

## Narrative and Ideology 2: Broadcast Fiction

In this handout we're going to look at how aspects of narrative theory can be applied to broadcast fiction, especially in its most common form: television. Firstt, however, we need to visit another couple of narrative ideas.

### **Repetition and Novelty**

The problematic and its resolution will be central to the journey of the narrative from the start to finish, but obviously on the way there will be a lot else going on. Event will lead on to event according to patterns of causality. This can be a very confusing process with an enormous number of things going on for the audience to take in. This process is made comprehensible for the audience because of what Ellis calls repetition and novelty

To understand this I need to return you to some of the ideas in the first narrative and ideology handout. If you think about a comparison with television, film-makers have advantages and disadvantages placed before them when they are trying to create a comprehensible narrative. On the plus side, they have the enormous amount of concentration and interest of their audience at the start of the movie – totally different to a distracted television audience. On the down side, everything in film is new, unfamiliar and confusing.

If you watch *Only Fools and Horses* on TV, you know all about the characters, settings and the kinds of things that happen, before you switch on. A film is completely different, as the lights go down and the film starts it is as if you are entering an unfamiliar world where everything will have to be explained to you patiently if the narrative is to make sense.



At the start of the film, in particular, the filmmakers will have to lead us gently through the narrative, giving us clear sign posts to what is important and what we can ignore in the jumble of images that passes before our eyes. One important part of this is in the visual and aural language of the film – key characters can receive more camera shots and can speak louder, key events can be sign-posted by sound-track music so that we don't miss them . However, by far the most important tool of the film-maker is repetition. If we see something several times, it will make more sense in our minds and we will feel it is important. In the narrative of the film there are three types of repetition:

#### **Genre repetition**

This should be familiar to you from last term. The world of the film can be less alarmingly unfamiliar if the audience can be made to feel at home by reminders of other examples of the genre.

## **Cultural repetition of “typical” scenes and people.**

At the start of *Seven* you may not recognise these streets of this city and these people, but you are well aware from living in the twentieth century what an American city looks like and you will have stereotypical ideas of what policemen are like. The film-makers can present you with repetition of standard representations to make you feel comfortable so that the narrative can move on. A good example of how this works is the opening of Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* where we are presented with a number of culturally familiar representations of American city life – we immediately feel at home in the world of the main character.

## **Internal repetition**

This is probably the most important way that the film narrative is made comprehensible for us. We are simply presented with repetitions throughout the film of the same people encountering the same kind of situations and reacting in the same ways. Ellis calls this an economic system in the sense that it saves time for the filmmaker – by having events which soon become familiar it allows the narrative to move on more quickly. For example, a long, lingering establishing shot may be used the first time our hero visits a location. Now that the place is established in our mind, when the location is repeated later in the film we only need to see it briefly for us to recognise where we are – the system is economic. This kind of pattern is common in all films, the second time we see something the filmmakers do not need to spend so long setting it up.

All three of these kinds of repetition are most common in the first act of the film when things are most potentially confusing for us. Later on, as we become more comfortable, the director is able to bring in new elements (novelty). For the rest of the film there will be a delicate balance of repetition and novelty. I say delicate because if the balance is not achieved the film’s narrative will not work – too much novelty and the narrative will be incomprehensible, too much repetition and it will be boring – you can probably think of films that fit into both categories.

If you think of a comparison with television you can see that the same kind of pattern of repetition and novelty exists but it is the other way round. Any film is essentially made up of novelty – it is an independent individual text, unlike anything else you have seen before. All of the repetition is there to help you make sense of it. In TV on the other hand, the basis of the narrative is the repetition – each week in sit-coms, chat-shows, soaps and even the news, the same kinds of event take place. The enjoyment for us in the narrative comes from the predictability of this repetition and then seeing how elements of novelty are blended in, new twists are brought in to bring variation to the formula.

## **Plot or emotional story**

While I am talking about the enjoyment we get from the story it is worth considering another feature of what it is that we enjoy about the narrative – something that becomes clear if we try to make a distinction between the plot – the simple events of the narrative, and the emotional story – the changes that happen in the personality of the main character during the course of the narrative.

Audiences have more appreciation for a “well-constructed emotional story” than “a complex plot”. While the latter may be intellectually challenging, the former is more

emotionally engrossing and produces a much higher degree of audience empathy for the characters. The audience finds “over-plotted” films to be unsatisfactory because there is not enough change and development in the personal lives of the characters. These distinctions also will be fruitful in helping us to define the structures necessary for a film to be a “satisfying emotional experience.”



*Back to the Future Part II* was accused of being over-plotted – and was the least successful of the trilogy.

Think of the *Star Wars* trilogy as an example of these – the plot is intricate and fascinating but what ultimately makes the films so warm is the emotional story of Luke Skywalker and his growth to maturity and in the final film the resolution of his relationship with his father.

This distinction between emotional story and plot will be particularly useful when you think about the film *Seven*: here, the plot may be what first hooks us

into the film, but it is the emotional journey of Somerset through the film that keeps us interested and that also stops the film from ultimately being completely bleak.

## TASK

Think of three films that you know fairly well – what is the emotional story rather than the plot of these films.

## Broadcast Fiction

When you begin to study television narrative, you will find much this familiar – a typical television programme will contain a mixture of action and events, there will be a plot and an emotional story, binary oppositions and often even some kind of three-act structure. Because of all of this it can become easy to forget about the distinctions between television and film—in fact they are very different forms.

### Where and how we watch TV

To consider why television is so different we start as we did with film by looking at the conditions of reception – where and how do we watch television.

Almost exclusively, we watch TV at home. Think about the differences between the typical home environment and the cinema. There is very little chance to concentrate here – homes are places full of distractions and the tiny television in the corner of a room has none of the power to take over all of your senses that a film screen has. Much research has suggested that while the television is on for large amounts of time in the average household, attention is very rarely truly focused on it. In fact most of us

make choices over which shows to watch attentively and what we can treat as 'wallpaper TV.' There is also some research that suggests that there are gender differences when it comes to attention being paid, with women being more likely to multi-task while the TV is on and men being more obsessively attentive.

## Segmented Narrative

Television narrative has evolved in a way that takes all of this into account. Television producers know that they do not have our undivided attention and so instead of the long sweep of a cinema narrative, the typical television programme, whether fiction or non-fiction works in segments of about five minutes. Although these segments work together to create a longer narrative, the idea is that they can also make sense on their own. Unlike a film, a television programme can be picked up quite easily at almost any point.

A typical example of this would be a soap where in any one episode no single storyline is allowed to dominate. The narrative moves smoothly from one group of people to another every few minutes. Similarly in television news, no one story lasts very long.

This is one reason why some critics believe that television is a "dumbed down" medium with a superficial and hurried mode of narrative which never requires the audience to think deeply about anything. In contrast, the slower narrative of films is one of the reasons for that medium's higher status.



If a television narrative is intended to be easy to pick up, the producers also know that there is much more of a risk that you are going to drop the programme at the end of the segment so television narrative is full of lots of hooks to keep you viewing from segment to segment. Cliffhangers and competitions, which continue after an advertising break, are examples of this.

## Flow

It's worth considering now how we react to this kind of segmented narrative when we sit down to watch an evening's television. Whatever we watch during that evening – be it neighbours, the news, game shows or top of the pops will be made up of these segments and if we are watching anything other than the BBC, the programmes will be broken up even further by shorter segments of advertising. One possibility is that over the course of the evening these segments will start to blur together so that the adverts might resemble the soaps or the news look like a game show.

The critic Raymond Williams called this concept 'flow'. He claimed that the television becomes meaningless because none of the different segments are given enough time to mean anything on their own. Instead the only way that they make sense at all is for the different segments to flow together so that everything resembles everything else.

So soaps mix with documentaries to become docusoaps, science fiction series like *Star Trek* start to deal with relationship issues so that they too begin to resemble soaps and the news begins to feature funny items so that it becomes like a comedy sketch

show. In the end the whole of television becomes homogenised – everything looks the same as everything else. This is another major part of the theory that TV is ‘dumbing down’.

### **Domestic television and its subject matter**

Earlier we looked at the idea that it was television's place within the home that led to this segmented narrative style, but the effects of television's domestic nature do not stop there. One important result is that television tends to favour very domestic subject matter. Think of the number of programmes of all kinds that are based around ‘typical’ heterosexual relationships, marriage, masculine careers or feminine domesticity. It could be said that television's place in the home leads to programmes being based around quite mainstream ideology. Certainly it leads to censorship with the potential of a family audience for all shows before the watershed resulting in many restrictions being placed upon broadcasters over content.

The style of television is also very different because of the domestic audience – rather than the visual excitement that is at the heart of film, television is based around sound. This is partly because television is lower budget than film, but it also allows for straying eyes in the typical low attention household to be drawn back to the screen by stimulating sounds. Typically these noises are that most domestic of sound-forms, conversation. TV has so much of this that we even have a name for conversation in the medium – ‘talking heads.’

Because television has so much chatter, it means that what we see on the screen has to focus on these people who are talking to us – television visuals are stripped down with all the lush mise-en-scene of the film world replaced with fairly bare settings (cheap again!) What we see instead are a preponderance of close ups of the speakers. Because this is visually less interesting than the rich visuals of film, television tends to favour quick cutting from shot to shot to avoid boredom and the ever-present risk of channel hopping.

You could link this to the idea of plot and emotional story we covered earlier. In film these two strands are often quite separate in the narrative of a film with the excitement of the plot running along at the same time as the more domestic emotional story. For example in *Speed* whether Keanu Reeves ends up kissing Sandra Bullock is really quite a separate concern from whether he saves the people on the bus. Television's conversational mode of story telling tends to link the two things together more – if you are dealing with discussions and arguments rather than gun battles and explosions, plot and emotional story tend to merge together so that in a soap for example the rows between the characters that move create the dramatic plot twists and cliff-hangers are the emotional story.

This conversational and domestic style of TV also has effects on our feelings about the stars and the programmes. Television personalities seem more like parts of our everyday lives than the out of this world stars of films. In the same way, television programmes seem more immediate and believable. In films realism has to come from the visuals, which whether in space or amazing locations have to look believable. Television gets its realism more from the believability of its character interactions and also crucially from the sense that it is live

## **Live TV**

The sense that television is live, that the characters on the screen are living their lives out in front of us, is central to its nature as a domestic medium. We take it for granted that shows like the news and sports broadcasts are live but in fact the whole medium tries to create the sense that events unfold on the screen in real time. Think of how the events in a soap seem to be carrying on at the same time as we are watching – when you switch off between episodes, there is a sense that life in the world of the soap carries on and when you watch, seasonal features, comments about the news and even current chart music help to create the live feel. Recently, shows like *Big Brother* with its round the clock web broadcasts have taken this idea even further.

This live feel is particularly evident if you consider the working of a typical segment of a television show. Imagine a character walking toward their house opening the door and going in to say hello to their wife. In a film we might see the man approach the house and then cut to a few minutes later when he was sitting at the dinner table with his family. The cinema has no wish to appear live and cuts out dead time. In the television segment, on the other hand, we would typically see the whole journey through the door and to the wife all in order to keep the illusion that what we were seeing was live. There might be shot changes to keep it interesting, but the sense that we were seeing things in real time would remain.

This live feel strengthens the sense mentioned earlier that the characters in television are more immediately present in our lives than film stars. It allows the talking heads on TV to address us in ways that would never happen in film and it creates a closer relationship between viewer and text. Think of the phone-ins that fill the television schedules or all the programmes, which feature members of the audience. Even in fiction like the sitcom, there is a sense of the audience's presence in the studio in the canned laughter, which would feel totally out of place in the cinema.

## **No voyeurism**

John Ellis has suggested that the different relationship that we have with television means that it loses the voyeuristic nature of cinema. Voyeurism is the idea of spying on behaviour that we really shouldn't be seeing and is central to the experience of cinema. The long cuts of some film sequences together with the situation of the viewer in the dark watching the distant figures on the screen all lead to this sense in film. In television, instead, we do not have this relationship with what we see – quick cuts and the sense that the characters almost know that we are there destroy it.

## ***Seeing the text as a whole – beyond the segment***

All this emphasis on segments and the idea of the instant accessibility of television programmes should not allow us to ignore how complete texts work. Here again there are some crucial differences with film.

## **Repetition and Novelty.**

If you remember, film as a medium tends to be based around novelty – every film is considered unique and begins by introducing new characters and situations to us. Repetition is used in order to make all this potentially confusing novelty comprehensible to us. Television too mixes repetition and novelty but it does it the opposite way round. A typical television show is made up first and foremost of repetition – characters that we have seen before in familiar locations and recognisable

situations. Think of a typical sit-com like *Only Fools and Horses*. Week after week we see Del and Rodney walk around the same recognisable sets that we probably feel we know as well as many real places and their behaviour follows a pattern – Del will have some scheme, Rodney at first resists but then gets hooked in and it all goes disastrously wrong. Think of a non-fiction programme like the news – each episode starts with a number of serious stories followed by a lighter human interest one, the sport and then the weather – the same characters – Trevor MacDonald, or Tony Blair appear day after day. In both cases short segments are linked together to form a narrative that is basically recognisably familiar.

Critics of television will often point to this repetition as an example of its inferior status as a medium, but they may be missing the novelty that does exist within these programmes. The recognisable pattern of the narrative of *Only Fools and Horses* relies for our interest on the producers presenting us with original segments – we know from experience that Del's plan will go wrong, but our expectation of enjoyment comes from our belief that the segment where this happens will be different and surprising (novel).

This repetition of typical situations also adds to the live feel of TV. Most of us have very few film-like events in our lives, but the repetitive pattern of a television show is reassuringly familiar and seems more realistic.

### **The problematic**

If you consider the example of *Only Fools and Horses* again – you can see that the idea of the problematic, which we looked at with Film, also fits here. In each episode of a television series there will be a problematic which forms the basis of the show's narrative and which will be solved at the end of the episode just as in a film. However, there is a difference because unlike the one-off film, we will return to the television series the next week with the mysterious sense that last week's problem has been completely forgotten, nobody has learnt from their experiences and there's a new equally important problem in their lives.

A typical TV series will also have a more serious enigma which runs through the whole series and which is crucial to the narrative of every episode – Will Ally McBeal ever find the right man? Will Mulder and Scully discover the truth? Will the crew of *Star Trek Voyager* get home? Will Nialls in *Frasier* tell Daphne that he loves her? By their nature these enigmas are often what keeps us watching the series, and a large number of episodes will be based around problematics, which seem to take us closer to their answer and then inevitably disappoint us. There is a tension here, however. There is a limit to how long an audience can remain interested in an unresolved problematic and as a result many television series will make the gamble of answering this enigma in the hope of moving the audience's attention on. This rarely succeeds.

### **Series and Serials.**

A show like *Only Fools and Horses* where each episode has a self contained narrative and where the characters generally fail to develop is called a series. The other principal television form is the serial a long-term narrative that develops over several episodes and where we are expecting an eventual conclusion. You could say that the serial is more like a film in its narrative style in that it is based around the long-term

resolution of a single problematic. It is a much rarer form than the series, but because it is less based around repetition it has higher status with the critics and audiences.

Typically television producers will spend more money producing serials and will market them more extensively and with a greater sense of importance although this is partly because their novelty means they need to be brought to our attention more. It is because of this difficulty in selling them to us that serials are tending to disappear from the schedules. Another problem with keeping and attracting audiences for serials is that if they miss a crucial episode, they may not feel able to return. To solve this problem, episodes will often start with a re-cap of past events.

## ***The future***

The gradual disappearance of serials from our screens is only one example of the possible massive changes that may be just around the corner in the future of television. Some people have argued that digital TV and the possibility that it offers of even more channel hopping would lead television to even more segmentation although an opposite argument might be that multiple channels will mean that some broadcasters will attempt to attract a niche audience for specialist shows and then, confident of the loyalty and attention of their audience will be able to produce television that is more extended and less segmented. Another recent development is computer-style hard disks which replace video recorders and which allow users to record an entire week's television and then watch what they want when they can concentrate on it properly. Again this might go against the need for segmentation.

However, any attempts to guess the future should be treated with caution. A few years ago it was argued that video recorders would completely change viewing habits so that no one would ever have to watch anything simply because it was the only thing on. In fact, despite the fact that video recorders have sold very well, figures suggest that very few of us actually use them. Only 4% of viewing time is spent watching video, the majority of video recordings made are never watched and 60% of video users tape no more than one programme a week.

