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NARRATIVE AND GENRE

◆ Horace Newcomb

The significance of narrative and genre for the study of contemporary media can hardly be overestimated. Both are means by which the world of human experience can be reconstructed, rearranged, and reimagined. As ways of organizing, framing, and directing experience and knowledge and as industrial tools, these categories have been central to film and electronic media since the beginnings of these forms of communication.

Although both concepts can and should be applied to the structures of meaning in strictly "informative" or rhetorical works such as news reports, documentary film and television, and advertisements, this chapter focuses primarily on the functions of narrative and genre in fictional works of film and television. When appropriate, however, attention will be focused on other significant representational types. It is also important to note here that the focus of this chapter is on patterns generally associated with "Western" or "European" forms of narrative and genre, though it will be important at times to take note of this cultural specificity. Similarly, by way of introduction, it is equally significant to recognize that neither concept is founded in the creation, distribution, reception, or organized study of film and electronic media. Notions of narrative and genre are central to all forms of literature—and, in some instances, even of other arts such as painting, music, and dance—and to the study of those media as well. Indeed, drawing on this long history of the uses of narrative and genre is necessary to fully understand the significance of these concepts for media studies.

For example, there is perhaps no better illustration of the fundamental roles of narrative and genre than to notice their application in interpersonal communication grounded in human speech, in everyday exchanges with others. Ask of another any simple question, something such as, "What did you do last night?"

Answering such a question usually involves the making of a narrative. Certainly, no one would attempt to catalogue each action or every moment of the lived sequence time indicated as "last night." An appropriate answer would select certain events, highlight some of those selected, use others as linking devices, and move toward a conclusion. Even if that conclusion were no more "conclusive" than "Nothing. I stayed at home," a narrative would have been created, for "nothing" is an evaluative judgment and deletes all the things done there. It suggests other "something" alternatives that would have more significance for the questioner, and in these immediate, potential comparisons, a range of responses is implied and embedded.

If, of course, the events were much more involving than "nothing" suggests, if they were organized in such a manner as to invoke suspense, or laughter, or disbelief, specific types of organization might be used. In other words, the narrative might fall into a classification scheme—a genre. We might even suggest, for analytical purposes, that the question, "What did you do last night?" could itself constitute a specific genre that we might call the "stories about last night" genre, which would be distinct from "what did you do last summer" or "what did you do at school."

In most social interaction, a certain value is placed on narrative and on those who create good narrative—variously defined as entertaining, or enlightening, or informing. The person who embellishes, who makes good selections, who organizes, who draws us in, who allows us some sense of participation is important just for those skills. Our pleasure and our enlightenment is a part of life we appreciate.

Such simple examples suggest that the "work" done by narrative and genre can be understood as a process of rearranging the world for imaginative purposes. This imaginative activity occurs in at least two ways. First, the act of the one who answers the question, who selects events and orders them, is an imaginative action. Second, the one who listens, who anticipates, who believes or disbelieves, who laughs or fails to laugh, who places herself or himself into the circumstances by thinking something such as "I wouldn't have done it that way" is also engaged in an imaginative process. This "freedom" to participate in the constructed "worlds" of narrative and genre is perhaps one thing that contributes to definitions of being human. To "imagine" the future, or the past, or other worlds, or actions forbidden—or bidden—by our societies, enables a potentially rich consideration of and commentary on the actions we do perform.

This observation, however, requires central focus on yet another aspect of these two concepts that becomes significant for their study in contexts of contemporary media: The creation of narratives, as well as their classification into genres, is never a "neutral" act. The one who

answers our question, the one who selects which features of "last night" to emphasize, pass over, or even delete, has the power to direct our attention, which also involves diverting our attention from other events. What if there are things the answerer, the narrator, wishes to hide from us? What if there are things the answerer selects as important but that for us overlook something far more significant? Indeed, what if the answerer is lying to us? Does it matter if the entire answer, the narrative account, is "made up"? Why and how is it that we value so highly the fictional worlds that "entertain" us?

From such questions, and out of such basic aspects of social activity, great and trivial art, huge industries, and, in the views of many who study such matters, powerful social and cultural influences arise. Understanding the roles of narrative and genre in media studies, therefore, requires rather precise study of those concepts and the wide range of approaches to them. Indeed, the study of these topics has produced an especially rich body of work related to expressive forms, a long history of engagement with narrative and genre. As should be expected, different theories (and theorists), different questions, and analytical strategies have focused on different aspects of the topics. Rather than seeing these as somehow more "right or wrong," these variations can be understood as an ongoing deliberation, a conversation of sorts, in which alternative perspectives enable a richer understanding, each offering reshaping the others as it forges its own argument.

Structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1967) analysis of "binary oppositions," for example, offers formulas for recognizing relationships among features that have been used to examine both narrative and genre. Folklorist Vladimir Propp (1968) argued that "all" narratives share certain common features serving similar purposes. These "functions," he argued, might take varying shape in specific cultural contexts but could, on close analysis, be found to serve different narratives in the same manner. Tzvetan Todorov (1977) focuses the analysis of narrative on the shifting states of social formations, beginning in stability, moving through change, challenge, and instability, to arrive at an altered stable state "in the end." Seymour Chatman's (1978) study of the "branching" aspects of narrative, citing "nodal" points and movement away from and toward certain narrative events, offers yet another perspective.

Studies of genre are equally varied and suggestive of strategies for analysis. Much of the discussion surrounding genre relates to the ideological implications of shaping and organizing human experience in such specific ways, in forms that seem to have both an ongoing appeal to audiences and a sufficient resilience to be reshaped for social, cultural, or industrial change.

A key source in these explorations is Roland Barthes's (1972) *Mythologies,* a work that has generated its own body of commentary literature applying and exploring basic concepts. Many other studies focus on specific forms, such as the musical (Altman, 1981; Feuer, 1982), whereas others, such as Thomas Schatz's (1981) *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System,* survey a range

of film types. Similarly, Horace Newcomb's (1974) *TV: The Most Popular Art* examines a range of television genres.

In the apparently ever-expanding contexts of expressive culture, as new media wrestle with and modify traditional forms, even as "older" media such as film and television continue to churn out familiar examples, approaches to narrative and genre will require more precision. But the fundamental concerns—how, including the technological and industrial aspects, are stories told and experienced—keep us mindful of the significance of these topics.

◆ *Narrative*

A fundamental characteristic of narrative, as indicated above, is the arrangement of events in time. If we take as a central feature of this arrangement the Aristotelian dictum that all narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends, we must recognize or establish relations among these parts.

In *Film Art: An Introduction,* David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (1986) offer a definition of narrative that suggests the significance of such an analytical approach: "A narrative is *a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space*" (p. 83).

A central question in the study of narrative, then, and one that is a good starting point for narrative analysis, is, "Why did it start here and end here?" A related question (or set of questions) asks, "Why are the events in the narrative arranged in this specific order?" What "causes" this narrative to occur and perhaps orders the causal relationship that follows? For analytical purposes, it is even helpful to ask, "What if?" What if the narrative had begun at another point, with another event contained within the narrative? What if the sequence had been rearranged so that the audience would have certain information at an earlier or later point in the narrative?

Such questions emphasize the fact that narratives are constructs, relatively arbitrary arrangements designed to appeal to certain desires or to shape certain responses. They

also remind us that in certain circumstances, the audience has knowledge of "what might happen" in the narrative and that the creator(s) of the narrative can play upon expectation, defeating or confirming it, a point that becomes especially pertinent in the discussion of genre that follows.

To understand and make use of the constructed aspects of narrative, it is helpful to follow the work of scholars who make distinctions between *story* and *plot* (cf. Bordwell, 1985). In this distinction, the story involves events as they happened and includes all aspects of those events—as in everything that happened "last night." The plot, however, is the selection and arrangement of certain events, using "story" as the raw material, the body of resource events from which to draw—and construct—the narrative.

Clearly, one primary transformation of story into plot, of events into narrative, involves a reconstruction of time. In prose fiction, a writer might note the passage of time with a simple phrase: "As winter snows melted. . . ." Dramatic performances on stage might suggest time passage with lighting changes, fades down and up. In the quasi-literary form of the radio drama, we have a similar example with the classic line from narratives constructed for juvenile listeners tuned to western adventures: "Meanwhile, back at the ranch. . . ."

With cinematic narratives, the range of technical devices for indicating altered time, for changing story into plot, is quite large. As with printed narratives, dates and times

can appear on the screen: "December 7, 1941." In sound, film characters can speak of specific dates and times of day. Passage of days and weeks can be signified by such clichéd techniques as the falling pages of a calendar or the churning wheels of a train. But more complicated alterations of time appear with the use of "fades" and "dissolves," as on the stage, to indicate passage of time. When the screen goes to "black," then fades into a new picture, we assume time has passed even if we are viewing the same people in the same location.

Flashbacks, also often indicated with a dissolve technique or other visual manipulation on the screen, take us into the "past" and beg the narrative question of what these past events will contribute to the plot emerging in this narrative. Parallel editing, however, implies that the events we see in a narrative sequence are occurring at the same time. We cut back and forth between events, having learned by experience that "real time" has not passed in the interval taken to enact the other scenes. The term *to cut,* of course, comes from the physical act of editing film. Pieces of film are cut apart and glued together again to construct narratives. (This practice is now generally accomplished electronically, with digital editing equipment that allows far more "efficient" selection processes from among a massive range of options for assembling filmed or taped content.) This physical capability to juxtapose visual content focuses attention on another aspect of the cinema, the ability to create narrative from filmed images alone. Some makers and theorists of silent film (Eisenstein, 1949) considered this the most significant aspect of the new medium and developed complex theories of narration based completely on relations among segments of filmed content.

Equally as significant as time in narrative is space. Again, literary narrative is quite capable of constructing spaces in which the events of a narrative occur. This is most often done with detailed description, though on occasion, a narrative may simply refer to a locale—"the desert," "the shore."

Obviously, narratives in film and television have advantages here. The photographic capabilities of these media are enhanced by the use of lighting techniques to give spaces more specific connotative meanings. Camera placement may limit or increase information available to the viewer. Design within space provides context for events that occur there, and the movement of performers to specific spaces may indicate a range of significance. Moreover, as we will see in the discussion of genre, space may carry significance for the meanings of the narrative in and of itself, as do the "wide open spaces" of a western or the tightly confined areas within a spaceship.

As with the sequence of events, the ability to edit film into specific spatial relationships is central to narrative. A cluster of conventional techniques blends events into visual sequences that contribute to meaning making. With the "eye-line match," the camera first photographs a performer looking in a certain direction, then focuses on what the performer sees. By filming "on axis," spaces are maintained in specific relation to one another, following the logic of conventional perspective. The familiar "shot-reverse-shot" or "over-the-shoulder" shot may maintain a conversation as if two people are speaking to one another in turn.

In point of fact, as this last example indicates, such uses of editing to construct the sense of a sequence are powerful devices. Films are almost always shot out of sequence. The last scene of a narrative could be the first to be filmed. Performers need not be in the same room at the same time to carry on a conversation. The "listener," who we see looking "at the speaker," is looking into a camera. The "speaker" may perform the same scene on a different day, looking into the camera now positioned from "the other side."

No matter the technological limitations or capabilities, however, no matter the construction or reconstruction of time or space, what happens within the most familiar cinematic narratives generally focuses on human experiences, some far more developed than

others. These narratives often begin in a state variously described as "normal" or as in equilibrium. This state of affairs is then disrupted by an event or events, and the remainder of the narrative is given over to events leading to a changed state of affairs or to the reestablishment of equilibrium. In some cases, the disruption of the "normal" results in the presentation of an enigma that must be solved or, at least, explained. The sequence of events leading to this end state is often a series of complications that must be confronted or overcome. Questions surrounding the enigma are presented. Clues are hidden and discovered. The quest is completed.

In most media narratives common in the Western European American traditions, the attempts to complete the tasks set within and defining the plot—attempts to resolve the enigma, to reestablish equilibrium—become the responsibility of a central figure, often described as a "goal-oriented hero." This individual, usually male, must overcome difficulties and reassume a central position to satisfactorily conclude the narrative.

Within such commonly figured narratives, then, the sequences of events, scenes, and actions most often follow a logic of cause and effect. Each scene or sequence may in itself involve a beginning, middle, and end, and analysis of these scenes and sequences is central to an analysis of the narrative whole.

At this point, we come to a core issue for the study of narrative: Who is the creator of the narrative? Whose narrative is being constructed? A related question complicates this problem: Who is the narrator, and is the "narrator" the same as the "creator of the narrative?" Here I have purposely avoided the term *author* to describe the creator of the narrative. The notion of *authorship* is in itself a vexed topic and nowhere more problematic than in the study of mass media such as film and television. One school of thought suggests that the director of a film is, in some cases, its *auteur*. This term is variously used to suggest that the director has (a) created all elements of a film, from script

to final edit; (b) has final control over these elements; or (c) has established the "vision" of the film and stamped her or his concept on the elements involved. Challenges to this concept of authorship point out the highly industrialized nature of most filmmaking, involving multiple tasks and procedures that are impossible to control. Still other critiques argue that "authorship" is itself a sociocultural construct, that artifacts such as films or television programs are as much culturally created as they are individually or even collectively invented.

Neither side of this issue, however, quarrels with the notion of, the existence of, a "narrator" for narrative. The point is that the narrator is the voice or perspective within the narrative that guides the construction of the sequence of events, hence guiding the viewer's knowledge and perhaps reactions to these events. In some instances, the narrator is a performer, a character within the narrative. Indeed, one of the clearest indications of the complex nature of narrative and narration occurs in films such as *Rashomon* (directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1950), in which there are multiple narrators constructing the "same" narrative from different points of view—a technique that leads inevitably to the fact that the same narrative is, in fact, many different narratives and that this "external" philosophical observation is, in some sense, narrating the whole. More conventional narratives in which the narrator is clearly identified might be found in some instances of the hard-boiled detective film, or in *films noir,* where a central character "narrates" the film in the first person.

In a great many cases, however, the viewer's perspective on a given narrative is akin to an omniscient view in which "we" look "into" the world of the narrative. Even here, however, our perspective is limited, focused, forced, and guided by what the camera allows us to see and the sequence of events that constrains our knowledge. We may guess at what will happen—indeed, this is the source of much pleasure in narrative. We may do more than guess, relying

on cues within the film that match lived experience or, as we shall see, more often match cues commonly found in other, similar films. In such cases, we may take pleasure from the confirmation of our guesses, or we may be more involved precisely because we do *not* know what will happen next or because our expectations have been defeated or channeled in new directions.

Among the most important features of narrative, then, and one of the factors that makes it useful and significant for human experience is its malleability. Narratives may, and often do, conform to patterns. But they may also suggest new patterns, new ways of considering the world, new perspectives on old topics.

◆ *Implications of Preferred Narrative Structures*

So familiar is narrative design that we often tend to overlook its highly constructed—one is tempted to say arbitrary—characteristics and, more significantly, overlook the implications of these specific features. But narratives also call for analysis of the factors underlying the specific formations described here. That is, the analysis must take into account the medium in which the narrative is created and the historical, social, and cultural circumstances surrounding that medium. Those circumstances would include, among other factors, the technological and economic resources available to the makers of narrative, the traditions of narrative construction associated with the "culture" in which it is produced, the expectations of audiences both within and outside of that specific cultural setting, and so on. But because of our focus here on fictional narratives, the circumstances would also include the intentions, capabilities, and resources of makers of narratives. For film and electronic media, these circumstances are, historically, directly related to industrial organization of a certain scale, and development of the "fiction film" or "fictional

television" offers a perspective on many aspects of narration.

As Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger (1985) suggest in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960,* a key work on the history of cinematic narrative strategies (among other topics), nothing inherent in the invention of technologies of the cinema required "movies" to develop in specific ways, into certain familiar forms, or into specific narrative patterns. Nevertheless, they argue, by the mid-nineteen-teens, American film especially had narrowed into the structure viewers around the world recognized as the "Hollywood" film.

For media studies, the implications of this historical development are profound. One of the most telling implications is that films come to be associated primarily with entertainment. Once films are categorized in this manner, and once they are then distributed for profit, the entire process of filmmaking becomes highly industrialized. Industrialized filmmaking is expensive and potentially quite profitable. But to be profitable, films must attract large numbers of viewers. If certain narrative structures draw those numbers to theaters but others do not, the profitable narrative structures come to dominate the understanding of what constitutes "a movie," what it is to be entertained, what a cinematic narrative "is." No matter the specific content or, as we shall see, the specific genre, the conventional "Hollywood" film takes on those certain characteristics.

Thus, we can attend to the social, cultural, and ideological implications of reliance on the goal-oriented hero, the typical White male central character whose actions, choices, and values guide us through the fictional world he centers. We can attend to the prominence of heterosexual romance as a structuring feature in the Hollywood cinema, as well as the prevalence of coupling or marriage as a concluding moment in so many films. We can mark the subordinate roles of women in most of these films. We can observe the

marginalization or demonization of members of other racialized groups or ethnic groups.

But such observations only begin to account for the implications of the dominance of specific narrative structures. Other factors include the fact that the necessary support systems are brought into alignment with the preferred narrative. Buildings and locations are constructed or designed to accommodate these kinds of films. Equipment is invented, modified, and improved to suit the form. Systems of distribution and exhibition must match the needs associated with particular film form.

Consider, for example, the expectation that fictional filmed narratives will be of a certain predictable length, roughly 90 to 120 minutes. We read of battles between studios and directors over films that are longer than this established criterion. But there is no factual reason for films to be of this length. Rather, it is the case that a film of 100 minutes can usually be shown more frequently in an evening, whereas films longer than 120 minutes would reduce the number of screenings in the social settings that have developed for the usual showing of films. Thus, even the notion of "going to the movies" is determined, in part, by the intersection of economic interests and narrative structures.

A similar implication can be attached to the ways in which creative personnel learn to "make" movies in particular ways. Handbooks and instruction manuals teach the Hollywood "three-act structure," and some go so far as to suggest page numbers in scripts as points at which certain types of actions should occur. Executives, agents, producers, and directors anticipate such structures and may reject works created on different patterns. If the "inciting incident" has not occurred at 25 to 30 minutes in the narrative, the movie is deemed "unconventional." When an unconventional narrative does become successful, it is often defined as an "art movie."

This points to the fact, of course, that describing the narrative structures of the "Hollywood cinema" barely scratches the surface of potential narrative strategies. Films are made around the world with different approaches to narrative. Popular Indian cinema regularly "disrupts" the central narrative with musical performances. In the classic Arabian narrative, *A Thousand and One Nights,* stories within stories connect in a variety of ways that do not fall easily into the conventions of "Western" narrative strategies. Multiple points of view, narratives within narratives, narratives that end ambiguously, in failure, without restoring equilibrium—all these are possible. A primary concern for culturally based analysis of narrative remains focused on the degree to which "Hollywood cinema" has forced such culturally specific narratives to the margins, even in their own societies. Still, it is worth noting that even the narrator of the tales in *A Thousand and One Nights* can be seen as a nearly classic example of the "goal-oriented hero(ine)," who exemplifies what might be the task of all narrative—to keep herself alive.

◆ Television Narrative

Though not immediately apparent, another alternative to classical Hollywood emerges in the structures of television narrative. In the earliest days of American television, a few plays written for television and performed live followed the more ambiguous structures found in dramatic productions for the stage. And a great many performative programs such as the variety show, stand-up comedy, the talk show, and children's programs were interspersed throughout the television schedule. Both types of programming—single play and performance—remain staple strategies in many national contexts that are, unlike the U.S. system, unable to provide financial support for extended fictional narratives.

One factor distinguishing television narrative from that of Hollywood film, however, resulted from the different economic structures underlying television.

Following the "broadcast model" developed for commercial radio, American television was planned as an advertising medium. Programs were designed not to "sell tickets" as were movies but to sell the attention of viewers to advertisers. The larger the audience, the higher the fees returned to producing and distribution/exhibition entities.

Much of the power of such a model lay in its domestic context. Although some alternatives such as "theater television" were considered, the medium quickly came to be designed for viewing in the home. A second fundamental characteristic of advertiser-supported television was quickly found in its regularity—the schedule. Popular programs maintained long-running places on the television schedule. New narratives had to be created for the same performers week after week. This fact was among the most significant in the shift from "live" to "filmed" television. Although it was nearly impossible to create an entirely new "play" on such a demanding schedule, it was quite possible to film new material for weekly presentation. Adopting familiar genres such as westerns, mysteries, medical and legal melodramas, and situation comedies, writers could regularly create "episodes" for familiar characters. The industrial structures of American television quickly made necessary alterations in the patterns of film production, and film studios, major and minor, became "factories" for the production of television. Most early fictional television programs did, in fact, follow the classic structure—beginning, middle, end; goal-oriented hero; and equilibrium disturbed but restored in the "conclusion." Thus, each week, the central recurring character of a western would defeat the violent intruder, or the police detective would solve the current crime.

The primary alternative to this narrative pattern was found in the fictions of "daytime television," the soap opera. Originally developed for radio, the soap opera was designed to attract female listeners/viewers, and, as the nomenclature suggests, many early programs were produced by the advertising agencies of their sponsoring domestically identified products such as soap powders. These narratives were programmed in short, usually 15-minute, episodes. But neither the story nor the plot was concluded in a single episode. Indeed, the longest running soap opera, *The Guiding Light,* began on radio in 1937 and continues on television at this time. It follows the lives of a group of families who are now in multiple generations and has appealed to multiple generations of viewers, often also members of the same families.

Although there were a few attempts to bring this continuing narrative structure to television, most significantly *Peyton Place* (1964–1969), it was not until the late-1970s that more significant programming trends adopted what is best referred to as *serial narrative.* Prior to this time, even with the limited success of *Peyton Place,* conventional wisdom throughout the television industry was that audiences would not return to "unfinished" stories during prime time. The prohibitions against the form often relied on condescending and patronizing attitudes toward the female viewers of daytime television, and the term *soap opera* was applied derisively to anything resembling serialization in the more "male-oriented" prime-time programming strategies.

With the astonishing success of miniseries such as *Roots* (1977), however, programmers began to consider the possibility of using the longer form as a means of attracting viewers. Indeed, longer running episodic comedy series, such as *The Andy Griffith Show* or the later *All in the Family* or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* already exhibited aspects of seriality in the development of their characters, in references to previous episodes, or in episodic plots that flashed back to previous narrative moments. By the end of the 1970s, with successful long-running programs such as *Dallas* and *Hill Street Blues,* television producers and programmers acknowledged the drawing power of stories and plots that could—at least in theory—go on without end.

This very complexity, however, can be seen as an economic liability in the television industry. Much of the profit potential for television lies in the repeat programming of content. This is known as *syndication,* the licensing, for a fee, of programs for use by other programmers. Particularly for American television, syndication provides the capital reserves for production of many highly expensive programs, most of which fail to attract viewers. A single successful series, however, can, when sold into syndication, fund many failures, and production organizations rely on secondary use of these successful programs by other television stations and networks and by programmers in other countries. But highly serialized series do not syndicate well. New viewers often see one episode and fail to watch others, thus losing the thread of the narrative.

As a result, modified forms of serial narrative have been developed. I have referred to one version as the "cumulative narrative" (Newcomb, 1985). In this pattern, each episode of a television series can "stand alone." That is, the plot is completed within the allotted time. Yet it relies on and frequently makes specific reference to aspects of character, motivation, and even story that have occurred in previous episodes. Regular viewers are rewarded with the pleasure of remembering these references, understanding complexities rising from new character developments, and recognizing the potential for future events and characterizations, whereas single-episode viewers take pleasure in the full completion of a specific plot. The "cumulative narrative" might be said to encompass something of a meta-plot that extends over the entire series, in a manner similar to, but distinct from, the fully serialized narrative.

Other series have come to rely on narrative *arcs,* plots completed within a few episodes, which allow the series to move on to another arc in subsequent episodes. These arc-driven narratives can be programmed as packages and stand between full serialization and cumulative narratives. Still other options emerge with new programming strategies developed for newer distribution systems such as cable television. Clusters of episodes are programmed serially but not in an ongoing manner. A number of episodes appear on a semiregular basis, allowing programmers and promoters to promote the next cluster by appealing to viewers to return months later to follow the exploits of characters. The fact that programs such as *The Sopranos* or *Sex and the City* are also distributed as video packages in rental outlets attests to the fact that they appeal to specific groups of viewers who may or may not follow the programs on television at the time of original programming.

Beyond the obvious economic advantage constructed by having audiences return week after week to follow an ongoing narrative, serialization offers potential advantage to the creators of such fictions and potential intensification of pleasure for viewers. Without the restriction of time imposed in most movies, serial narratives for television have the opportunity to explore events in a far more complicated fashion. The consequences of actions can be played out over weeks, even years in the case of daytime soap opera. Choices made by characters return to haunt or to relieve them in later sequences of events. Relationships are allowed to become more complicated and complex. "Good characters" can die, adding levels of emotional reaction for viewers.

In most serial narratives, the psychological and emotional aspects of characters' lives also become a layer of story and plot. If professions—policeman, doctor, lawyer—dominated earlier television, serialization allows for plots drawing on the personal "lives" behind the professional performance. Moreover, because serial narratives usually focus on groups, on ensembles of characters, the intertwining of relationships, both professional and personal, increases the potential for new story lines as well as for complications among plots and stories.

As a result of these and many other factors, the meaning and significance of events

can be enlarged and made more uncertain, more ambiguous. They suggest that serial narrative in television is, in many ways, more like narration in novels, particularly the long, often serialized novels of the 19th century. If we return to the notion that all narratives potentially allow for imaginative capability, for the possibility of considering alternatives to our lived experience, these serializations can be seen to serve far more than escapist or economic ends. They allow viewers to engage the imaginative possibilities of choices in ways resembling those made in their own lives. And they suggest that television narrative can, though often it does not, become one of the most complex and complicated narrative forms in human experience.

◆ Genre

Genres are systems of classification or grouping. Traditional classifications of expressive culture originally grouped forms of presentation. Drama, poetry, and, later, the novel were listed as genres. Within drama, *tragic* and *comic* further distinguished among larger numbers of works, and within poetry, the epic, the lyric, and the dramatic forms contained specific examples. Clearly, in such large, general categories, only a small range of qualities sufficed to "place" a work.

In more recent periods, however, genre has taken on far more specific notions of classification, often focused on content. And even more significantly, genres are defined by their conventions or repeated, expected, to-a-degree-predictable qualities. Among these, in addition to conventions of character, setting, costume, and action, are conventions of narrative. Indeed, it is possible to see matters of character, setting, costume, and action as aspects or, at least, specified modifications of narrative. Put another way, certain narratives deal with similar topics and themes and employ similar character types (often resembling one

another in physical features) to participate in similar types of actions and events (sometimes occurring in similar spaces). These narratives, then, can be classified as instances of specific genres.

As more and more specific characteristics have come to be noted, the concept of genre has been more widely and generally applied. Thus, across media—from literature to film to radio to television—patterned works such as the western, the mystery, the medical story, and the romance can all be considered genres. Even within these categories, further classification is possible. Thus, we have with the western the cavalry story, the trail drive/cattle empire story, the gunfighter story, and so on. Or within the detective story, we have the "English country house" story, the hard-boiled detective story, or the police procedural.

So common is this process of classification that it is possible to suggest that genres are completely arbitrary systems, created by critics who "invent" patterns as much as they discover them. This might be so in some instances of excessively fine-grained distinction. But the assertion is belied by the uses made both by creators who work within generic patterns and industries, from publishing to all forms of electronic media, which make use of them. Moreover, users of these patterned works—readers and viewers—display extraordinary knowledge dependent on familiarity with significant aspects of classified characteristics of bodies of work.

Despite any skill required, however, both the makers and users of expressive works defined as "generic" have faced forms of sociocultural denigration. Beginning in the late 18th century, genre works were often considered inferior to distinctive, highly individualized, "unique" works. Increasingly, especially with the rise of forms of mechanical reproduction such as film, the former were considered "industrialized" or "factory" works, whereas the latter were considered "works of art."

The counterview, that generically bound works of expressive culture are valuable in

and of themselves, is eloquently expressed by Leo Braudy (1976) in *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films:*

> Critics have ignored genre films because of their prejudice for the unique. But why should art be restricted to works of self-contained intensity, while many other kinds of artistic experience are relegated to the closet of aesthetic pleasure, unfit for the daylight? Genre films, in fact, arouse and complicate feelings about the self and society that more serious films, because of their bias toward the unique, may rarely touch. Within film, the pleasures of originality and the pleasures of familiarity are at least equally important. (p. 105)

It is precisely this play, the oscillation between originality and familiarity, and the pleasures and knowledges attendant to both that make genre such a significant topic. But the relationship between originality and familiarity, between "product" and "art," does also acknowledge both the industrial/economic and the cultural aspects of genre. This relationship is fundamental to the utility of the concept of genre for media studies.

From the perspective of the film and television industries, genres provide substantial economic benefits. The stories/plots—the narratives—defining (and defined by) the genre are (to an ever more complicated degree) predictable. This enables producers who fund, distribute, and schedule the works to rely on an available pool of talent and technique. Writers who specialize in specific genres can provide material in line with the producers' expectations. Similarly specialized directors are skilled in managing the production process on tight schedules and precise budgets. Actors, despite their unwillingness to be typecast, are often identified with specific roles or role types and play to generic definitions. Locations can be used repeatedly or entire sets constructed for use in multiple productions. Props, such as costumes, weapons, vehicles, and decorations, can be purchased once with costs amortized over many years and uses. In one way, then, genres are best understood as examples of industrial efficiency. It is this "assembly line" aspect that is often cited as evidence of qualitative inferiority. Adding to this evaluation is the factory-like use to which generic content is put in programming mass media—from the designation of the "B movie" as the film following a more distinctive feature on a double bill to the specific time slots associated with the situation comedy or the more "adult" action-adventure programs on television.

Related to this critique of generic works is their popularity, the fact that audiences rarely seem to tire of new versions of the same patterns. But it is precisely this sense of the popular, of the continuing appeal of certain narrative patterns, that complicates the critique. How are we to account for this response? What is the significance of highly patterned, familiar works for audiences/viewers and for the cultures and societies in which they are manufactured and experienced?

As the quote from Braudy (1976) suggests, genre films and television productions are powerful forms of expression. This argument depends on the assumption that popularity with large numbers of viewers rests, at least in part, in the fact that genres return to topics, issues, problems, and events that are historically, socially, and culturally significant. Moreover, as Thomas Schatz (1981) argues throughout his work on American film, *Hollywood Genres,* the social and cultural issues addressed by specific genres may be incapable of solution or resolution.

Thus, the western continually confronts a violent past, replete with divisions grounded in "race," class, and gender and played out in confrontations over territory, social control, and authority. The hard-boiled detective genre explores violent crime in an urban context, suggesting that contemporary divisions of class and gender, as well as issues of power and authority, remain as vexed as in the past. Science fiction allows for exploration of a range of topics and is perhaps

less defined as a general category than in subgenres relating to technology, exploration, utopia, and dystopia. Social comedies in film and television explore interpersonal foibles and provide affirming laughter as evidence that all can be right within certain domestic or domestically inflected professional contexts. In all these and in other familiar genres, patterns of narrative construction work toward conventional conclusions.

And it is precisely these conventional endings that open genres to a far more complex critique. In this view, popular genres are inherently conservative, preserving the ideological status quo. In the western, certain racialized stereotypes contribute to the continuation of racism. In the police procedural, dominant authoritarian perspectives are solidified. In the situation comedy, traditional gender roles are confirmed.

This is a serious critique, often confirmed both by underlying story and narratively constructed plot. The key evidentiary factor in this analysis is the emphasis on repeated elements within the genre.

The counter to this argument focuses on differences within instances of a genre, finding them equally as significant as the similarities in the broad pattern. This view holds that genres offer a site for exploring alternatives to these views and sees the conventional endings as contrivances that cannot obliterate the conflict over social issues that constitutes the narrative itself. Recognizing genre as a site destabilizes the meanings conveyed. Instead of taking the familiar pattern at face value, emphasis is placed on a struggle over meaning, on the "work" required to reach the conventional ending.

In this view, genre and narrative come close together and suggest more complex explanations for the resilient "popularity" of generic productions. The industrial demand for "familiar novelty," for establishing a relationship between the conventional patterns and the "inventions" of material that "fits" those patterns, suggests that creators can place newer versions of old issues within the expected formulas. Genres remain popular, in part, because they are flexible, resilient. The fundamental issues—authority, power, violence, relationships of gender, "race," age, sexuality, "family," and so on—remain present. Attitudes, behaviors, actions, choices—all available in alternative and imaginative form—can be explored in wild variations of narrative *within* genre.

And finally, these aspects of genre and narrative are again complicated by televisual practices. So dense and demanding is the television schedule, requiring "new" material in increasing amounts, that almost all conventional aspects of genre have become open to experimentation. This process is best defined as *genre blurring* and can be seen from the earliest days of television. A television western such as *Wagon Train* or *Bonanza* was as much a family melodrama as a more conventional example of the genre. Even a program such as *Have Gun, Will Travel,* much more closely aligned to the conventional western, usually focused on specific social issues. And programs such as *All in the Family,* from a later period, easily slid into noncomedic moments of great poignancy.

The trend has continued, particularly in line with the increased use of serialization and ensemble casts discussed above. Allowing police personnel, lawyers, or doctors to have richly personal lives explored in elaborately developed narratives shifts emphasis away from the underlying sociocultural "problem" that defined their "originating" genres. The result adds layers of significance by examining a far larger range of issues than those associated specifically with "establishing order," "administering justice," or "healing the sick." But the same "personal" problem continues to be inflected by those first associations.

Tony Soprano may face the same problems with his son as those faced earlier by Bill Cosby. The two may even offer similar advice for dealing with the problems, and there may even be a comic overtone to

Soprano's performance or something slightly fierce in Cosby's. But the generic support underlying each presentation and the elaborated narrative preceding the moment ultimately suggest differences within these moments. The result, as always with expressive culture taken at large and comparatively, suggests again that the significance of narrative and genre is the permission granted to consider alternatives to our own states of being.

♦ Genre and Narrative in the Postnetwork Era

Despite these general patterns of development and application, however, despite the resilience of particular narrative strategies and generic classification and discrimination, the economic and social contexts of television have in recent years shifted in such a way as to alter the application of these analytical categories. Here it is important first to recognize that within frames of the development of broadcasting as a means for presenting and experiencing forms of expressive culture, "programs"—the "content" of radio and television—were offered as segments in larger strategies of distribution. One of the most incisive descriptions of this form of experience was offered by Raymond Williams (1974), who described his experience of U.S. television as being caught up in the "flow" of broadcast offerings. Although there have been many applications of and arguments against the notion of television as a "flow" experience (notably, that viewers may watch specific programs or genres, not the entire schedule), the concept remained apt as an abstraction of the communicative model for most of the history of broadcasting. Put another way, it was an apt description of the model of broadcasting when limited to a small number of offerings, as in the case of U.S. television with its three over-the-air networks from the late 1940s through the mid-1980s.

If we describe this period and the experience of it as "the network era," however, we must recognize that the coming of many more channels of distribution via cable and satellite television, compounded by the use of devices such as remote control switchers, videocassette recorders, and digital video recorders has placed us in the "postnetwork era." Although television surely continues to "flow" all around viewers, indeed, in deeper and deeper eddies, the process of selection has become much more fragmented and segmented. In late 2002, for example, the portion of the audience viewing television networks broadcasting primarily over the air dropped below 50% for the first time. One result of this situation is the difficulty faced by programmers of attracting and holding viewers, of making them stop and watch their program rather than another program.

To accomplish this attraction, creators of programs, program buyers, and program schedulers have resorted to strategies of what John Thornton Caldwell (1995) refers to as "televisuality." The strategies so developed amount to a new set of genres, not distinguished so much by content, by cultural resonance or significance, but purely by the grasp for distinction, for differentiation among the mass of material available to viewers.

Caldwell (1995) offers five such categories. "Boutique" television is distinguished by its reliance on specific "designers," usually recognizable names from the world of film production who have moved to television. Notable directors such as David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*) or Barry Levinson (*Homicide: Life on the Street*) are strong examples. The "Franchiser" category is reliant on new video and digital technologies to emphasize visual surface and attach meaning to events. Here Caldwell cites events such as the Gulf War and the Los Angeles rebellion, events that were almost instantly repackaged into distinctive videographed images. More recently, we could cite the revisualizations of the attacks on the World Trade Center. His "Loss Leader" category focuses on such

programs as the adaptations of well-known novels, usually as mini-series. These "major" television events can be heavily promoted, pushed as special events for which audiences are to make special arrangements for viewing. Although not programmed at the time of Caldwell's writing, we could include here the "event" programming of premium cable networks, such as HBO's *The Sopranos,* which, despite its relation to older genres, is programmed, packaged, and promoted as related to other HBO programs rather than in terms of specific content—"It's Not TV, It's HBO."

Caldwell's final two categories—two televisual "genres"—are the closely related "Trash TV" and "Tabloid TV." Trash TV is, in his words, made up of programs that "seek to overwhelm the viewer not with narrative or history, but with physical stuff and frenetic action" (Caldwell, 1995, p. 193). His primary example is *Pee-Wee's Playhouse.* Tabloid television, drawing on its print heritage, offers "heavy emphasis on pictorial stories and illustrative subject matter and an obsession with short, sensational topics" (p. 224). These programs "exploit the only viable presentational process left to them: the endless elaboration, dramatization, reiteration, and re-creation of some aberrant event or sensational hook" (p. 224). As should be clear from the preceding discussion, both these categories have also been "serialized" into extended "competitions" such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother,* and it is notable that "reality television" has become a highly successful genre, complete with its own plot patterns, narrative structures, conventions, and character types. As with other genres invented by individual creators, by "the industry," and by critics, "reality television" has already been divided into subgenres.

The developments Caldwell (1995) describes can be defined, as I have done here, as new "genres," or they can be seen as forms of modification, making use of newer technologies and techniques to emphasize certain qualities of older programming strategies. "Reality television,"

after all, relies heavily on familiar patterns of melodramas, often intensifying elements such as the "goal-oriented hero/heroine" and the significance of heterosexual romance. In either case, they indicate both the utility and the problems of generic classification, their potential for arbitrary application, and their use for comparative analytical purposes. It is doubtful that television creators and programmers, who commonly use more traditional generic systems of description to develop their ideas, will fall into comfortable use of categories such as Caldwell's. For analytical purposes, however, for the ability to think and write about the media without being drawn into "the industry's" own purposes, studies such as his should point the way for a more distanced and perhaps more distinctive application of theories of narrative and genre.

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