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Narrative analysis

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found in John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978); the differences between broadcast television and film are provocatively described in John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). An exhaustive application of semiotics to television that also offers an excellent discussion of its limitations is Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986); Hodge and Tripp's work is highly recommended reading for everyone, even those uninterested in the specific topic of children's television. Another useful book is Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

Television scholars John Fiske, Margaret Morse, and David Morley consistently have used semiotics and structuralism in their work. Fiske's "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 56-78, discusses the difficulties in defining television as a text as well as the opportunities for "unlimited semiosis." Margaret Morse offers detailed formalist analyses of various nonfiction television genres in "Talk, Talk, Talk—the Space of Discourse in Television," *Screen* 26, no. 2 (1985): 2-15. David Morley links semiotics and structuralist analysis of television news to the audience members in *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); "Texts, Readers, Subjects," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980); and *The "Nationwide" Audience: A Critical Postscript*, *Screen Education* 39 (Summer 1981): 3-15.

To date, film has been analyzed more carefully by semioticians than has television; some central works that may prove useful are Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Jurij Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, Michigan Slavic Contributions no. 5 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976). Bill Nichols relates semiotic issues to ideological analysis in *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). A lucid case study of a film that uses structuralist methods and attempts to combine these with a historical, Marxist, and psychoanalytic interpretation is Charles Eckert, "Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's *Marked Woman*," in *Movies and Methods II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Reading Eckert's response to the critics of this article and his own second thoughts about the method can give us a sense of the reception of structuralism by U.S. film scholars in the 1970s (see "Shall We Deport Lévi-Strauss?," *Film Quarterly* 17, no. 3 [Spring 1974]: 63-65).

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(1992)

Whereas our ancestors used to listen to tall-tale spinners, read penny dreadfuls, tune in to radio dramas, or rush to the local bijou each Saturday, now we primarily satisfy our ever-constant yearning for stories by gathering around the flickering box in the living room. Television is the principal storyteller in contemporary American society.

But what kind of storyteller is it? In what ways are stories presented on television similar to those transmitted through other media? How can approaching television as a narrative art deepen our understanding of individual shows or of the medium as a whole? How can looking at television help us with our research on narrative itself?

The same decades that have brought the invention, birth, and increasing maturity of broadcast television have also played host to the development of a new critical field, *narratology*, or more simply, *narrative theory*. This theory has its roots in the Soviet Union of the late 1920s, specifically in the work of the Russian Formalists and Vladimir Propp; it has since been fed by the studies of a diverse, international group of linguists, semiologists, anthropologists, folklorists, literary critics, and film theorists. Although several people have made outstanding contributions, the field does not rest on the work or the authority of any founding figure(s). Moreover, although the practitioners come from different disciplines and study various questions in a diverse selection of texts, the field has been (comparatively) free of heated dispute. Topics have been raised, sifted,

argued, and tested until a general outline of narrative structure and process has emerged and won widespread—if not absolute—consensus.

Many of the major studies of narrative were published during the 1960s and 1970s; by the early 1980s the field could be synthesized and disseminated to a wider audience. The most recent work in narrative theory is more in the nature of refinement and extension than of discovery or creation.¹ Although many questions remain to be settled (and some once-settled issues are now being rethought) narrative theory is well established as a field of academic study.

There are several books (to which I am deeply indebted) that summarize the fundamentals of the theory.² I hope that the interested reader will consult such texts for more detailed explanations of the key concepts and more accurate discussion of the ambiguities than is possible here. My task is to use the fruits of this theory to focus on the nature of television narratives.

First, however, we must understand the limitations of narrative theory as a tool. Because this field is concerned with general mappings of narrative structure, it is inescapably and unapologetically "formalist" (that is, it concentrates on describing or analyzing the text's intrinsic formal parameters), and it is up to the individual practitioner to use the insights gained about narrative structure to analyze a text's content or ideology. Similarly, because narrative theory concentrates on the text itself, it leaves to other critical methods questions about where the story comes from (for instance, the history, organization, and regulation of the broadcast industry, the influence of the networks, or the contributions of individual professionals) and the myriad effects (psychological or sociological) that the text has upon its audience. Later chapters will demonstrate critical approaches that fill in these large voids.

Yet, at the same time, we must not underestimate the importance of narrative theory as a critical vantage point, because American television is as saturated in narrative as a sponge in a swimming pool. Most television shows—the sitcom, the action series, the cartoon, the soap opera, the miniseries, the made-for-TV movie—are narrative texts.³ Moreover, programs that are not ostensibly fictional entertainments, but rather have other goals such as description, education, or argumentation, tend to use narrative as a means to their ends.⁴ On the evening news, an unembellished recital of the latest economic figures is merely informative, but the story of the Congressional battle over passage of a hotly debated bill is just that: *a story*.⁵ A commercial for pain relievers may rely on comparison and argument, or an ad for a car may be abstract and descriptive, but

a vast number of advertisements offer a compressed narrative exemplifying the products' beneficial effects. Music videos often enact the storyline of the song's lyrics. Nature documentaries tend to follow the story of the animal's life cycle or of the seasonal progression in a geographic area.

The only television formats that consistently eschew narrative are those that are highly structured according to their own alternate rules: game shows, exercise shows, news conferences, talk shows, musical performances, sports contests. Yet even in such cases, narrative may infiltrate: football games, for instance, can be seen as stories of one team's triumph and the other's defeat, narrated by the sports announcers.

Thus, narratives are not only the dominant type of text on television, but narrative structure is, to a large extent, the portal or grid through which even nonnarrative television must pass. The world that we see on television is a world that has been shaped by the rules of this discourse. It well behooves us, then, to examine its rules carefully.

To this end, we learn from narrative theory that every narrative can be split into two parts: the *story*, that is, "what happens to whom," and the *discourse*, that is, "how the story is told." (Please keep in mind that this is an artificial or "theoretical" distinction.)⁶ To recognize television's specificity, I believe we need to add a third layer, *schedule*, that is, "how the story and discourse are affected by the text's placement within the larger discourse of the station's schedule." Let us begin with the innermost layer:

Story

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines a story as "a series of events arranged in chronological order." She correspondingly defines an event as "a change from one state of affair to another."⁷ Tzvetan Todorov uses different terms, but he is talking about the same phenomenon when he defines a minimal narrative as a move from equilibrium through disequilibrium to a new equilibrium.⁸ For example, a United Airlines commercial presents a mother and young daughter in loving embrace (equilibrium). The mother leaves the girl at a day care center and flies off to New York for a business meeting (disequilibrium). The mother flies back in time to pick up the daughter at the end of the day (new equilibrium). Rimmon-Kenan's and Todorov's definitions do not quite make explicit the fact that events cannot occur in a vacuum—they must be enacted by a given set of characters or *actants* in a certain setting. Seymour Chatman groups characters and set-

ting under the label *existents*. Together, events and existents are the basic components out of which stories are made.

Out in the "real world," things may happen totally at random, but in stories they are linked by temporal succession (X occurred, then Y occurred) and/or causality (because Y occurred, Z occurred). Television, like all other narrative forms, takes advantage of the viewer's almost unquenchable habit of inferring causality from succession. For example, a simple commercial for NyQuil (a patent cold remedy) first shows a man and a woman together in a double bed, both snuffling and sneezing. We understand them to be husband and wife, afflicted with horrible colds. Without dialogue, the woman takes some NyQuil from her bedside table and offers it to the man; he declines and takes another medication. A title reads LATER; then we see the woman fast asleep while the husband is still miserably awake. Note that the commercial links these two scenes merely by an indicator of temporal succession, but the advertisers know full well that the viewer will make a causal connection: the wife is sleeping peacefully because she took NyQuil.

Not all story events are of equal importance. As Roland Barthes was the first to point out,⁹ one can determine a hierarchy between the events that actively contribute to the story's progression and/or open up options (Chatman labels these *kernel(s)*) and those events that are more routine or minor (Chatman's *satellites*). In the NyQuil commercial, the important, kernel event is the decision to take the medication: "sitting up in bed," "reaching for the bottle," and "unscrewing the cap" may be events, but they are minor satellites.

In stories, events do not progress randomly. For millennia, one of the tasks of critics has been the discovery and description of stories' underlying structures. It was Aristotle who first pointed out the seemingly banal but actually vital fact that the plots of tragedies have a beginning, a middle, and an end.¹⁰ Over a century ago, German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag elaborated on this insight by describing the typical "dramatic triangle": well-made plays begin with an expository sequence setting out the state of affairs, rise through various twists and turns of complicating actions to a climax, and then fall off in intensity to a coda that delineates the resolution of the crises and the new state of affairs.¹¹ With the exception of serials (to be discussed later), Freytag might have been describing American television.

Noting that stories often share an overall arc of development is one thing, but arguing that story events fall into predictable, specific patterns is another. In his pathbreaking study, *Morphology of the Folktale*, first

published in 1928, Vladimir Propp studied a group of Russian fairy tales. He invites the reader to compare such events as "1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom. . . . 2. An old man gives Súcenko a horse. The horse carries Súcenko away to another kingdom."¹² Obviously, something uncannily similar is going on here.

Propp concludes that although different tales may feature different characters, these characters fall into one of seven types of dramatic personae: hero, villain, donor, dispatcher, false hero, helper, and princess and her father. Moreover, despite surface variability, the actions of these personae serve identifiable purposes in terms of their "function" in moving the story along. Propp thus was able to formulate the following "laws":

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled;
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited;
3. The sequence of functions is always identical; and
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.¹³

Propp compiled a list of thirty-one functions occurring in his tales. These tales trace a hero's quest and/or contest with a villain; thus, typical functions include such activities as "#6: The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings" and "#12: The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper." Propp's list of functions specifies all the different categories of events found in these tales and the sequence in which they transpire.

Consider the following:

1. Housewife X's sink is clogged. Josephine the plumber suggests Liquid Plumr. The drain cleaner cuts through the clog and the problem is solved.
2. Customer Y has dry, chapped hands from washing dishes. Madge the manicurist suggests Palmolive dishwashing detergent. Customer Y gratefully returns to the beauty parlor with restored hands.
3. Housewife Z makes bad coffee and husband complains. Mrs. Olson recommends Folger's coffee. Housewife Z tries Folger's and wins husband's praise and affection.

In each of the above stories, the heroine has a lack or misfortune (Propp's function #8a), which is noticed (#9). She comes into contact with a donor

(#13), who suggests the use of the magical agent (#14). The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated (#19). Often the heroine is then praised and thanked by family members (figuratively, #31: "The hero is married and ascends the throne").

Obviously, it is sorely tempting to try to fit television narratives into Propp's schema of functions and his categories of personae. Indeed, Roger Silverstone has worked out a detailed analysis of a British series, *Initial Strangers*; David Giles has worked on police shows; Arthur Asa Berger has studied *The Prisoner*.¹⁴ (In other contexts, Propp has been applied to films, novels, and even to the Bible.)¹⁵ Yet there have always been questions as to the validity of Propp's particular schema, and David Bordwell has recently argued that: (a) there are legitimate questions about the accuracy of Propp's original scholarship; and (b) followers of Propp are overly casual in their application of his schema, using it piecemeal, constantly stretching points, making exceptions, and forcing things to fit.¹⁶

If we must accordingly be wary of relying too heavily on Propp's specific schema, we might still be open to, and perhaps excited by, the possibility of determining general rules of story construction. Taking off from Propp's lead, several structuralist narrative theorists have argued that stories are governed by a set of unwritten rules, acquired by all storytellers and receivers in somewhat the way we all acquire the basic rules of grammar. This conclusion explains both stories' variability and consistency: a sentence can be composed from an almost infinite choice of subjects, verbs, and objects, but to be comprehended, these choices must be arranged according to certain shared conventions. One major strand of narrative theory has concentrated on further specifying these rules; the theories expounded by Tzvetan Todorov, Claude Bremond, Thomas Pavel, A. J. Greimas, and others are generally more "abstract" than Propp's and are bent on working out, via the methodology of linguistics and semiology, patterns of relations that apply to all stories.¹⁷ None of these competing theories has won complete acceptance, and to my knowledge, only Greimas's schema has ever been applied to television.¹⁸

The search for underlying structure may be particularly relevant to television, which, as critics have so often complained, is highly formulaic. Some formulas are unique to particular shows: one can practically guarantee that each week on the original *Star Trek* the USS *Enterprise* will encounter some alien life form, members of the crew will be separated from the ship (which will itself be placed in jeopardy), one crew member will have a romantic interest, and all will be resolved through the crew's resourcefulness or high-mindedness. Other formulas may apply across

genres (see Jane Feuer's chapter): harmony must be restored at the end of each sitcom; detectives will solve the crime; investigative reporters will uncover a scandal, and so on.

Such predictability has led scholars to remark on television's deficiencies in terms of one of the major engines driving narrative—suspense. As Roland Barthes argues in *S/Z*, each significant event opens up a number of possibilities; the reader or viewer is constantly in a state of suspense and anticipation, wondering "what next? what next?"¹⁹ Because episodic series on television are so formulaic, and because we know that, except in special cases, the hero or heroine will be back next week, critics have argued that we rarely feel the same anxiety with TV, as we do with a film or novel, about whether the hero and his love interest will triumph—or even survive.²⁰

Although this "low suspense" generalization has validity, there are exceptions. In addition to their moral and political significance, the Watergate scandal and the Persian Gulf War were compelling *as stories*; each evening news broadcast revealed complicated and unpredictable twists and turns, and it was by no means certain that the good guys were going to win out, or at what cost.

Moreover, certain regularly scheduled television shows can be excruciatingly suspenseful. Consider *Rescue 911*. This program blends reenactments and documentary footage, actors and "real people," to recreate the "true stories" of victims of life-threatening situations, victims who were saved by the assistance of emergency personnel. (Hence the title, which refers to the phone number that Americans dial to reach emergency assistance.) Let us look in greater detail at an episode that aired during the 1990–91 season. The story can be summarized as follows:

The Kopsticks are ending their vacation in a resort condominium. Christine is in the kitchen washing dishes while her husband, Terry, loads the car with luggage. The two children are watching television. Unseen by Christine, two-and-a-half-year-old Ross goes into the bedroom and looks out the window at ducks in a pond below. Ross leans on the screen—it gives way, and the boy falls three stories into the pond. His parents notice that he is missing, and, initially without anxiety, start to look for him. Meanwhile the boy's body, floating in the water, is seen by the Smith family: Lindell Smith dives in and pulls him—apparently lifeless—to shore. An ambulance is called for. The parents realize what is going on and are distraught. Terry attempts CPR on his son, he is soon replaced by the resort's landscap-

ers, who are more effective. Ross starts to breathe and moan. The ambulance arrives; the paramedics are concerned that Ross may have suffered spinal injuries in the fall. He is carefully loaded in the ambulance and taken to the hospital. Doctors examine him for six hours and conclude that he has escaped all injury; the parents are overjoyed. Drawn together by the accident, the Kopsticks and the Smiths become friends.

This story proceeds by prompting a series of questions. When will the parents realize that the boy has fallen out the window? Will the Smiths realize that the object they see in the water is a child? Has Lindell Smith pulled him out of the pond in time? Will the artificial respiration work? When will more help arrive? How bad are the boy's internal injuries? Did he suffer brain damage? As soon as one question is answered, another, seemingly equally critical, takes its place. The viewer doesn't quite believe that the boy will die; we feel certain that the producers would never offer up such a tragedy. (To my knowledge, although *Rescue 911* has offered stories that end with the victim suffering amputation or paralysis, it has never presented a story in which the victim died.) And yet the show manages to build up a great deal of suspense and tension. I can think of three reasons for this unusually high level of suspense: (1) This story is a self-contained episode. The Kopstick family are not "regulars" on *Rescue 911* and the viewer has no expectations of seeing them again next week. Thus, their future is not predetermined by the demands of the "series" format; (2) The story itself has the unpredictability, the unforeseeable "messiness," of "real life" (these twists and turns are not likely to occur to television scriptwriters); and (3) The show capitalizes on a certain "reality effect"—knowing that the action really transpired along these lines makes the peril and the stakes much higher than they would be in an overtly fictional text.

Ongoing, scripted, fictional television narratives have learned to compensate for their lack of suspense by proliferating storylines. Often a show will use the same protagonist for separate storylines, as when detective shows involve their heroes in both a case and a romance. Other series will use different family members as the leading players in separate storylines; soap operas keep as many as five or six storylines hopping simultaneously. Each given storyline may be formulaic, but the ways in which it combines with, parallels, contrasts, or comments upon another storyline may add interest and complexity.

Let us look, for illustration, at an episode of *Roseanne* broadcast dur-

ing the 1990-91 season. Roseanne and Dan are planning to take a long weekend vacation together alone in Las Vegas, a vacation that they have been looking forward to and scrimping for. They encounter complications: Roseanne's new boss at the diner tells her that he was never told of her intention to take the weekend off and that if she doesn't show up for work he will fire her; Darlene and Becky are planning to give a party in their parents' absence, and Dan must set down rules and arrange for his sister-in-law, Jackie, to supervise; and a terrible snowstorm grounds the plane on the runway. The dominant storyline, which centers on Roseanne and Dan's marital needs and desire for pleasure, is intersected by the ongoing story of Roseanne's relationship with her boss and her job and by the continuing saga of their teenage daughters' attempts at independence and romantic involvements. Thus, Roseanne's bristling at her boss's authority is echoed by the girls' attempted defiance of their parents, and the parents' sexuality is mirrored by the girls' interest in their boyfriends.

The strategy of proliferating storylines diffuses the viewer's interest in any one line of action and spreads that interest over a larger field. In general, I would extend Robert Allen's insight about soap operas to cover the lion's share of narrative television: television stories generally displace audience interest from the syntagmatic axis to the paradigmatic—that is, from the flow of events *per se* to the revelation and development of existents.²¹

"Existents" includes both characters and setting, but television narratives commonly underutilize setting. Theatrical films will lavish money and time on capturing details of the setting with infinite care, making the Western prairie, the futuristic cityscape, or the urban ghetto a major component of the tale, a character in its own right. But the average prime-time series has a relatively undistinguished setting; opening montage sequences may situate the show in a particular locale, but once the action begins, the living room, bedroom, office, restaurant, or hospital studio sets are not particularly evocative or individualized. (Commercials, with higher budgets, make more use of scenery.)

In fact, as others have noted, it is characters and their interrelationships that dominate television stories.²² The way the medium presents characters contrasts markedly with the situation in literature; despite the apparent individuality and vibrancy of an Emma Bovary or Huckleberry Finn, theorists argue over whether, or in what way, literary characters can truly be said to exist. Some claim that it is nonsense to think of them as people—they are merely phantasms, nothing but a concatenation of the actions they perform or the traits ascribed to them. Ultimately each

dissolves into nothing but words on a printed page. However, television narratives, like films, indisputably offer more than words on a page. Television performers and their character roles are hardly equivalent: television characters "die," whereas the actors who portrayed them blithely move on to other projects; by the same token, performers may be involved in scandal or controversy that doesn't affect their characters. Yet because of the indexical nature of the television sign (see Ellen Seiter's chapter), whenever we are watching *Roseanne* and we see the image of a rotund female, we know that a living, breathing woman once stood in front of a camera and uttered those lines.

Predictable as their events may be, television stories offer us a wide gallery of vibrant characters. Many of these characters can be slotted into certain categories of narrative personae. One could use Propp's original model (hero, helper, dispatcher, donor, villain, princess and her father, false hero) or Greimas's recasting of Propp (subject, object, sender, helper, receiver, opponent). Or perhaps, with less theoretical ambition but more practical efficacy, one could categorize characters by their genre "role": "father" in domestic comedy, "detective" in a cop show, "co-worker" in a situation comedy, "evil woman" in a soap opera, and so on. The point is that, although character roles are quite formulaic in American television, the viewer's interest is continually engaged by the personalities who fulfill these roles. Cliff Huxtable is the "father figure" in *The Cosby Show*, and as such he fulfills certain set expectations (dispenser of wisdom, disciplinarian, breadwinner, devoted husband), but he fulfills these functions in quite a different way than Ward Cleaver in *Leave It to Beaver*.

Moreover, as David Marc argues, each episode of a series contributes to the series' "broader cosmology."²³ Television series often create in their initial premise a tension or enigma that centers on character development or relationships. Will Mary Richards (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) be able to make it on her own? Will Alex Keaton (*Family Ties*) renounce greed and ambition and embrace more human values? Will the *thirtysomething* group figure out how to be happy and "have it all"? Numerous shows (such as *Guns Smoke*, *The Avengers*, *Cheers*, *Moonlighting*) thrive by exploiting the tension of covert or undeclared passion: will Matt and Kitty, John and Emma, Sam and Diane, David and Maddie ever declare, or consummate, their love?

To take an example, the central question of *Roseanne*, as I see it, is "How are Roseanne and Dan to cope with the limitations of their life? They are explicitly drawn as working class and as such are subject to problems not faced by the characters on *thirtysomething*. Roseanne and

Dan will never "have it all"; the question is, "How to be happy with what you've got?" Whereas *The Waltons* (poor but proud) answered, "Through family togetherness and personal integrity," *Roseanne* is much more cynical. Love is all right, but one must also adopt an attitude of defiance and self-deprecating humor as armor and compensation against life's troubles. The last scene of the episode referred to above shows Dan and Roseanne dancing to Wayne Newton records in their own candlelit living room, wipping out their disappointment over the canceled trip by jokingly pretending that Las Vegas has been sucked underground by a terrible earthquake and removing the sting of Roseanne's humiliation in front of her boss by fantasizing that he begged her to come back and has given her a \$100 an hour raise.

Television stories may be formulaic, but the ways in which they are told can vary considerably. Thus, let us move on to look at narrative discourse.

Discourse

PARTICIPANTS

On your way to the store you may witness a series of events enacted by various personages in a given setting—say a purse-snatching and the apprehension of the thief—but what you have witnessed is not a narrative; it only becomes a narrative when you relate what you have seen to your friends. Narration is a communicative act: to have a narrative, one must have not only a tale, but also a teller and a listener.

A substantial portion of narrative theory has focused on studying the participants in this special exchange. As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg noted some years ago, our model of narrative transmission comes from the days when one sat and listened to a physically present storyteller spin his or her fantasies.²⁴ With the move to literary narratives, the situation became more complicated, because instead of actually listening to a storyteller, we read a printed text in which an author has deliberately inscribed an imitation storyteller, that is, the narrator. In fact, on a theoretical level, literary narratives always involve the following six participants:²⁵

TEXT

Real	Implied	Real
Author →	Author →	Narrator →
	Narratee →	Reader →

That's
how
it
works

To (briefly) describe these six participants, let us pretend that the text under consideration is *Huckleberry Finn*. The "real author" is Samuel Clemens. The "implied author" is the imaginary conception of "Mark Twain" that a reader constructs from the text.²⁵ (Because each reader formulates his or her own image of Twain from weighing subtle hints in the text, readers may not always agree on his characteristics; some argue that the person behind this work is terribly racist, others that he is a fierce critic of racism.) The "narrator" is Huck; he is explicitly set forth in the opening lines as the voice telling the tale: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter." The "narratee" is the unspecified person, the "you" above to whom Huck is supposedly speaking. The "implied reader" is the imaginary person for whom the implied author seems to be writing—someone, in this case, who is willing to criticize the foibles of civilization. The "real reader" is the flesh-and-blood person reading the book in his or her armchair.

Because the above chart grew out of theorists' analyses of literature, complications arise in applying it to film and television. As Robert Allen notes in the introduction to this book, assigning individual authorship to a TV series is, for a variety of historical, economic, and technical reasons, nearly impossible. Who, for instance, is the real author of the *Star Trek* series? With rosters of individuals working on a program over its lifetime, it is difficult to assign to a single individual the title and status of authorship.²⁷

The "implied author" of a television show, like that of a novel, is not a flesh-and-blood person but rather a textual construct, the viewer's sense of the organizing force behind the world of the show. Many shows are so conventional that it is hard to get a definite sense of such a figure, but one can sometimes make broad contrasts. Behind *Hill Street Blues*, one senses someone fatalistic and irreverent; behind *The FBI* stands someone who believes in law and order and humorless professionalism; behind *Murder, She Wrote* flits a lighthearted yet conservative imp.

The question of the existence of a cinematic or television narrator has sparked much discussion in narrative theory. Our prototypical model of a narrator is a person speaking aloud. Films and television proceed instead through the unravelling of a series of moving images and recorded sounds. Yet we sense that someone, or some agency, is presenting these images in just this way—someone/something has chosen just these camera setups and arranged them in just this fashion with just this lighting, these sound effects, and this musical score. As Christian Metz leads us to see, be-

cause it is narrative, someone must be narrating. This intangible narrating presence need not be thought of as a person, but rather as an agency, that which chooses, orders, presents, and thus *tells* the narrative before us.²⁸

Alerted, one can see marks of the television narrating agency at work. The last scene of the *Roseanne* episode starts with a close-up showing a phonograph turning, a Wayne Newton record album, and two burning candles; the camera then pans up to reveal Dan and Roseanne walking. This composition and this movement *tell* us that the couple has made up for missing the Las Vegas show by creating their own special evening. The music is romantic but jaunty, a perfectly apt commentary on the couple's attitude toward their troubles. (Music, in film and in television, is a key channel through which the voiceless narrating agency "speaks" to the viewer. The Gershwin score underlying the United Airlines commercial described earlier grows ineffably tender during quiet moments and rises to a resounding climax at the end.)

Partly because the narrating presence behind most television shows is impersonal and nebulous, time after time television naturalizes this strangeness by offering a substitute human face and/or voice. In the fifties the dramatic anthology series had "hosts" who would appear before the story itself and act as introducers and emcees. This practice continued through the sixties in Rod Serling's and Alfred Hitchcock's introductions to *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and figures to the present day in Adam Walsh's role on *America's Most Wanted* and William Shatner's on *Rescue 911*. On-camera hosts lend their charms and credibility, and their mere humanness, to the amorphous television narrating agency; they serve to personalize the impersonal. Shatner, indeed, is a good choice as figurehead of *Rescue 911* because he carries viewer associations with his roles as the captain of technology (James T. Kirk on *Star Trek*) and a policeman (on *T. J. Hooker*).

In other cases, the narrator is humanized not by means of a substitute body but merely through a disembodied voice, through voice-over narration. Commercials, of course, use voice-overs incessantly, as do documentaries, newscasts, and sports events. The voice works in tandem with the visual track, telling us what we are seeing or what to think about what we are seeing, providing the commentary or exposition we are accustomed to from narrators in novels.

Fictional television programs use voice-over more frequently than one might at first realize. Some utilize such voices at the beginning to set up the premise of the series (remember the song that introduces *The Beverly*

Hillbillies?); others, like *The Wonder Years*, make oral narration an integral, ongoing facet of the text. Narrative theory helps us break down such voice-over narrators into two types: those who are situated outside of the story they relate, and those who also double as characters within that story. We will look at voice-over narrators more in the next section.²⁰

Robert Allen will develop the concept of television's narratee more fully in his chapter. As he notes, the concept of the "narratee" is particularly helpful for the study of television because, inasmuch as the shows are broadcast so widely to vast, impersonal audiences, producers have frequently resorted to using stand-ins. How many times have we heard, "Show X was filmed live before a studio audience"? Consciously or not, the producers invite these audiences to make the communicative act concrete—the story is now being told for real listeners (as opposed to video lenses), and the actors and director can get immediate feedback from the audience's reactions. Furthermore, the viewer isolated at home can now get the sense that he or she is experiencing the narrative communally, and his or her reactions are likely to be augmented by the example of the studio audiences. Alternatively, producers may skip the trouble of inviting a live audience and instead substitute canned narratees in the form of a laughtrack.

Another type of television narratee is the "perfect listener." The visiting star on the *Tonight Show* or a Barbara Walters special recounts the story of his or her career/drug/personal crises and recovery to Johnny Carson or Walters. Similarly, reporters in the field address their stories not straight to the audience at home but rather to the network anchor. The talk show hosts and the news anchor fulfill identical functions—they listen eagerly and sympathetically and ask intelligent questions. Their interest and attention serves as a model for the viewer eavesdropping in on this conversation at home.

The "implied viewer" of television narratives is again a fictional construct, the person who communes perfectly with the implied author. Thus, the implied viewer of *Gabriel's Fire* believes in women serving as attorneys and in interracial friendships; the implied viewer of *Trin Peaks* appreciates a macabre sense of humor. Though it may seem self-evident, it is worth noting here that Schlitz beer commercials are addressed to people who drink, not to abstainers. In short, each commercial creates an implied viewer who is interested in its message. Even if you don't own a dishwasher, when you watch a Cascade commercial you must pretend that you do in order to meet the narrative on its own terms.

Finally, however difficult audience demographics may seem to the Niel-

sen Company, to narrative theorists the "real viewer" is an unproblematic entity, that flesh-and-blood person sitting in front of the television set. However, as both Robert Allen and John Fiske discuss, there is nothing simple or unproblematic about the ways those "real" viewers engage with television's narratives or about the processes by which those stories are woven into the everyday lives of millions of people. (The social dimensions of our relationships with television narratives are clearly important; however, their investigation lies beyond the reach of narrative theory.)

This model of narrative participants can help us understand a facet of television so often commented upon: the medium's propensity for "direct address," an aspect of what Robert Allen refers to as television's "rhetorical mode."²¹ Direct address refers to the situation that occurs when someone on TV—a news anchor, a talk show host, a series host, a reporter—faces the camera lens and appears to speak directly to the audience at home. When this happens, we have an apparent precipitous collapse of the six narrative participants into merely two, the speaker and the viewer. When Dan Rather faces the camera and relates the evening news, he simultaneously figures as real author, implied author, and on-screen narrator, while I, sitting at home, am simultaneously narratee, implied viewer, and real viewer. Although theoretically there is always a distinction between these roles, the distinction in such cases is nearly indiscernible. Such a strong impression is given of direct, interpersonal exchange that when Rather says, "Good night," I, for one, am likely to answer back to the screen, "Good night, Dan."

Whenever we get down to two participants, we are back to the original model of the prototypical narrative exchange—the oral storyteller and the physically contiguous listener. In *Reading Television*, John Fiske and John Hartley refer to television's "bardic" function. They argue that television serves the same function in a community as a traditional tribal poet like Homer, who sang of epic heroes and their exploits, in that, like a bard, television conveys the culture's dominant values and self-image.²² I suggest that the medium is also "bardic" in that, despite its technological sophistication, it frequently seeks to imitate the most traditional and simplest of storytelling situations.

TYPOLOGY OF NARRATORS

Narrative theory can provide crucial help in analyzing television narrators because the field has isolated a host of issues concerning the relationship of a narrator to his or her tale and to the world constructed by that tale—what in narrative theory is called the *diegesis*. In the

following discussion, we will look at six of the most important of these variables.

1. First, is the narrator a character in the story he or she tells, or is the narrator outside of the story-world?

I referred to this distinction briefly above. Thomas Magnum and John-boy Walton are character-narrators (in Gérard Genette's terminology, they are *homodiegetic*—that is, situated within the world they tell us about), whereas the anonymous narrators of PBS documentaries come from another realm (they are *heterodiegetic*). The distinction between these two types of narrators can be important because, by convention, character-narrators are considered less objective and less authoritative than heterodiegetic narrators. The former are personally involved in the stories they relate; the latter merely observe from some more or less Olympian vantage point.

2. Second, does the narrator tell the whole tale, or is his or her story embedded within a larger "frame" story? (Narrative theorists always explain embedding by reference to nested Russian dolls.)

Whenever a character within a program tells another character a story, that narration is embedded with the overarching discourse of the narrating agency. Because the embedded narrators are themselves enfolded within the discourse of the whole text, they are assumed to be less knowledgeable and powerful. Such discriminations help us understand the dynamics of *Rescue 911*. William Shatner acts as the personification of the heterodiegetic narrator of the entire show: he introduces each episode, provides information and commentary, and draws conclusions. The various participants in the accidents also narrate—they recount their own memories of the events—but their storytelling is enfolded within Shatner's. Thus, the stories that Christine Kopstick, Terry Kopstick, Lindell Smith, Connie Smith, and Kendall Smith offer are inferred to be partial, even colored by their involvement and distress. Like Shatner, the participant-narrators speak both in voice-over and on camera; however, on screen their gaze is skanted to the side, presumably toward an interviewer who is eliciting their accounts. Only Shatner, the personification of the frame narrator, looks straight ahead, meeting the gaze of the camera. Through the editing back and forth amongst the participants' stories, through the reenactments, through the choices of camera placement, through the musical score, and through Shatner's spoken commentary, the television narrator ties together all the threads of the story to provide the viewer with the complete overview.

3. Third, what degree of distance, in terms of space and time, exists



William Shatner as frame narrator

4. between the story events and the time and place of the narrator's narrating?

John-boy Walton narrates from the vantage point of a grown man; his tone is nostalgic and reflective. (John-boy is portrayed on screen by Richard Thomas, but an older actor provides John-man's voice-over). On the other hand, Thomas Magnum narrates as his story unfolds. He is more wrapped up in the action; his narration is more anxious and immediate.

4. Fourth, what degree of distance in terms of transparency, irony, or self-consciousness does the narrator exhibit?

The vast majority of television narrators strive for neutrality and self-effacement, as if viewers are supposed to overlook the fact that the story is coming through a mediator and instead believe that they are looking in on reality. Other styles are possible, however. Some shows—I'm thinking of *Moonlighting*—convey an "arch" tonality and an assertive self-consciousness, deliberately flouting conventions of realism. Hand-held camera movement, so typical on contemporary commercials, conveys an artlessness so studied that it is paradoxically quite self-conscious. And the decision to use an actor as a narrating figurehead (either on screen or in voice-over) is always a move toward foregrounding the discourse. In

fact, many hosts/voice-overs are not at all shy about acting like the talkative narrator of a Victorian novel. At the end of each episode of *Rescue 911*, Shatner always draws a moral: parents should teach their children how to call for assistance, everyone should learn CPR, and so on.³²

Fifth, is the narrator reliable? If unreliable, does the narrator withhold the truth through his or her own limitations (that is, is the narrator fallible), or in order to mislead us?

The way to tell whether a narrator is unreliable or not is to look for discrepancies between what the narrator tells us and what we intuit the implied author believes. Heterodiegetic voices generally strive for perfect sincerity, and every other facet of the text is designed to bolster their credibility. Character voice-over narrators are more likely to be fallible. On an episode of *Magnum, P.I.* entitled "Old Acquaintance," Magnum is to meet a woman he has not seen since they were high school friends. His voice-over states: "I had to admit I was a little nervous about seeing Goldie again after all these years. But one thing I wasn't worried about was whether I'd recognize her or not. There was a bond between us, a history, a camaraderie that went beyond the physical. It was a spiritual sort of thing." Meanwhile, the shot shows Thomas craning around a hotel lobby and overlooking a lovely redhead—Goldie—who is blatantly trying to attract his attention. This dichotomy shows us that Thomas has been spouting garbage; his "spiritual bond" is not strong enough to overcome his memory of Goldie's unattractiveness in high school.

Finally, one might look at the narrator's degree of omniscience. Omniscience may involve one or more of the following traits: knowing the story's outcome, having the ability to penetrate into characters' hearts and minds, and/or having the ability to move at will in time and space. One common way to judge the narrator's omniscience is to see whether or not the narration is "restricted," that is, whether or not we follow only the actions and knowledge of a leading character, or whether the narrator moves at will between characters and thus is "unrestricted." In some crime shows, such as *Hawaii Five-O* or *Columbo*, the camera shows the viewer the guilty party at the outset; we side with the narrator in a position of knowledge and wait for McGarrett or Columbo to catch the crook. In other cases, the television narrator Knows All but resists Telling All; it shows the murder being committed but coyly keeps the murderer's face off screen. (In *Dallas*, the narrator knew full well who shot J. R. Ewing; it just wouldn't tell us until the following season.) Most television narrators display a large degree of omniscience.

To summarize, narratologists look carefully at a cluster of markers indi-

cating the narrator's position vis-à-vis the tale and the consequences of this position to the discourse as a whole. Identical story events can seem radically different depending upon the narrator's slant and on the degree of the narrator's power, remoteness, objectivity, or reliability. As Walter Benjamin once put it, "Traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."³³ Analyzing television narrators, then, involves putting a magnifying glass to these individualized handprints.

TIME

Christian Metz has written, "There is the time of the thing told and the time of the telling. . . . One of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme."³⁴ The binary nature of time in narrative is considered one of its distinguishing characteristics and has been much studied.

Story events, by definition, proceed chronologically. But when the teller tells the tale, that teller is not bound to follow chronological order; events can be presented in any order the teller finds most effective. A television narrator frequently teases the viewer with flashforwards of the action to come; on *Rescue 911*, for instance, Shatner intones, "When we continue . . . and presents us with a clip showing Christine Kopstick's hysteria when she realizes what has happened to Ross. Alternatively, a narrator might employ a flashback to orient the viewer and bring him or her up to date; news stories often intercut file footage from previous events, and serials often begin with a montage of scenes from earlier shows.

Television narrators often must convey simultaneity. As mentioned above, television texts frequently present more than one storyline; in the story-world these events may be happening at the same moment, but a narrator can only tell one thing at a time. Before television was invented, film developed several techniques for indicating simultaneity: titles such as "meanwhile, back at the ranch"; large clocks placed in every location; verbal indicators; and parallel montage (cutting back and forth between separate locations).

Television has taken parallel montage to a high art. The United commercial mentioned earlier lasts a mere sixty seconds but is composed of twenty-six shots. The narrator cuts back and forth between mother and daughter, paralleling their activities throughout their respective days. This linkage is a key component of the text's message. Designed as it is to appeal to businesswomen, the commercial offers a reassuring fantasy that one can travel out of town and still be back in time to pick up the kids—in

other words, that one can combine family and career (with the help of United Airlines). The day care center is presented as a warm, wonderful place, and the little girl—who, like her mother, will obviously grow up to have a career—is presented as a tomboy in patched jeans, playing with blocks instead of dolls. The parallel montage both implies the similarities between them—“like mother, like daughter”—and also suggests that even though the mother is separated by distance from her child, their lives are indissolubly linked.

Not only can discourse reorder the *sequence* of story events, it can also alter those events' *duration*. Building on Gérard Genette's work in *Narrative Discourse*, Seymour Chatman details the following five possible matches between story and discourse duration:³⁵

1. *Summary: Discourse-time is shorter than story-time.*

Verbal narratives rely heavily on summary. In visual media, summary is less common and proves slightly awkward because time condensation is more difficult without verbal tenses. Perhaps the closest that television comes to summary is in montage sequences (particularly those used in tandem with voice-over narration). Thus the title sequence of *Gilligan's Island* condenses events that must have taken some hours or days into a few moments.

2. *Ellipsis: Discourse time is zero.*

Television narratives depend on ellipsis. Every time the camera cuts from a man leaving a building to that same man getting out of his car, it has cut out all the story-time in between. This habit of eliding routine events or nonpertinent stretches of time allows television to present a story that supposedly has a duration of several hours, days, weeks, or months within the confines of a half-hour or hourlong text.

3. *Scene: Story-time and discourse-time are equal.*

Whenever a television show allows the camera to present story events in full, without temporal cuts (the camera may change its spatial position at will so long as no time is lost), we have congruence between story and discourse-time. The scene is the basic building block of television narratives. *Roseanne*, for instance, unrolls through a series of scenes. Visual variety is accomplished by means of cutting back and forth between cameras, but the conversations unroll without a temporal break.

4. *Stretch: Discourse-time is longer than story-time.*

The best example of stretch is slow motion. In slow motion the



6. Daughter pointing



7. Mother relaxes on plane home



8. Daughter naps



9. Re-UNITED



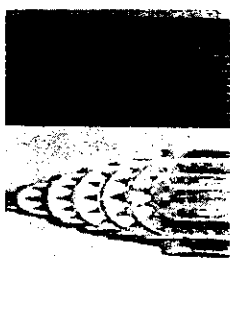
1. Mother and daughter together



2. The pointing



3. Daughter builds tower



4. Chrysler Building (another tower) Mother is in New York



5. Mother at work

The commercial has no dialogue, only music, until the ending moments, when a male voice-over states, "For a half century and more, business travelers have depended on United Airlines to get them to their most important meetings. United. Rededicated to getting you the service you deserve. Come fly the Friendly Skies."

narrator takes longer to relate the events than the events originally lasted in the story. (Fast motion, which is less common, qualifies as a form of summary.)

5. *Pause: The same as stretch except that story-time is zero.*

One example of a pause would be a complete freezing of the frame while the narrator—perhaps a sports announcer—analyzes that action. Commercials also use pauses, particularly in product shots. At the end of the NyQuil commercial mentioned above, we get a freeze frame of the couple in bed and a superimposed picture of the product, while print and voice-over simultaneously proclaim: "Vicks NyQuil, the nighttime sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy head, fever, so you can rest medicine, from Vicks, of course." The action has paused, but the narrator continues to speak and to drive home the moral of the story.

As Genette also pointed out, narratives have several options in terms of their correspondence between story and discourse frequency. Each narrator has a choice between the *singulative*, the *repetitive*, and the *iterative*. That is to say, a narrator can: tell once what happened once (one shot of the quarterback's brilliant pass); tell *n* times what happened once (replaying the shot of the pass *n* times); or tell once what happened *n* times (using one shot of one brilliant pass to stand for all the brilliant passing the quarterback did in that game.)

What is the point of identifying these time distortions? For one thing, it can be intriguing to consider what lies behind the temporal choices. Interestingly enough, commercials often strategically elide story-time; they cut from the "before" situation to the "after"—we see the dirty shirt and then the clean one, but all the work of doing the laundry is hidden. Similarly, a show may begin with some exiting action to grab the viewer's interest and only flash back to provide less eye-catching background information once its hold on the viewer is firmly established. The United commercial uses both stretch and ellipsis: it uses slow motion during the moments of parting and reunion, lingering over the time the mother and child are together, whereas it proceeds quickly through the time they are apart.

Moreover, examining the temporal distortions can help us characterize television narrators. The closer the discourse approaches to congruence with story-time through presenting singulative scenes in chronological order, the less interventionist and the more invisible is the narrator; the more the discourse distorts story-time through achronological order, un-

usual pacing, or repetition, the more the narrator's hand is revealed. Sitcoms tend to have self-effacing narrators and to proceed chronologically from scene to scene, whereas music videos make time distortions part of their style.

Narrative theory also provides us with a framework for understanding one of the unique qualities of television—the ability to broadcast "live." "Liveness" may be defined as the apparent congruence between discourse-time and reception-time—that is, no time gap exists between the narrative's production and its consumption. We have become accustomed to films' and novels' "having been spoken" many years before we happen upon them. In the case of film, this "past-tense" quality is a function of technology: the moment of recording the film always precedes the moment of our watching that recording. Television, on the other hand, is both a recording medium (videotape) and a medium for simultaneous transmission. Other chapters will take up the question of "liveness" as a defining quality of television. Here let me just point out that "live" broadcasts offer a simulation of traditional oral storytelling, in which the audience hears the tale at the moment that the storyteller speaks it.

But on television, what was once live can be taped and rebroadcast later (and the quality of videotape recording makes it literally impossible for the viewer—without other clues—to know the difference). In other words, there are really three time schemes operating: the time of the told, the time of the telling, and the time of the broadcasting. Let us turn now to look at this third, outermost layer.

Schedule

Compared with television, novels and films are comparatively "free-standing" in terms of their exhibition or consumption, and the reader or viewer has relatively unfettered access to such texts. Television narratives are unique in the fact that all texts are embedded within the metadiscourse of the station's schedule. A viewer can circumvent some of the extrinsic consequences of this embedding by using a videocassette recorder; one can, for example, watch a show at a more convenient time, or watch it again, or fastforward through commercials. But this embedding has also led television narratives to make certain intrinsic adjustments. American television schedules are like jigsaw puzzles. They are composed of scores of separate pieces that must fit together in set patterns and thus must conform to standardized rules. For instance, each piece of

the puzzle must fit into a specific time frame controlled to the last second. Accordingly—unlike oral, literary, or cinematic narratives, which are much more likely to last as long as their story requires—television narratives have to fit into an assigned Procrustean bed. This frequently means that long television movies and miniseries are “padded” with insignificant events, whereas many commercials and news stories don’t have enough time to develop their stories before they must conclude.

Another principle of most television schedules is that each text must accommodate interruption. The most common form of interruption, of course, is the commercial break, but one should not overlook the “pledge breaks” on public television stations or “the kitchen and bathroom” intermissions that cable networks insert into long feature films. Television narratives have learned to compensate for and even take advantage of the inevitable interruptions in various ways. First, they typically tailor their discourse to fit “naturally” around the commercial breaks, so that, for instance, the exposition fits before the first break and the coda after the last. Second, shows build their stories to a high point of interest before each break to ensure that the audience will stay tuned. (Or actually, as Kenneth Hey notes of the classic television drama *Marty*, crescendos are so structured as to deliver “emotionally sensitive viewers straight into a commercial message.”)³⁶ Finally, programs frequently time the placement of commercials to coincide with a temporal ellipsis so that while the viewer’s attention has been diverted, the story can gracefully leap ahead several hours or days.

In recent years, advertisers have actually begun to use interruption as part of their own texts: one now sees commercials that break themselves into two parts. In the first “act,” someone pours milk onto a bowl of cereal. The commercial is “interrupted” by one or two other nonrelated advertisements, then we return for the second part of the story—to and behold, the cereal has not gotten soggy!! Such commercials use interruption as part of their sales pitch.

Because most television stations broadcast around the clock or nearly so, they have a voracious demand for material. To maximize investments in time and money, it is cheaper to continue using the same cast and set than to create all new shows. Moreover, as writers of comic strips, popular novels, and radio shows had already discovered, using the same existents has the advantage of building audience familiarity and loyalty.³⁷ Thus, as we all know, few television narratives are self-contained, single broadcast; thus the development of series and serials.

Series refers to those shows whose characters and setting are recycled,

but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a *serial* the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus. A series is thus similar to an anthology of short stories, while a serial is like a serialized Victorian novel. Serials can be further divided into those that do eventually end (despite the misnomer, miniseries belong in this category) and those, such as soap operas, that may be canceled but never reach a conclusion, a new equilibrium.

The series format has several consequences for television narratives, some of which have been mentioned above. For one thing, because the characters must continue from week to week, suspense is diluted; the viewer knows that the hero is never in mortal danger. For another, because each show repeats without progression, the viewer finds surface variability on top of a rigid formula—a “new” mystery (which will be solved), a “new” villain (to be vanquished), a “new” love interest (to flirt with, but separate from), a “new” embarrassment or misunderstanding (to forgive or unravel). One truism of television criticism is that series characters have no memory and no history: amazingly, they don’t notice that they said and did exactly the same things the previous week. (However, although past events disappear into a black void, characters’ interrelationships do grow from week to week.) Moreover, as long as the series continues, the viewer can bank on the fact that the central tension or premise will not be resolved; for instance, on a given *Star Trek* we do not expect that the *Enterprise* will complete its mission and return to earth. As John Ellis has noted, “The TV series repeats a problematic. It therefore provides no resolution of the problematic at the end of the run of the series. . . . Fundamentally, the series implies the form of the dilemma rather than that of resolution and closure. This perhaps is the central contribution that broadcast TV has made to the long history of narrative forms and narrativised perception of the world.”³⁸ Only on red-letter occasions will a series reach an Aristotelian end. The last episode of *M*A*S*H* attracted national attention because the show actually created a new state of affairs: the Korean War ended and everyone got to go home.

Because serials progress from week to week, they face special dilemmas. First, they must bring up to date viewers who do not usually watch the show or who have missed an episode. To this end, many begin by offering a flashback recap of ongoing storylines (“Previously, on *L.A. Law* . . .”). Another option, characteristic of daytime soap operas, is to have the characters redundantly discuss the most significant past events. Second, serials must generate enough viewer interest and involvement to

survive their hiatus. Some offer flashforwards to tease the viewer with bits of upcoming action; frequently, they also turn to the technique made famous by movie serials—the cliffhanger. The general rule seems to be, “the longer the hiatus, the higher the cliff”—witness the spectacular cliffhangers whipped up on *Dallas* and *Dynasty* for the last show of each season.

I am tempted to claim that one of the distinguishing characteristics of American television over the last five years has been its blurring of the distinction between series and serials, or, to be more precise, its increased tendency toward serialization. (Surely it is significant that even commercials have recently adopted a serial format—for example, the Nissan Pathfinder's ongoing expedition to Rio de Janeiro, or the unstoppable Energizer bunny, or the burgeoning romance between neighbors who borrow Taster's Choice instant coffee.) But the line between series and serial may have been blurry to begin with. Even in a “classic” series like *I Love Lucy*, some storylines—such as Lucy's pregnancy—necessarily carried over week to week. And many series have always evinced nonreversible changes over the years: within a given season, each episode of *M*A*S*H* may be freestanding and all episodes may be watched in any order, but the shows dating from the years after Colonel Blake's departure necessarily represent narrative development over those made before he left. On the episode of *Roseanne* mentioned above, the central storyline about vacation plans reaches resolution, but Darlene and Becky's party introduces events involving the girls' boyfriends that link up with earlier and later programs. *St. Elsewhere*, *L.A. Law*, and similar shows have merely developed a distinctive, stable amalgam of series and serialization; on such shows, one or more of the half-dozen storylines featured on a given night may conclude, but others will develop over a number of weeks.³⁹ Perhaps the distinction between serial and series should be seen more as a continuum than as an either/or situation.

Series may spill over into serialization because, as Jane Feuer has noted, the boundaries of television diegeses are strangely, uniquely permeable. With novels and films, the reader/viewer believes that the action takes place within a discreet, enclosed time and place, a fictional world, a diegesis. Yet with TV, one notes a constant “bleed over” of characters and themes from one text to another: characters from one series make appearances on another series; the news at eleven will offer more information about the social problem (child abuse, gambling addiction) just featured in the made-for-TV movie. Texts even physically overlap one another, as when voice-over advertisements for a later program are placed on top of the

closing credits of the present text. Jane Feuer goes so far as to claim that, because there are so many interruptions of television narratives, “the very concept ‘diegesis’ is unthinkable on television.”⁴⁰ Certainly the boundaries are shakier and more permeable than is the case with other narrative mediums.

One of the questions asked at the beginning of this chapter was, “What qualities are specific to television narrative?” I'd like to avoid answering, partly because narrative codes on television, as in all mediums, are in flux and change through time. Partly also because television offers so many disparate types of texts (commercials are obviously quite different from soap operas or TV movies) that generalizations are of limited value. Similarly, some of the qualities I perceive as characteristic of television can also be found on radio dramas or in serialized novels. Nevertheless, in order not to shirk my responsibilities, and to summarize the preceding discussion, I will hazard the following list of American television narrative's most common traits in the early 1990s:

- predictable, formulaic storylines;
- multiple storylines intertwined in complex patterns and frequently interconnecting;
- individualized, appealing characters fitting into standardized roles;
- setting and scenery either very evocative (commercials) or merely functional (series);
- substitute narratees, voice-over narration, and direct address often employed to “naturalize” the discourse;
- complex interweaving of narrative level and voices;
- tendency toward omniscient, reliable narration;
- reliance on ellipsis and scene;
- achronological order to entice (previews) or inform (flashbacks);
- series, serial, and “hybrid” formats;
- accommodation of interruptions;
- lengths cut to fit standardized time slots; and
- permeable diegesis.

This concatenation of traits adds up to a manifestation of narrative rather distinct from that found in other mediums. And it would be a grave mistake, I think, to underestimate the efficacy and sophistication of television's narrative structures; certainly many of the texts I have studied closely offer evidence of great refinement and complexity. I have been treating the television schedule as a kind of discourse. In a

sense I believe that we can also look behind each station's schedule to see a *supernarrator*. These supernarrators are personalized and individualized by three primary means: logos (the NBC peacock, the CBS eye); signature music; and voice-over narrators who speak for the station or network as a whole. The voice-over narrators are perhaps most significant—each station routinely uses certain voice-over narrators who speak to the viewer, providing flashforwards of coming attractions, justifying schedule changes, or pleading technical difficulties.

Because they are the narrators of the outermost frame, these strange storytellers are in the position of the utmost power and knowledge. They sit outside and above all the embedded narratives, unaffected by them. And it is through their sufferance that all the other texts are brought to us: they can interrupt, delay, or preempt the other texts at will. I am intrigued by the fact that in recent years the American Movie Channel and WNET have sought to personalize their station spokespersons by using on-screen figureheads. AMC offers us silver-haired Bob Dorian, speaking from a traditional study or library, offering gossipy details about the classic films. WNET presents the much more "with it" image of Louis Dodley, younger, black, with fine-chiseled features, seated at a television control panel. They are the mouthpieces for the stations, seeking to form personal, not technological, connections.

Perhaps television is conscious of its role as storyteller: The Bard is dead . . . long live the (TV) Bard.

NOTES

1. I'm thinking of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), which itself is a gloss on Genette's own pathbreaking *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), and of Seymour Chatman's *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), which takes as its explicit goal the need to standardize the terminology of the field.
2. My largest debts are to Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); and to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983). For other sources, see "For Further Reading" below.
3. Scholars disagree over the basic definitions of *narrative* and *drama*, thus

leading to some confusion about to where to slot television and film. Chatman argues persuasively that narrative is the larger field, with *diegesis* (roughly, "telling" or "narrative") and *mimesis* (roughly, "showing" or "dramatic") as subsets (*Coming to Terms*, pp. 109–15). See my discussion below on the existence of the television narrator.

4. Chatman speaks of one text-type being at another's "service" (*Coming to Terms*, p. 10).
5. See Sharon Lynn Sperry, "Television News as Narrative," in *Understanding Television: Essays on Television as a Social and Cultural Force*, ed. Richard P. Adler (New York: Praeger, 1981), pp. 295–312; and Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," in *Regarding Television—Critical Approaches: An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol. 2 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983), pp. 23–43. For a discussion of narrative strategies in a science documentary, see Roger Silverstone, "Narrative Strategies in Television Science—a Case Study," *Media, Culture, and Society* 6 (1984): 377–410.
6. As Wlad Godzich, following Genette, reminds us, "actions do not exist independently of their representation" (foreword to *The Poetics of Plot*, by Thomas G. Pavel [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985], p. xix).
7. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 15.
8. Tzevetan Todorov, "The Grammar of Narratives," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 111.
9. Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 93.
10. Aristotle, "Poetics," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 52.
11. Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art*, trans. Elias MacEwan (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), pp. 114–40.
12. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), pp. 19–20.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 22, 23.
14. Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1981); Denis Giles, "A Structural Analysis of the Police Story," in *American Television Genres*, ed. Stuart Kaminsky with Jeffery H. Mahn (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), pp. 67–84; Arthur Asa Berger, "Semiotics and TV," in Adler, *Understanding Television*, pp. 91–114.
15. Roland Barthes, "Struggle with the Angel," in *Image/Music/Text*, pp. 125–41.

16. David Bordwell, "Appropriations and Improprieties: Problems in the Morphology of Film Narrative," *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 5-20.
17. For descriptions of other "narrative grammars," see Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, pp. 22-28, 34-35.
18. Silverstone, *Message of Television*.
19. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
20. David Bordwell helps us see how differently classical Hollywood films handle suspense. In particular, such films crank up the tension by creating and emphasizing deadlines (*Narration in the Fiction Film* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985], pp. 157-66).
21. Robert C. Allen, "On Reading Soaps: A Semiotic Primer," in Kaplan, *Regarding Television*, p. 103.
22. "Over and over again, when I asked executives which factors weighed most heavily in putting shows on the air, keeping them there, shaping their content, I heard a standardized list. At the top, the appeal of actors and characters" (Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* [New York: Pantheon, 1985], pp. 25-26).
23. David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), p. 12.
24. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 240-82.
25. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 151.
26. Actually, the question of the existence of the "implied author" is one of the more contested topics in narrative theory. The term originated with Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); it was adopted by Chatman (*Story and Discourse*), attacked by Genette (*Narrative Discourse Revisited*), and then defended again by Chatman (*Coming to Terms*).
27. See Randall Rothenberg, "Yesterday's Boob Tube Is Today's High Art," *New York Times*, 7 October 1990.
28. For more on the question of the cinematic narrator, see Robert Burgoyne, "The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration," *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 3-16. For an opposing view, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 62.
29. For more about the voice-over, see Sarah Kozloff, *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
30. See Michele Hilmes, "The Television Apparatus: Direct Address," *Journal of Film and Video* 37, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 27-36.
31. John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. 85-100.

32. Linguist William Labov, in researching "natural narratives" (oral, unrecorded stories of personal experiences), has found that they break down into six parts: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. *Rescue 911* follows his schema exactly. See Labov, "Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), pp. 354-96.
33. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 92.
34. Christian Metz, "Notes toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 21.
35. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 68-78. See also Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 33-160.
36. Kenneth Hey, "Martyr: Aesthetics vs. Medium," in *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 115.
37. See Roger Hagedorn, "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation," *Wide Angle* 10, no. 4 (1988): 4-12.
38. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 154.
39. See Caren J. Deming, "Hill Street Blues as Narrative," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (March 1985): 1-22.
40. Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 104.

FOR FURTHER READING

Anyone interested in pursuing this subject should begin with a general overview of narrative theory. I recommend Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), which is highly readable; Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), which compares competing theories, includes useful diagrams and examples, and offers a thorough bibliography; and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), which is both concise and thorough and also offers an excellent annotated bibliography. A useful addition to one of the above general handbooks is Gerald Prince, *A Diction-*

nary of *Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), which discusses concepts of narrative theory in a handy dictionary format.

Having mastered the basic tenets of narrative theory, one can proceed further into the field along any number of byways. I have noted below only a handful of the many paths one might follow.

Those interested in storyline or plot would do well to start with Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), which is a pathbreaking study of story structure that is short, readable, and intriguing; another seminal study of story events is found in Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975) traces narrative theory's debt to structuralism and offers insights on naturalization and convention.

Those interested in narrators, discourse, and studies of what used to be called "point of view" should start with Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), which helped define the field, and then move on to Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), which is a sustained analysis of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* mixed with rigorous theory. Genette has provided his own corrections and additions to his previous text in *Narrative Discourse: Revisited*, trans. J. E. Lewin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988). Both of Genette's studies should be consulted by anyone interested in time.

Different, valuable approaches to narrative theory are offered by William Labov, "Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," in *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), pp. 354-96, which offers an alternate model of narrative structure, and by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), which provides an overview of the development of narrative form from the time of the ancient Greeks to the twentieth century.

Whereas the works cited above couch themselves as studies of general narratology (and primarily restrict their examples to literature), many texts explicitly apply narrative theory to film. One might begin with Christian Metz, "Notes toward a Phenomenology of the Narrative," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), a rich, though brief, essay. Next one might turn to David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), which is a lengthy and scholarly discussion drawing

on the work of the Russian Formalists and later narrative theorists. Seymour Chatman's *Coming To Terms: The Rhetoric Of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990) offers the latest thinking on many thorny issues. My own *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) may be useful.

The number of journal articles dealing with film and narrative is large and growing. Students would do well to consult such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *Screen*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *Cinema Journal*, and *Wide Angle*. Let me specifically draw attention to: Robert Burgoyne, "The Cinematic Narrator: The Logic and Pragmatics of Impersonal Narration," *Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 3-16; Francesco Casetti, "Antonioni and Hitchcock: Two Strategies of Narrative Investment," *Sub-STANCE* 51 (1986): 69-86; André Gaudreault, "Narration and Monstration in the Cinema," *Journal of Film and Video* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 29-36; Brian Henderson, "Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 4-17; and Marsha Kinder, "The Subversive Potential of the Pseudo-Iterative," *Film Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Winter 1989/1990): 3-16.

The body of literature dealing with television narratives is also growing. Some of these studies offer valuable descriptions without resorting to narrative theory per se; for example, see John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); and David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

Other texts apply various aspects of narratology to television. For a sampling, see Roger Silverstone, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1981); Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987). In anthologies, see Sharon Lynn Sperry, "Television News as Narrative," in *Understanding Television: Essays on Television as a Social and Cultural Force*, ed. Richard P. Adler (New York: Praeger, 1981), pp. 295-312; Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 101-14; and several useful essays by Robert Allen, Sandy Flitterman, Maureen Turim, and Robert Stam in *Regarding Television—Critical Approaches: An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol. 2 (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983).

Among the many journal articles dealing with television and narrative, see

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especially Caren J. Deming, "Hill Street Blues as Narrative," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (March 1985): 1-22; Phillip Drummond, "Structural and Narrative Constraints and Strategies in *The Sweeney*," *Screen* 20, no. 1 (1976): 15-35; and Mimi White, "Crossing Wavelengths: The Diegetic and Referential Imaginary of American Commercial Television," *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 51-64.

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This chapter focuses on the experience of watching television—an experience that, as I suggested in the introduction, is a pervasive and almost universal feature of modern life. And yet, precisely because it is so much a part of the fabric of everyday life, it is not very well understood. All of the essays in this book address the general question: How do we make sense of and derive pleasure from watching television? This chapter zeros in on the meeting place between television's discourses and television viewers. We will approach this intersection between the world inside the set and the viewer in front of it from three directions. First, I assess the general strand of contemporary literary theory called reader-oriented criticism to see what light it might shed on how we understand television narratives. Sarah Kozloff's chapter on television narratives has examined the relationship between the tellers of "tele-tales" and the tales themselves. In part, this chapter takes up the relationship between television's tales and the viewers of those tales. If every story presumes a teller, it also presumes someone to whom the story is told.

But television is not just a series of tales; it is a performance medium, and in some ways it resembles the I/you relationship of face-to-face communication more than the removed and mediated writer/reader relationship of literary communication. With most novels, films, and books, the

television and

Channels

contemporary criticism

of

second edition

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edited by robert c. allen

Reassembled



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