VISIBLE FICTIONS

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CINEMA
TELEVISION
VIDEO

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7 Broadcast TV as cultural form

The very obviousness of the differences between cinema and broadcast TV means that they are often overlooked. Cinema revolves around the purchase of the right to attend a performance of a single film text. The performance is public; the audience is prepared for it by the widespread circulation of the narrative image. Broadcast TV emits a series of signals that are available to anyone who possesses or rents a TV set. Broadcast TV is received overwhelmingly in domestic surroundings. The images involved are different: cinema's is large and projected; broadcast TV's is characteristically small and luminous. This much is obvious. However, the consequences of these differences for each medium are less obvious.

This section argues that broadcast TV has developed distinctive aesthetic forms to suit the circumstances within which it is used. These forms are distinct to broadcast TV as a phenomenon, rather than to video as a phenomenon. They have as much to do with the fact that broadcasting presents a continuous set of signals that are either received or missed by their potential audience. There is hardly any chance of catching a particular TV programme 'tomorrow' or 'next week sometime' as there is with a cinema film. There is no reason to infer that the forms outlined here will dominate the growing market for videotapes and discs. In the early stages, this might be the case through sheer imitation, but new forms should develop very quickly. Currently, broadcast TV is the predominant use of the video image in our culture. There is evidence (like all evidence in this area, not particularly

reliable) that home video is overwhelmingly used as a 'time shift' phenomenon, moving a particular broadcast programme to a point when it is convenient to watch it.

Broadcast TV has developed a distinctive aesthetic form. Instead of the single, coherent text that is characteristic of entertainment cinema, broadcast TV offers relatively discrete segments: small sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes. These segments are organised into groups, which are either simply cumulative, like news broadcast items and advertisements, or have some kind of repetitive or sequential connection, like the groups of segments that make up the serial or series. Broadcast TV narration takes place across these segments, characteristically in series or serials which repeat a basic problematic or dilemma rather than resolving it finally. The broadcast images depend upon sound to a rather greater degree than cinema's images. The image is characteristically pared down, and appears as though it is immediate or live. This generates a kind of complicity with the TV viewer, a complicity that tends to produce the events represented as an 'outside world', beyond the broadcast TV institution and the viewer's home alike. The predominant forms in which this 'outside world' is presented tend to be those of the hostile or the bizarre. The viewer tends to delegate his or her look to the TV itself: it is as though the TV institution looks, the viewer passes his or her gaze across the sights in the TV eye. Such is the regime of representation that broadcast TV seems to have: a general description that is no doubt profoundly inflected by my experience of British TV.

This model of the functioning of TV seems to apply indiscriminately to fiction and non-fiction alike. It is one of Jean-Luc Godard's characteristic throw-away lines to inquire why it is that we divide cinema and TV so rigidly into 'fiction' and 'non-fiction', when we do not regard this distinction as fundamental to other means of representation. Indeed, for the purposes of this model of broadcast TV's characteristic procedures, examples are drawn indiscriminately from factual and fictional work. Both narrate events to a viewer who is in a particular relation to them. In this sense, there is no difference. The distinction rests on another level altogether, a level at which we simply have to trust the integrity of the programme-makers. The distinction between fact and fiction depends on the source of the material that is manufactured into narrating images and sounds. If fact, it is supposed to come from the world that exists beyond the TV institution and the home of the viewer. If fiction, it is the imagined and created vision of a particular person or persons. Hence arguments about documentaries and their supposed truthfulness very quickly become arguments about the integrity of the programme-makers involved, for it is with their guarantee of the source of the material that the distinction between fact and fiction rests.

Broadcast TV is a profoundly domestic phenomenon. The TV set has to be acquired by a person or persons before TV signals can be received, and the manufacture of TV sets has long assumed that its market is the domestic unit. In some countries, a licence to view (which contributes to the costs of producing some broadcasts) has to be purchased as well. This is the case in Britain. Unlike entertainment cinema, which characteristically addresses the couple seeking an evening's entertainment outside the home, broadcast TV is already in the home. The TV set is another domestic object, often the place where family photos are put: the direction of the glance towards the personalities on the TV screen being supplemented by the presence of 'loved ones' immediately above. Broadcast TV is also intimate and everyday, a part of home life rather than any kind of special event.

Broadcast TV institutions respond by conceiving of this domestic and everyday audience in a specific way. Broadcast TV, its institutions and many of its practitioners alike assume that its domestic audience takes the form of families. 'The home' and 'the family' are terms which have become tangled together in the commercial culture of the twentieth century. They both point to a powerful cultural construct, a set of deeply held assumptions about the nature of 'normal' human existence. The family is held to consist of a particular unit of parents and children: broadcast TV assumes that this is the basis and heart of its audience. Broadcast TV's conventional notion of the family is of two parents, the father

13 The domestic audience as it probably is (*Meet Mr Lucifer*)

working, the mother running the home, together with two children of school age. This conception is clearly seen in much advertising material; in the way in which statistics are interpreted on news bulletins ('for the average family, this means . . .'); in 'families' selected for quiz programmes; in 'families' shown in fictional representations of all kinds. The prevalence of this conception of the family is all the more remarkable since only a minority of the population of Britain currently live like this. Only a third of households currently consist of man, woman and dependent children, according to government statistics. In most of these units, the woman also has a regular job. In some cases, she is the only 'bread-winner'. In all, the supposedly classic nuclear family unit, of working father, housewife mother and dependent school-age children accounts for less than 5 per cent of the population. Yet social policies of all kinds assume this to be the norm, and so does broadcast TV. For many people

living in ways that differ from this supposed norm, these ways of living are experienced as exceptions or temporary departures from the norm. The presence of a grandparent, of other relatives, the single-parent family, the childless household, all of these common and by no means 'radical' forms are taken as a passing phase rather than as a real way of living. Such is the power of the conception of the nuclear family in its particular form.

Broadcast TV assumes this norm as do most of the major institutions of British society. For broadcast TV, it has certain specific effects because TV tends to orient its programmes towards its presumed audience, to try to include the audience's own conception of themselves into the texture of its programmes. Hence broadcast TV gives central place to the series of cultural preoccupations that accompany the nuclear family: to heterosexual romance, to the stability of marriage, to the notions of masculine careers and feminine domesticity, to the conception of the innocence of childhood, to the division of the world in public and private spheres. In addition, this conception of the family-as-audience determines a series of attitudes to what is legitimate material for broadcast TV. Any specialised interests are avoided, especially those which divide across generations. 'Youth' as a specific audience is not catered for by broadcast TV to any appreciable extent; neither, for that matter, are those over sixty. Such categories of audience are normally deployed only as the reasons for prohibitions: no sexually explicit programmes before 9 p.m. because children will be watching; no disturbing programmes about death because old people may be watching on their own. TV programmes are addressed to a generalised audience which is conceived in a very specific way: as isolated nuclear families in their domestic settings.

The particular ideological notion of the nuclear family in its domestic setting provides the overarching conception within which broadcast TV operates. Given this setting, and the multiple distractions that it can offer, broadcast TV cannot assume the same level of attention from its viewers that cinema can from its spectators. So broadcast TV has developed specific forms of narration, and specific

forms of organisation of its material. The basic organisation of material is that of the segment, a coherent group of sounds and images, of relatively short duration that needs to be accompanied by other similar such segments. The segment as the basic unit according to a short burst of attention is matched by the serial and series form. These provide a particular kind of repetition and novelty that differs markedly from that found in the narrational patterns of classic cinema. In turn, the series and serial imply a third term: scheduling. Scheduling is the means by which a day's broadcasting is arranged so that particular programmes coincide with particular supposed events in the life of the family. Scheduling provides a regular, week by week, slot in which the repetition of particular series formats can take place. This aspect of broadcast TV's arrangements is dealt with in Part III.

Within the context of the segment and series, broadcast TV can, at particular moments, adopt a form that corresponds much more closely to that of cinema. Broadcast TV can present a single work that has a high degree of internal coherence and patterns of repetition and innovation. Broadcast TV does use the model of the Hollywood film. It does so in two ways. First, it transmits films, which provide it with a convenient form of raw material. Second, it produces 'TV films' or 'special presentations' or 'single plays'. These are the area of broadcast TV which aims most directly towards cultural respectability. The 'single play' on British TV has always been the area of greatest ideological and aesthetic risk, and the area of the greatest artistic reputation for writers and directors alike. However, it is significant that these productions are increasingly cinema films in all but name; they rely upon cinematic techniques, and they invite their audiences to try to view them with the attitudes and intensity of concentration that is more characteristic of cinema. For broadcast TV, the culturally respectable is increasingly equated with the cinematic.

However, the vast quantity of broadcast TV's output, usually the critically neglected part, conforms to a different model. Its basic unit is the segment, with segments following on from each other with no necessary connection between

them. This definition of TV's commodity as a programmed series of meaningful segments used in a domestic context owes much to Raymond Williams's definition of broadcast TV as 'flow'. The notion of 'flow' is a much misused one, and its openness to misuse is the result of the way in which Williams defines the idea. He argues that TV cannot be conceived of as unitary programmes which are 'interrupted' by advertisements and suchlike material. 'Yet it may be even more important to see the true process as flow: the replacement of a programme series of timed sequential units by a flow series of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organisation is something other than the declared organisation' (*Television* p. 93). 'There has been a significant shift from the concept of sequence as *programming* to the concept of sequence as *flow*. Yet this is difficult to see because the older concept of programming – the temporal sequence within which mix and proportion and balance operate – is still active and still to some extent real' (*ibid*., p. 89). In arguing against two assumptions (that programmes are interrupted; that TV is a series of separate coherent programme items), Williams describes flow as a liquid and even confusing process by which broadcast TV tends to average out the various programme forms that its formal organisations of production claim to keep separate. According to Williams's model of flow, then, everything becomes rather like everything else, units are not organised into coherent single texts like cinema films, but form a kind of montage without overall meaning: 'like having read two plays, three newspapers, three or four magazines, on the same day that one has been to a variety show and a lecture and a football match. And yet it is not like that at all, for though the items may be various the television experience has in some important ways unified them' (*ibid*., p. 95). Here both the strength and weakness of Williams's argument becomes clear. Flow assembles disparate items, placing them within the same experience, but does not organise them to produce an overall meaning. This is a valuable insight; however, the problem lies in Williams's definition of 'items'. 'Items' are still separate texts, independent works like a

cinema film. Finally, for Williams, flow is a feature of TV that severely compromises and alters the separate texts that TV has manufactured. His model is of cinema-style texts which appear in a context that reduces their separation one from another. In doing so, he underestimates the complexity of broadcast TV's particular commodity form, which has very little to do with the single text.

The 'spot' advertisement is in many ways the quintessence of TV. It is a segment of about thirty seconds, comprising a large number of images and sounds which are tightly organised amongst themselves. This segment is found accompanied by other similar segments: coherent within themselves, they have no particular connection with each other. Meanings are discrete and separate; their interrelation lies in the fact that they belong to a similar class of segments, or, occasionally, in the way that they proudly produce puns upon each other. Watching advertisements is often an exhilarating experience because of their short span and their intensity of meaning: they are expensive (more expensive than the programmes they come with) and precisely calculated (often better than TV drama). They are sparklingly diverse, the shiny surface wrapping of a domestically oriented consumerist society. They are also the supremely televisual product: hence another part of their exhilaration, that of seeing a medium used for itself, and not weighed down by cultural presumptions that are not its own.

Yet, being a segment, each advertisement does not stand on its own. The experience of watching advertisements is that of seeing segments cluster together, inciting each other. Their specific meanings have relatively little to do with each other; their generalised generic meaning (a domestic consumerist relation to objects) gives them a certain common thematic; but their organisation together is something new to Western representations. Advertisements on TV cannot be scanned or ignored like the page of a newspaper: they demand short bursts of attention, producing an understanding that rests at the level of the particular segment involved and is not forced to go further, is not made to combine as a montage fragment into a larger organisation of meaning. Thirty seconds by thirty seconds, the 'spot' advertisement

expands but does not combine: it is the furthest development of broadcast TV's segmental commodity.

The segmental commodity is found right across TV's output, and even inflects its use of material originating from the cinema. TV news and current affairs programmes have adopted this segmentalisation: in a news bulletin the standard approach is for each item to be separated from all others. It is a rare event for two items to be related together, the sure sign of an important ideological operation at work: the emergence of a common-sense view of affairs. One such event was the yoking-together of reports of 'industrial strife' on British TV during the winter of 1978. Newspaper journalism generated the term 'The Winter of Discontent': TV's persistent combination and foregrounding of reports of industrial disputes nightly consolidated this definition. Yet such an occasion is rare, and can be subject to complaints of 'over-interpretation' on TV's part. The news segment is characteristically isolated within a context of its likenesses: each a particular report, discursively organised to present a totalising view, yet no overall meanings emerging from the juxtaposition of segments.

In some sense, advertisements, news, and current affairs magazine programmes provide the most obvious examples of the segmental aspect of TV. However, this procedure extends very much further across virtually the whole of TV's output. It is not only a characteristic of those TV channels that carry advertisements: it has also become the standard form of TV construction for the BBC as well. First, it can be argued, as Raymond Williams has, that a significant proportion of broadcast TV consists of small segments that fill the gaps between substantial programme units: the announcer sitting in a studio providing a link; the trailer for a programme coming some time in the future; the showcasing extracts of the evening's entertainment, then tomorrow's, the weekend's and so on. The BBC does this just as much as ITV. This segmentation extends to programmes themselves, especially the title sequences. The title sequence is in effect a commercial for the programme itself, and it has all the features of a commercial. It is considerably more expensive per second than the programme it fronts; it is

highly organised and synoptic, providing a kind of narrative image for its programme. Every programme has a title sequence, whether a news bulletin or a documentary or chat show or police drama, and their manufacture is a long-established practice. There is a high degree of autonomy for the title sequence, since it is repeated every time the programme format is used and usually provides a highly generalised, gestural conception of the programme it advertises, unlike the material used to showcase individual programmes. A strategy increasingly used with American series is to combine the two forms, so that the standard title sequence integrates shots from the individual programme in a highly enigmatic or incoherent way. This is the closest that TV has come to constructing a narrative image in the cinematic mode. The main difference from cinema's narrative image is that broadcast TV's title sequences invariably come with the programme: there is an immediacy of realisation of the narrative image which marks it out from the cinematic practice. The practice of manufacturing title sequences (for which cinema has no real equivalent) is another obvious example of segmentalisation: this time occurring within the bounds of what is conventionally designated 'a programme'.

Further, programmes which have a high degree of coherence compared to news, advertisements, promotion material and title sequences can themselves be regarded as being composed of segments. Any fiction series or serial is prone to segmentalisation, and the series and serial form the vast bulk of broadcast TV material almost everywhere. This segmentalisation takes the form of a rapid alternation between scenes and a frequent return to habitual locations and situations rather than any sustained progression through sequential logic of events. In the series and the serial alike, these segments tend never to coalesce into an overall totalising account. The form that tends to be adopted by TV fiction, in this sense, is the same as TV news, with a continuous updating on the latest concatenation of events rather than a final ending or explanation. Even though events are frequently intercut in the series and serial, there is habitually no parallelism implied between the events beyond a simple

one of simultaneous occurrence and general connection between the characters.

This segmentalisation is TV's own creation, and is not traceable directly to the effects of 'spot' advertisements being scattered at various moments through the TV fiction. One of the classic moments of the development of this process in British TV was the police series *Z-Cars* produced by the BBC. *Z-Cars* was renowned (among other things) for the fact that it had more scenes than it had minutes, an effect achieved by the intercutting of slightly related events. The segment in this sense is not essentially different from the segment that is found in advertisements. Each scene is coherent in itself, delivering a particular meaning, an event, a relation between characters. Its characteristic effect, however, depends upon its placing in relation to other discrete segments that are also relatively coherent in themselves. This internal coherence in effect prevents the generation of effects of parallelism, contrast or irony between sequences except in special moments.

Hence, to take a slightly unpredictable example, the episode of the series *Telford's Change* transmitted on 25 February 1979. This series was characterised by a series of rather filmic concerns: the naturalistic performances of Peter Barkworth and Hannah Gordon, a tendency towards long takes with fluid camerawork rather than a multiple camera shooting style characteristic of studio-based TV series. Yet, for all its upmarket (i.e. cinematic) pretensions, the series was profoundly of TV. Its basic structuring division was between a semi-separated married couple, Peter Barkworth as Dover bank manager, Hannah Gordon as producer of a play in Brighton. The 50-minute programme alternated between these two basic segments, with a vague parallel being implied: both getting on 'on their own', both being experimentally flirtatious. The programme (the series) gave more weight to Barkworth (the Telford who changed a high-level international bank job for a humble one), and consequently he was involved in a long series of relatively short self-contained segments, organised around bank employees (senior and junior) and around bank clients: a garage owner on the brink of disaster (dispatched to file for bankruptcy);

a woman owner (rejuvenated by an affair); a woman wanting to expand her sauna business (Barkworth's socio-sexual attitudes explored). Each segment delivered its meaning and its cameo performance. The demarcation between segments was so great that any one could have been dropped out of the episode without material damage to the overall impression. At one moment only did the two major series of segments (Barkworth/Gordon) come together, a phone call between the two whose cautiously reconciliatory purpose was thwarted by the pressures of their respective immediate situations. Perhaps the only segment that could not have been eliminated (as it was the only moment of narrative progression), it was marked by a rapid alternation between the two major segmental series. *Telford's Change* is a series whose pretensions are towards cinema (for TV, the locus of artistic respectability and of authorial recognition), yet it still displays TV's characteristic segmentalisation.

Any single programme taken as an example of segmentation reveals only the way in which this characteristic procedure has 'invaded' what is characteristically taken to be an independent textual entity: the programme. However, broadcast TV does not consist of programmes in the way that they are listed in programme guides in newspapers or magazines. Here Williams's notion of flow is important: it indicates the way in which TV presents segments in larger or smaller conglomerations. Broadcast TV is characterised by a succession of segments, of internally coherent pieces of dramatic, instructional, exhortatory, fictional, or documentary material. The major difference between the BBC TV service without advertising and ITV with advertising lies only in the size of the conglomeration of segments. BBC is capable at certain points of presenting a fairly coherent set of segments, perhaps a whole narrative. But, feature films apart, this is a comparatively rare occurrence, the long documentary or the single play. BBC as much as any other broadcasting institution has adopted the characteristic commodity form of TV, the segment, and its complementary aspect, the series form.

The segment form implies repetition: TV's characteristic form of repetition is the series or the serial, a form of

continuity-with-difference that TV has perfected. This form fosters the segmental approach, the generation of large numbers of diverse coherent and relatively self-contained elements. The serial implies a certain narrative progression and a conclusion; the series does not: whether documentary, drama or everlasting soap opera, it has no end in view. The series always envisages its own return. The series itself divides into two types: fictional series that are centred around a particular situation and set of characters, and non-fictional series that are characterised by a recurring format and known set of routines.

The series and serial both provide a means of generating many segments from basic narrative or expository techniques, and from basic thematic material. The serial aims towards a conclusion which is a number of weeks distant. Like the massive three-decker novels of the nineteenth century, the TV serial multiplies incident along the way. It uses its characters, plays around with the possible permutations of relationships and situations. Its span is often that of generations. It implies a certain knowledge accumulated over the span of its broadcasting, but this itself causes worries within the broadcasting institutions, because it is quite conceivable that a large proportion of the audience will miss one or other episode, or will not be hooked on the expository first episode. Hence a number of techniques: the title sequence that introduces characters (faces connoting a characteristic) and even their relationships; the repetition of material from the end of one episode at the beginning of the next; carefully placed references to events in the conversations of characters. Again, there is the generation of segments which have a purely broadcast function, and an attempt to compensate for the effect of narrative progression and accumulation. A popular serial will tend to generate a semi-news status for itself, with commentaries on its latest enigmas being provided in the television pages that form a substantial part of popular newspapers. The enigma to be resolved 'tonight' is restated and ruminated over: the next day, not a word in the newspaper. This is another isolated example of construction of a narrative image, but again distinctive from the cinematic process.

Serial construction presents problems for broadcast TV, those of ensuring a large enough constant audience. Increasingly, the series form is becoming standard. Here, each episode is more or less self-sufficient, and very little if any narrative progression is implied from episode to episode. *Telford's Change* represents a compromise between serial and series that is becoming increasingly popular. Each episode is coherent enough for the casual viewer, packed with varied and satisfying segments; the serial aspect is provided by the continuing enigmas of whether Telford's change will be a success, and whether his marriage will break up.

The series itself provides a stable situation in which various incidents take place week by week. The incidents usually form a complete group each week (except in the case of soap opera). Such a definition of the series extends over most of TV's output: news programmes, investigatory documentaries, situation comedies, variety shows, chat shows, sports programmes. A fundamental stability and return to zero at the end of each programme or programme section is implied by the series. The news, current affairs, documentary and chat show series provide a stable format in which events from the world beyond TV can appear. The series format ensures that they can appear at all by providing them with a set of known expository procedures. Hence it is expected that the news series will consist of segments that have absolutely no connection between them, whereas the segmentalisation of an investigatory programme will tend to construct an overall strategy of relation between segments. Of course, the series format is by no means a neutral means: it constructs segments according to quite precise routines which create the events portrayed as meaningful and as coherent within their segments. The sheer repetition of the series format enables this process to go ahead, as it provides a framework of expectancy, intelligibility and evaluation. 'Now, back to the studio . . .' is a cue for a different form of discourse (presentation, overview v. witness account), not for a neutral geographic shift.

The format series is matched by the fictional series, which operates across all the modalities of fiction from farce to tragedy. It is characterised by the constant repetition of basic

narrative situations and characters: a family, a business enterprise, a hospital, etc. Each week the characters encounter a new situation which has no permanent effect upon them: the following week they will be in the same relation one to another. The repetitions are very marked, to the extent of some series (from USA chiefly) ending their weekly narrative with a kind of coda in which the basic relations between characters are reaffirmed outside of any narrative context. Subordinates joke with boss; children outwit their parents over some domestic chore. The formula, the basic situation, receives a final statement in a segment that tends to echo the title sequence. This has the effect of reaffirming the stasis from which the next episode will depart: a stasis that is more a basic contradiction or power relation than a zero degree. The series, then, relies on repeating a basic problematic which is worked through on each occasion without a final resolution. In a police series, the police catch the criminals in each individual instance of the series, but two things still remain: criminality itself (the episode ends with another call, a trivial assignment, etc.) and the particular relationship between the police involved (*Starsky and Hutch*'s spiky mutual dependency; *The Sweeney*'s blend of antagonism to authority and respect for justice). The series is based upon the notion 'what will happen to them this week?', known elements are repeated with no discernible development from one episode to the next.

The series is very widespread in TV, and complements the construction of TV output into segments. Segments gain their mutual organisation and some of their coherence from the complicated series patterns which generate them. The series ensures that each segment will be classified into a particular class of segments because of the repeated elements (character, mode of address, etc.) that play through them. Programming, the art of scheduling, appears in this context as the deliberate policy of TV organisations of ensuring that segmentation does take place. Scheduling determines the way in which an evening's TV will be organised so that one class of segments does not dominate, yet the series will find a permanent 'slot', a place where its particular pattern of repetition can take place. Scheduling

effectively provides a supra-segmentation of broadcast TV.

The characteristic broadcast TV experience is a domestic consumption of a succession of segments organised according to the logic of the series. The characteristic entertainment cinema experience is public and collective, an experience of a single text which performs and completes the narrative image circulated for it. Broadcasting has not developed the institution of the narrative image; instead the series provides the necessary expectancy and anticipation, which is distinct from that of the cinema. TV's process of segmentalisation of its flow contrasts again with cinema's emphasis on the single unitary film. This also has effects which mean that in their common area of narrative fiction, cinema and TV tend to develop different forms and approaches. It also has effects in that each medium tends to concentrate on different procedures of signification of events.

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