detection process and are at the same time conducting our own investigation in order to construct the story of this detection. The opening sequences of *The Singing Detective* take place in the narrative and stylistic traditions of film noir and the

hardboiled detective story. I shall call this level *the crime plot*. In the crime plot we follow a detective, named Marlow (as in Chandler's novels, but without the 'e') involved in a rather hopeless spy story, which is visualised in scattered parts all the way through the narrative. This narrative, however, is also framed by a meta-fictional dimension that is linked to a second level, which I shall call *the therapeutic plot*. In this plot the author of a novel, also called *The Singing Detective* lies paralysed by a skin disease in a London hospital, and at one level of this therapeutic plot, Marlow, because that is also the author's name, is rewriting his novel as a film, and we are then witnessing this lower- or upper-level visualisation process seen as the crime plot. But of course the whole six-part mini-series we are watching can also be seen as a sort of representation of the whole lot of feverish and partly imaginary projections taking place in the head of the protagonist, the author.

The therapeutic plot, which is more and more heavily intertwined with the crime plot (in which the author represents himself in several characters, one of them the detective), clearly works to make the viewer construct a sort of psychoanalytical fabula. That is, a story of a skin disease which is the symptom of a set of basic repressions, gradually leading us back to a version of the primal scene: his mother's adultery and her death by suicide, jumping from a bridge. And as already mentioned, this incident is heavily related to a basic and unresolved Oedipal triangular conflict lying at the bottom of the whole narrative. Note, for instance, that the crime plot moves between three places: an apartment where paid-for sex takes place and two restaurants, named Skinscapes and Laguna. Contempt for women, skin disease, and water are thus symbolically connected in the narrative space. At a third level of the narrative we therefore find another *syuzhet/plot* and style, the *socialisation plot*, which, intertwined with the crime plot and the therapeutic plot, traces the life of the author/detective and the voice-over narrator back to his childhood in a poor, working-class, mining district.

What happens on the aesthetic and narrative level is basically that these three systems of narration are combined into both competing and interrelated discourses in the narrative decoding and constructing – in the mind of the protagonist and eventually in that of the viewer. The narration requires a very active pro-

cessing on the part of the viewer, activating all kinds of schemata, and also foregrounding a number of stylistic schemata because of the very explicit way styles and forms of narrative cueings are used together with intertextual references. The process of detection taking place in the crime plot gives us a number of clues that point to clues in the socialisation plot, which are then gradually worked through in the therapeutic plot. At the centre of all the narratives we find the figure of the author/detective in different forms, and the two ultimate detectives are of course the viewer and the super-narrator behind it all, Dennis Potter.

At the fourth level of the narrative process we therefore find the *meta-fictional plot*. This plot constructs a fabula about how fabulas are constructed. We are actually witnessing a fiction theory in practice, relating the different layers of action, cognition, reflection, and emotion working together in the mind and the body and in fiction to each other. Thus, inside this fictional world, created by a feverish and paralysed ego, and created by a real-life television author, Dennis Potter, who himself suffers from the same skin disease as his protagonist, we see how so-called reality is mixed with so-called fiction. Not only does one plot mirror the other and challenge the viewer to combine them, but all the time characters and events from the different narrative frames feel the same or perform the same acts and eventually cross the walls of the different narrative spaces or address each other from discourses that are represented as separate.

Actually, in the last sequence of part 6, two minor characters from the crime plot enter the hospital and the socialisation plot to confront the author of the novel/film with the fact that they have such minor roles, no names, and are just supposed to do all the dirty work. They literally try to shoot the author, who is only just saved by his own detective-figure, his own fictional alter ego – who then suddenly eliminates the author instead of the characters who rebel against their roles. However, the next day the author is resurrected and well, and leaves the hospital!

The medium-reflexive dimension is thus very strong in *The Singing Detective*, but not just as a playful gimmick. It points to a much more direct discussion of the function of fantasy and fiction in our lives and in society. One of the symbolic scenes that keeps recurring is a scene from the socialisation plot where Marlow as a boy climbs a tree in a forest. In this way he might be said to be trying to escape from his problems, but his action

is also an expression of the need to overlook and control chaos. In the tree he converses with God and himself, working through his problems, and he clearly expresses the wish to be a detective. The tree then also allows us to see a connection between the imaginary and the symbolic order, the process whereby we try to use our 'narrative desire' (Brooks 1985) to construct stories – our own and larger ones.

Detective fiction is a powerful model for this narrative desire, but even though Potter uses this form positively, as an image of all narrative constructions in search of the understanding of basic traumas, he also treats popular fiction as a possible shield or diversion. This is shown, for instance, in the dialogues between the psychiatrist and Marlow, where his detective stories are used as clues to the 'hidden story'.

The fourth part, 'Clues', thematises the way in which Marlow is constantly rewriting and transforming his life and basic problems through different narrative processes. His wife attacks his use of detective stories: 'Write about real things in a realistic way – real people, real joys, real sorrows – not the silly detective stories. Something more relevant.' But Marlow replies: 'Solutions – all solutions and no clues, that's what the idiots want. That is what they understand by the bloody novel – I'd rather have it the other way around. All clues and no solutions' (Potter 1986: 140). Of course this is contradicted by his own eager construction and decoding of narratives, and by the role narrative structures play even in a postmodern culture, where narrative structures are supposed to disappear: we all try – when confronted with fiction – to construct the story, to find meaning, and if it is not there, we tend to read it in.

However, this particular dialogue can also be seen as part of an ongoing dialogue in the text and between the different plots and styles of *The Singing Detective* as a discourse where high culture/*avant garde* meet with mass culture. As a writer and as a person Marlow is haunted by psychological and cultural guilt and an enormous inferiority complex. Through the therapeutic plot and the socialisation plot this is linked to the feeling that he is an informer, that he himself is actually the guilty one, the true criminal, hiding behind the mask of the hardboiled detective and the skin disease. In a way, then, the whole narrative project of *The Singing Detective*, and in fact much of the rest of Potter's

television fiction, can be seen as a sort of critical deconstruction of the popular narrative text. In the last part of the story all the popular texts and intertextual references evaporate into thin air, and we are firmly back on the track of social realism. The text, then, is not a wide open narrative, like many of the commercial TV serials, but a kind of narrative where in the end a clear solution and a hierarchy between the discourses are established. The aims of the text are psychological insight and emancipation, and the ideology seems to point in a critical direction. But it is not a high-culture accusation of the popular text that is put on the agenda. Rather it is a criticism aimed at the institutionalised forms of socialisation in connection with which the popular text can be seen both as a clue and as a form of diversion, not a solution in itself.

Potter is able to speak through both the *avant garde* channel of narration and the popular channel of narration, creating a very dialectic sort of 'stereo effect'. If, for instance, we take a closer look at the intertextual signals and frames in *The Singing Detective*, we find within the crime plot not only the hardboiled genre but also elements of the classical detective story, where the intellectual reflection process dominates over action, and we also find elements of more psychological crime fiction, where the focus on the emotions of both criminal and detective is essential. In the therapeutic plot we also find a wide range of intertextual references. First of all the melodramatic form and style is clearly at work across the different plot-lines, but we also find extensive use of social realism, especially in the socialisation plot. But all the time the text may suddenly turn into a symbolic or radical text, using a modernist montage technique and editing, a stream of images like a spider web that make patterns of a non-narrative kind. This is the case, for instance, whenever we approach the visual representation or memorising of the primal scene, the death of the mother or other aspects of the socialisation plot and its hidden fabula. Finally it must not be forgotten that the use of comedy and satire is widespread in the text: the sudden cuts from the symbolic or deeply troubling scenes to extremes of morbid humour is a very important part of the aesthetic construction of the text.

Potter has learnt from the postmodern condition not to respect the discourse of the great divide, but rather to respect narration processes and viewer constructions taking place on both sides or

across the divide. He is thus undermining the elitist side of the *avant garde* project without losing the critical dimension, and without surrendering to easy notions of postmodern commercialism and nonsense.

MODEL VIEWERS AND ACTUAL VIEWERS: POTTER AND THE AUDIENCE

There is no qualitative, empirical reception analysis available to tell us how different viewers evaluate and decode Potter's television fiction. And it is in fact very difficult to get empirical data on these kinds of very complex decoding processes and fiction formats dealing with a variety of intertextual references and subconscious mechanisms. But we have some quantitative evidence of the average Potter-viewer in the UK and Denmark. In Denmark we only have data on the reception of *Pennies from Heaven* (1990), whereas we have UK data on *Christabel* (1988), *Blackeyes* (1989), and the repeat of *Pennies from Heaven* (1990). Unfortunately neither of the countries has data on *The Singing Detective* in the official broadcasting research units.

The Danish figures show that *Pennies from Heaven*, which was broadcast fairly late in the evening, had an average audience of 3.5 per cent of the possible audience, or approximately 150,000 viewers. On an evaluation scale from 1 to 5, with 5 as the maximum, the average evaluation is 3.64. These figures clearly show that this mini-series has not reached what you would call a mass audience in television terms. But it is still a mass audience compared to book-readers and cinema- and theatre-goers, at least in Danish terms, and the evaluation of the programme is above average. The typical Potter-viewer in Denmark is fairly well educated, lives in the greater Copenhagen area, and is more likely to be self-employed, a senior citizen, or a manual worker than a civil servant, a student, or an apprentice, and is likely to be over thirty. However, it is clear from the figures that although we are talking about relatively small figures, we have a very differentiated group of viewers. It is not a mass audience, but on the other hand it is not an elite audience by composition.

The average audience in the UK for the three mini-series is of course much higher in absolute figures: *Pennies*, 2.7 million, *Blackeyes*, 5.5 million, and *Christabel*, 5.6 million. The percentage figures are also much higher than in Denmark (at least for

the last two mini-series): roughly around 10 per cent of the total population. So here we are talking about a mass audience. The evaluation of all three series, expressed as an average appreciation index, is above average, with *Christabel* at the top: on an index scale with 100 as the maximum, the three series score as follows: 76 (*Pennies*), 51 (*Blackeyes*) and 79 (*Christabel*). *Blackeyes* thus receives the lowest evaluation of the three, while the naturalistic drama *Christabel* is the highest rated of the three. Female viewers dominate at approximately 55 per cent, except in the case of *Blackeyes*, where we have 55 per cent male viewers (perhaps because of the juicy sex-scenes!). The average viewer for *Christabel* and *Pennies* is clearly a person over 35, whereas *Blackeyes* interestingly enough has a much younger viewer profile: people aged twenty-five to thirty-four. The average social composition of the audience for all three series together is AB (higher and lower managerial, professional or administrative groups), 17 per cent; C1 (skilled supervisory non-manual and lower non-manual groups), 24 per cent; C2 (skilled manual workers), 26 per cent; and finally DE (residual groups such as state pensioners and casual workers), 33 per cent.

One cannot draw the conclusion from these empirical data that Potter is a commercial success, as one might from the ratings system in American network television. But certainly these figures show that Potter's television fiction does cross the line between the two sides of a former very sharp, great divide between high culture and low culture. His fiction represents a sort of semi-popular *avant garde* on a television screen that was once much more divided between very popular and pretty straightforward commercial narratives and very high-cultured TV drama – he is a critical postmodernist in practice.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (1972) *Kritiske modeller (Critical models)*, Copenhagen: Rhodos.
- Ang, I. (1985) *Watching Dallas*, London: Methuen.
- Baudrillard, J. (1985) 'The Ecstasy of Communication', in H. Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, London: Pluto Press.
- Bondebjerg, I. (1988) 'Popular Fiction, Narrative and the Melodramatic Epic', in M. Skovmand (ed.), *Media Fictions*, Aarhus University Press.
- Bordwell, D. (1985) *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Methuen.

- Brooks, P. (1985) *Reading for the Plot*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Collins, J. (1989) *Uncommon Cultures*, London: Routledge.
- Dunkley, C. (1990) 'A Funny Sort of Feminist', *Financial Times* (date unknown).
- Eco, U. (1985) 'Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics', *Daedalus* 114, 4.
- (1986) *Faith in Fakes. Essays*, London: Secker & Warburg.
- Ellis, J. (1982) *Visible Fictions*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*, London: Methuen.
- Fuller, G. (1989) 'Dennis Potter', *American Film*, March.
- Grodal, T. (1990) 'Framing, Intertext and Metatext', in P. Dahlgren, K. B. Jensen and S. Kjærup (eds.), *Strategier for TV-analysis*, Stockholm: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication.
- Hall, S. (1986) 'On Postmodernism and Articulation. An Interview with Stuart Hall', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 2.
- Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London: Methuen.
- (1988) *Hiding in the Light*, London: Methuen.
- Huyssen, A. (1986) *After the Great Divide*, London: Macmillan.
- Jameson, F. (1979) 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text*, Winter.
- Jencks, C. (1985) *What is Postmodernism?* London: S. Martin's Press.
- Jensen, K. B. (1988) *Making Sense of the Visual Aesthetics*, Aarhus University Press.
- (1989) 'Reception as Flow: The "New Television Viewer" Revisited', unprinted paper, University of Copenhagen.
- Katz, E. and Liebes, T. (1986) 'Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction', *European Journal of Communication* 1, 2.
- Metz, C. (1982) *The Imaginary Signifier*, London: Macmillan.
- Morley, D. (1980) *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, London: British Film Institute.
- Olson, S. R. (1987) 'Meta-Television: Popular Postmodernism', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4, 4.
- Potter, D. (1977) 'Realism and Non-Naturalism', *Official Programme of the Edinburgh International Television Festival*.
- (1986) *The Singing Detective*, London: Penguin.
- Schroder, K. C. (1988) 'The Pleasure of *Dynasty*', in P. Drummond and R. Paterson (eds), *Television and its Audience*, London: British Film Institute.

Semiotics by instinct

'Cult film' as a signifying practice between audience and film

Anne Jerslev

On 7 February 1979 Howard Hawks' film *The Big Sleep* reopened at a major art cinema in Copenhagen. An expectant mumble was heard in the crowded audience before the lights went out; I felt like a member of a theatre's audience just before the curtain rises: an experience one mostly gets secondhand nowadays, watching films about theatre. I felt like a connoisseur among other connoisseurs. It seemed that all of us had watched *The Big Sleep* at least once before. We knew when the highlights were coming and it seemed to us that they were performed in that very same moment just for us. Every now and then, from somewhere in the rows a few lines would be cited that Bogart and Bacall were to sneer politely at each other on the screen seconds later. And right after the famous café-scene where the two of them are testing each other verbally via horse metaphors, a great many people in the audience applauded loudly. When the film was over everybody applauded vehemently and whistled as if to get the actors back on stage.

CULT FILMS AS DECONSTRUCTION

This bit of memory describes precisely a historically specific construction of a cult event in relation to cinema and a certain film. One might also say that it describes the putting into existence of a cult film. I am going to use this memory as a point of departure for a discussion of the very concept of *cult film*. And I am going to discuss the meaning resulting from the clash between an audience and a 'cult film' to come, a signifying practice that I shall call a *cult event* or *cult culture*.

Communication and Society
General Editor: James Curran

Images of the Enemy

Brian McNair

Seeing and Believing

The Influence of Television

Greg Philo

Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media

Brian McNair

Potboilers

Jerry Palmer

Critical Communication Studies

Communication, History and Theory in America

Hanno Hardt

Pluralism, Politics and the Marketplace

The Regulation of German Broadcasting

Suzanne Hasselbach and Vincent Porter

Communication and Citizenship

Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age

Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (eds)

Media Moguls

Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer

What News?

The Market, Politics and the Local Press

Bob Franklin and David Murphy

Fields in Vision

Television Sport and Cultural Transformation

Garry Whannel

Media Cultures

Reappraising Transnational Media

edited by
Michael Skovmand
and
Kim Christian Schrøder




ROUTLEDGE

London and New York

Contents

First published 1992
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

The collection as a whole © 1992, Michael Skovmand and
Kim Christian Schrøder
The individual chapters © 1992, the respective authors

Phototypeset in 10/12 Times by
Intype, London
Printed in Great Britain by
TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted
or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter
invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any
information storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Media cultures: reappraising transnational media.
I. Skovmand, Michael II. Schrøder, Kim Christian
302.234

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Media cultures: reappraising transnational media / edited
by Michael Skovmand and Kim Christian Schrøder.
p. cm. — (Communication and society)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
I. Mass media. 2. Popular culture. 3. Communication,
International. 4. Intercultural communication.
I. Skovmand, Michael II. Schrøder, Kim. III. Series:
Communication and society (New York, N.Y.)
P91.M379 1992
302.23—dc20

91-30422

ISBN 0-415-06384-1
ISBN 0-415-06385-X pbk

Notes on contributors vii

Introduction 1
Kim Christian Schrøder and Michael Skovmand

Part I Media cultures: the historical process 17

1 Citizens, consumers, and public culture
Graham Murdock

2 Modernity and media panics
Kirsten Dromer

Part II National and transnational media cultures 65

3 Electronic communities and domestic rituals:
cultural consumption and the production of European
cultural identities
David Morley

4 Barbarous TV international: syndicated *Wheels of
Fortune*
Michael Skovmand

5 French-American connection: *A bout de souffle*,
Breathless, and the melancholy macho
Jostein Gripsrud

6 More than just images: the whole picture. News in the
multi-channel universe
Peter Larsen

7 Postwar Americanisation and the revitalisation of
European culture
Søren Schou