

Chapter 8

Narrative

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's *Saint Ursula*), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.

(Barthes 1977a: 79, 1982: 251)

Narrative and language are two of the main cultural processes shared by all societies: they are "simply there, like life itself." Like language, narrative is a basic way of making sense of our experience of the real, and structuralists have argued that it shares many of language's properties, that it is structured along the twin axes of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic, that there may be a universal narrative structure, the equivalent of *langue*, of which specific narratives are the *paroles*, and that its signification necessarily works at denotative and connotative levels. Furthermore it is like language in that its denotative relationship with the real is illusory and its signifying ability derives from its systemic nature and its internarrative (intertextual) relations: that is, its categorizing and structuring processes signify not because of their operation upon reality, but because of their relationship to these processes in other narratives and other signifying forms.

Given that narrative is such a fundamental cultural process, it is not surprising that television is predominantly narrational in its mode. Television

drama is obviously narrative, but so too is news; documentaries impose a narrative structure upon their subject matter; sport and quiz shows are presented in terms of character, conflict, and resolution. Many commercial and rock videos are mini-narratives; arguably only music lacks a narrative structure, and even that has similarities in its ability to structure time.

Narrative works as a sense-making mechanism primarily through two dimensions. The syntagmatic is the dimension upon which it links events rationally, according to the laws of cause and effect or to those of association. Whichever principle it employs, it links events together so as to make their relationship meaningful and therefore understandable. This refusal of randomness creates consequence out of sequence and in so doing provides the means of understanding that most elusive dimension – time. In the paradigmatic dimension, narrative takes character and settings and makes a non-temporal sense of them that serves as an additional unifying agency upon the syntagmatic chain of events. Narrative structure demonstrates that people and places are not anarchic and random, but *sensible*, and then combines the paradigmatic sense of places and people with the syntagmatic sense of events and time into a grand signifying pattern (Chatman 1978).

Lévi-Strauss finds a deep structure of meanings in mythic narratives that can only be grasped by taking characters, settings, and actions out of the syntagmatic flow, and by analyzing their paradigmatic relations of similarity and difference, usually in terms of binary oppositions. For him, the chain of events is surface structure and is thus less significant than the deep structure that he reveals beneath it. This deep structure is shared with other myths, other narratives, for Lévi-Strauss is finally interested only in narrative *langue*, not individual *paroles*.

Realistic narrative is, as was argued in chapter 2, the dominant mode of representation on television, but realistic narrative was developed essentially through the novel and film, and television realism departs significantly from a number of the conventions that are central to literary and cinema realism.

Words like "realistic" that are used to define and categorize narratives work on two dimensions. First they alert us to certain textual characteristics of the narrative: an episode of *Hart to Hart* is clearly generically different to the Eskimo myth of the capture of the south wind. But secondly, these words alert us also to reading strategies, which, as I will argue in the next chapter, are as ideologically driven as signifying practices. We can read *Hart to Hart* as a realist narrative or as contemporary urban myth. Reading it realistically requires us to give prime attention to such factors as the psychological realism of its characters and their individuality, and to the coherence of its specific chain of events and their believability according to the "natural" laws of cause and effect. In other words, we read it as a unique representation

of unique individuals and events that is structured according to universal natural laws not cultural conventions.

Reading it structurally, however, requires us to focus on the conventions by which this sense of the real is established. It requires us to see that character acts primarily as a function of the plot; only then is it given individualizing characteristics as an ideological hook for the audience. Even these individualizing characteristics are best understood not in their uniqueness, but in terms of the overall structure of social values that are embodied in the structure of characters (hero + heroine + villain + villainess). Reading it mythically will lead us towards its "deeper" meaning. In Lévi-Strauss's terms, each episode of a series would be a transformation of a common deep structure, which may well, finally, be shared with other series in the same genre. So *Hart to Hart* would share a deep structure with *Remington Steele*, *Scarecrow and Mrs King* and *MacMillan and Wife*, to name a few examples of the cop show with a male and female hero pair.

But the point to make at this stage is that labels such as "realistic" or "mythic" are not just descriptors of textual characteristics but are active: they promote particular reading strategies which activate particular meanings in the text.

□ Realism revisited

Classic realist narrative and its preferred reading strategy try to construct a self-contained, internally consistent world which is real-seeming. By this, I mean not that it is an objective reproduction of the real world, but that it appears to be, and this appearance is governed by the extent to which the common-sense conventions that structure our understanding of the real world appear adequate to decode the fictional world, that of the diegesis. Verisimilitude is based not on iconic representation, but upon replicating the conventions by which sense is made. It is thus an ideological practice. We approach the fictional world of realism with the same easy familiarity with which we approach the world of our social experience: the two worlds are equivalent in that they are open to the same ideological reading practices. But the disguised common sense upon which these practices rest masks the differences between the two worlds.

Realism imposes coherence and resolution upon a world that has neither. In a realist narrative, every detail makes sense, it contributes to that final overall understanding granted to the reader in his/her position of "dominant specularity" (MacCabe 1981a). This internal coherence requires that the diegetic world must appear self-sufficient and unbroken: everything that we need to know in order to understand it must be included, and anything that

contradicts or disturbs this understanding must be excised. The diegetic world must not require the reader to turn beyond it to find the means to understand it, but it must, like the real world, appear to make its own sense according to the "laws of nature," not the conventions of culture.

These "laws of nature" are those of cause and effect, those of the psychology of human nature, and those of natural and physical science, and all are treated as universal laws that require exploration but not interrogation. Kuhn (1985) summarizes the features of the classic realist narrative thus:

- 1 linearity of cause and effect within an overall trajectory of enigma resolution
- 2 a high degree of narrative closure
- 3 a fictional world governed by spatial and temporal verisimilitude
- 4 centrality of the narrative agency of psychologically rounded characters.

(p. 216)

□ Structuralist approaches to narrative

Realism is a transparent mode that attempts to hide its nature as discourse. Structuralism and its developments are concerned to reveal and investigate the discursive nature of all cultural constructs, so structuralist theories of narrative have sought to explain the laws that govern its structure, not the accuracy of its representation of the real.

Early structuralism attempted to find a universal narrative structure, the equivalent of *langue*, and while this drive has now been spent it did provide some useful basic principles – particularly it showed us that narratives have much in common and need to be studied in terms of their relationship to others: a narrative, however realistic, is not a unique set of events whose only valid relationship is that of its verisimilitude to the real world.

□ Mythic narrative

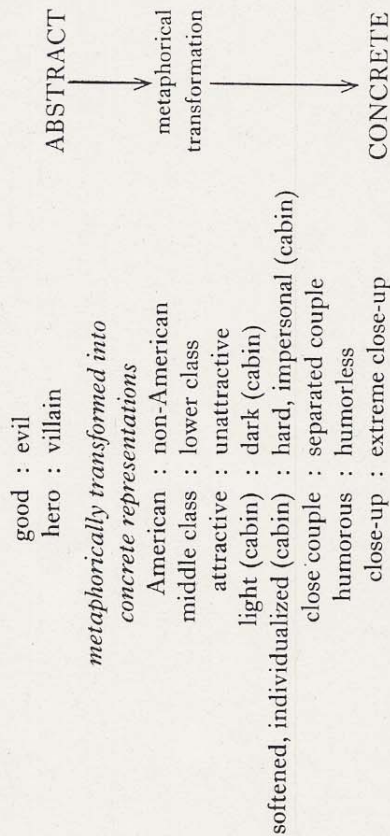
One of the ways in which structuralism has sought to explain what a range of apparently diverse narratives have in common is through the concept of myth. Two writers have been most influential here, Lévi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist, and Barthes, a Marxist semiotician. Their two approaches have little in common except for their insistence that myth-making is a universal cultural process and that the deeper "truer" meanings of myths are not immediately apparent but can only be revealed by theoretical analysis.

For Lévi-Strauss myth is an anxiety-reducing mechanism that deals with

unresolvable contradictions in a culture and provides imaginative ways of living with them. These contradictions are usually expressed in terms of binary oppositions, and form the deep structure of a number of apparently unrelated myths. These binary oppositions are large abstract generalizations such as good:evil, nature:culture, or humankind:gods. Myths work metaphorically to transform these oppositions into concrete representations by a process that Lévi-Strauss calls the "logic of the concrete." Thus in the western genre, culture:nature is transformed into indoors:outdoors and is structurally associated with values such as law and order:lawlessness, white:Indian, humane:inhumane, and so on. So a scene of Indians attacking a white homestead is a concrete metaphorical transformation of the opposition between nature and culture, and the narrative is an argument, via "the logic of the concrete," about the characteristics and consequences of this opposition.

In Lévi-Strauss's terms the deep structure of *Hart to Hart* can be modeled as in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 The deep structure of *Hart to Hart*



The opposed values are then given the narrative consequences of successful:unsuccessful. Alongside this is another deep structure:

- masculine : feminine
- active : passive
- thinking : object of look
- controller : controlled

Both these deep structures are evidence of cultural insecurity about the meanings and consequences of the opposed values (the myths do not solve this uncertainty (for example, that of gender difference) but they provide an imaginative structure by which the contradictions can be thought through:

the structure makes the contradictions conceptually and culturally capable of being handled and thus not dysfunctional.

Hartley (1982) analyzes in similar terms a news story about a dispute involving health service workers. The story concentrated on the effects of a withdrawal of labor upon hospital patients, particularly children. After analyzing the presentation of the story, Hartley concludes:

This is not an industrial dispute at all. It is a political dispute between

- children : public service workers
- government : strikers
- decent trade unionists : irresponsible minority
- us : them

(p. 127)

The gap between such clearly opposed categories often seems so stark as to be unbridgeable and the contradictions too violent to be coped with. In these cases, myth often produces a hero or heroine with characteristics from both categories. The hero thus has excessive meaning, extraordinary semiotic power, and acts as a mediator between the opposing concepts. In tribal myth such a figure is designated either sacred or taboo as a way of signifying or controlling his/her excess of meaning. Thus the heroes of many crime shows draw characteristics from both the value system of society and that of the criminals. They acquire the stature of heroic figures because of this excess of meaning. Additionally, in the mythic narrative, they act as mediators, as embodied resolutions of the conflict between the forces of order and those of disorder. Crockett and Tubbs, of *Miami Vice*, move literally between the worlds of the vice squad and the drug runners, and, in embodying certain values of both, they act mythically as mediators between both sides of the opposition. Their embodiment of the values and lifestyle of both demonstrates an imaginative way of coping with the conflict, which is a crucial mythic function, for the conflict itself can never be resolved. The "success" of the vice squad at the end of each episode is only temporary and in no way offers a permanent resolution of the conflict. It is only the hero figures of Crockett and Tubbs who demonstrate that society has ways of living with and coping with the opposition, even if not of resolving it.

For Lévi-Strauss, culture is a homogeneous concept: his theory does not admit that some classes may have different mythic needs from others, or that myths may work hegemonically. This may well be because his theories were derived from his work on tribal societies which are more easily conceived as homogeneous.

Barthes (1973), on the other hand, was concerned with the role of myth in industrialized capitalist societies marked by class conflict rather than homogeneity. His theory of myth, then, is very different from Lévi-Strauss's. For Barthes myth works to naturalize and universalize the class interests of

the bourgeois. It is not a narrative but an associative chain of concepts that works below the threshold of consciousness. The users of Lévi-Strauss's myths may not know the deeper meanings of them, but they do know that they are hearing or telling a myth: the user of Barthes's myths, on the other hand, is unaware even that he or she is handling a myth. Myths for Barthes are ideological and part of the power-class structure of capitalist societies.

Myths work to naturalize history. History is the accumulated social experience that has produced the divisions and differential power relations in our society, and thus forms an essential base for understanding that society. Myth overrides this. For instance, the *Hart to Hart* episode analyzed in chapter 1 is typical in having a villain with Hispanic features. This depends, in part, upon the white myth that Hispanics are devious, untrustworthy, and criminally inclined. The history of the white colonization and oppression of Latin America and the interracial relations it has produced are effaced in the myth. Crime statistics may well show that Hispanics in the USA are more likely to commit crimes than white middle-class Americans, but the myth finds the reason for this in their racial characteristics, not in the history of white oppression. The myth treats the belief that middle-class Anglo-Saxons are trustworthy, whereas swarthy lower-class males are not, as obvious common sense and natural. Similarly, the typical television practice of giving criminals working-class or ethnic accents is *not* a statement about the statistical probability that members of lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to turn to crime, because it does not require us to think through the relationships between social position and criminality. Rather it is a sign of a middle-class myth that denies the history of class relations and naturalizes the explanation of class differences into the "facts" of human nature.

Barthes believes that in capitalist societies all myth is bourgeois, that is, it always promotes the interests of the dominant classes by making the meanings that serve these interests appear natural and universal. Radical myth is impossible except in the limited sphere of politics where radicalism has achieved a degree of institutionalization and so can be taken for granted, and thus can work, within its own sphere, to naturalize the interests of the powerful. A left-wing myth of union solidarity is, therefore, possible, whereas a left-wing myth of, for instance, the family is not. Radical ways of understanding the family need to be conscious and rationally argued against the status quo: the only views that need no explanation or defense are those that have been naturalized or exominated into common sense by the operation of myth. For Barthes then, *Hart to Hart* works mythically to promote the point of view of the white, male middle classes as the "natural" point from which to make sense of experience, and to disguise the sectional nature of this process by universalizing it.

Barthesian analysis can all too easily stop at the identification and naming of the bourgeois myths that are promoted by television. This shows an incomplete understanding of Barthes's theory, for he insists that myth is a form of speech, that it is a system by which meanings are made and circulated. The content of myths can change rapidly, but the mythologizing process is constant and universal. In this respect, he is similar to Lévi-Strauss who also found a universal cultural process in the way that mythic thought was structured. Barthes's exploration of this principle, however, is articulated in historically and culturally specific terms, particularly those of mid-twentieth-century capitalism, whereas Lévi-Strauss emphasizes his search for human universals. Mythic approaches to narrative are essentially paradigmatic in that they emphasize the cultural-ideological system that underlies the syntagmatic flow of the narrative.

Narrative structures

Propp's work (1968) provides the most extreme example of syntagmatic structuralist analysis. He analyzed one hundred Russian folk tales and found an identical narrative structure in each of them. He described this structure as a sequence of thirty-two narrative functions, divided into six sections. We can summarize them thus:

Preparation

- 1 A member of a family leaves home.
- 2 A prohibition or rule is imposed on the hero.
- 3 This prohibition/rule is broken.
- 4 The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
- 5 The villain learns something about his victim.
- 6 The villain tries to deceive the victim to get possession of him or his belongings.
- 7 The victim unknowingly helps the villain by being deceived or influenced by the villain.

Complication

- 8 The villain harms a member of the family.
- 8a A member of the family lacks or desires something.
- 9 This lack or misfortune is made known; the hero is given a request or command, and he goes or is sent on a mission/quest.
- 10 The seeker (often the hero) plans action against the villain.

Transference

- 11 The hero leaves home.
- 12 The hero is tested, attacked, interrogated, and, as a result, receives either a magical agent or a helper.
- 13 The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.
- 14 The hero uses the magical agent.
- 15 The hero is transferred to the general location of the object of his mission/quest.

 Struggle

- 16 The hero and villain join in direct combat.
- 17 The hero is branded.
- 18 The villain is defeated.
- 19 The initial misfortune or lack is set right.

 Return

- 20 The hero returns.
- 21 The hero is pursued.
- 22 The hero is rescued from pursuit.
- 23 The hero arrives home or elsewhere and is not recognized.
- 24 A false hero makes false claims.
- 25 A difficult task is set for the hero.
- 26 The task is accomplished.

 Recognition

- 27 The hero is recognized.
- 28 The false hero/villain is exposed.
- 29 The false hero is transformed.
- 30 The villain is punished.
- 31 The hero is married and crowned.

Propp called these thirty-two narrative morphemes "functions" because he wanted to emphasize that what they *do* to advance the narrative is more important than what they *are*. (The function of the magical agent, for example, can be performed by a cloak, a sword, or a purse. In television narrative this function may be performed by, for instance, the super-technological limbs of the *Six Million Dollar Man*, the computerized car of *Knight Rider*, or the (almost) superhuman mechanical ability of *The A-Team*.)

The narrative functions are, according to Propp, always in the same sequence and they are common to all fairy tales, though not every tale will have every function.

Similarly, Propp's account of character is concerned only with what a character *does* in the narrative structure, not with whom he or she is as an individual. Character is defined in terms of a "sphere of action": thus the villain fights, opposes, or pursues the hero and commits acts of villainy. Different individual characters may perform the function (or character role) of villain at different times in the same narrative. This leads Propp to the conclusion that "the functions of characters are stable constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale."⁷

There are eight "character roles," which are located in seven "spheres of action":

 Character Role

- 1 Villain
- 2 Donor (provider)
- 3 Helper

 Sphere of Action

- Villainy, fighting, action
- Giving magical agent or helper
- Moves the hero, makes good a lack, rescues from pursuit, solves difficult tasks, transforms the hero.
- A sought-for person: assigns difficult tasks, brands, exposes, recognizes, punishes.
- Sends hero on quest/mission.
- Departs on search, reacts to donor, attempts difficult tasks, marriage.
- Unfounded claims to hero's sphere of action

This morphology of functions and characters has been applied in detail to contemporary films and television (e.g. Wollen 1982, Silverstone 1981) and most popular television narratives conform more or less precisely to this structure. At times the conformity is astonishing in its precision. I tested the structure on an episode of *Bionic Woman* and found that the pre-title sequence conformed to "Preparation." "Complication" took the narrative to the next commercial break and so on. Some sections and functions are more emphasized in television narrative than others, for instance "Struggle" can be long and elaborate, "Return" and "Recognition" can be very rapid. Sometimes functions 16 to 19 are repeated to emphasize action and sometimes the

functions of the false hero are very muted. But in general the structure underlies the typical television narrative with remarkable consistence.

The character roles, too, receive different degrees of emphasis. That of the princess (often a private eye's client, who may be male or female but is always comparatively powerless) is frequently performed by the same character as her father. The dispatcher is often the hero or a member of the hero team. The victim is one of the most multiple of these character roles whose function can be fulfilled by a character who elsewhere in the narrative plays the hero, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, or any role that opposes that of the villain.

On the evidence of Propp and his successors, there appears to be something close to a universal structure of popular narrative (a narrative equivalent of *langue*) of which individual stories are transformations or *paroles*. The cultural specificity or ideology of a narrative lies in the way this deep structure is transformed into apparently different stories, that is, in which actions and individuals are chosen to perform the functions and character roles.

The possibility of a universal narrative structure raises some intractable theoretical problems. Lévi-Strauss was able to ground his universal principle of making meanings by binary oppositions in the working of the human brain and thus explain its universality. It is difficult to envisage the physiology of the human brain producing thirty-two functions in sequence. It is safer not to talk in terms of human universals, originating in human nature, but rather to seek the origins of a common structure in human society, for all humans live in social organizations. Narrative can then be seen as the means of articulating the profound and uncertain relationship of the individual with the social. Anthropologically, Propp's narrative schema tells the archetypal story of the young male's acceptance into maturity and society: marriage is the achievement of individual maturity and the insertion of that mature person into a network of social roles and obligations. *The A-Team*, as I will argue in chapter 11, enacts masculinity/maturity and its conflict/accommodation with social responsibility (*The A-Team* episodes follow Propp's structure particularly clearly and closely.)

In such an explanation of Propp's structure, the struggle between the hero and villain is a metaphorical transformation of that between the forces of order and those of disorder, good and evil, or culture and nature. Such a struggle is fundamental to all societies, and the narrative explores the role of human and social agents in it.

Todorov's (1977) model of narrative also emphasizes the social over the individual. For him, narrative begins with a state of equilibrium or social harmony. This is disrupted, usually by the action of a villain. The narrative charts the course of this disequilibrium and its final resolution in another,

preferably enhanced or more stable, state of equilibrium. "The second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical" (p. 11). In Propp's schema, "Preparation" and "Complication" chart the forces of disruption that have disturbed the original harmony. "Transference" and "Struggle" chart the hero's fight against these forces: in this fight the hero embodies the social values that stabilize society. The villain embodies the forces of disruption and the conflict between them is the conflict between equilibrium and disequilibrium. "Return" and "Recognition" resolve the conflict and work to restore a new harmony. Narrative here is less the accommodation of the individual with the social, and more the exploration, within the social, of the opposing forces of stability and disruption. The ideological work of the narrative can, in this model, be discerned in two ways: the first is the comparison of the opening and closing states of equilibrium, and the second is in identifying what constitutes a force of disruption, and what a force of stability.

Todorov's model is particularly useful for its ability to explain news stories and to model news as the social narrative of the conflict between the social order and disruptive forces (see chapter 15). Todorov specifies two kinds of elements in narrative, (a state) (either of equilibrium or disequilibrium) and a passage from one state to another, usually through an event or chain of events. Newsworthy events, then, are those that disrupt or restore equilibrium. The state of equilibrium is not itself newsworthy and is never described except implicitly in its opposition to the state of disequilibrium which, typically, is described in detail. Here, the ideological work is at its clearest in the selection of *which* events are considered to disrupt or restore *which* equilibrium and in the description of what constitutes disequilibrium. Thus the event conventionally selected as a cause of an industrial dispute is an action of a worker or union, whereas the event selected to restore order is equally conventionally an act of management or government agency. In the narrative structure this puts unions into the role of villains and management into that of heroes. Similarly, the description of the disequilibrium will usually be in terms of the dispute's effect upon consumers, and rarely in terms of the hardships undergone by the striking unionists. This again serves to position the reader with the hero/victim (i.e. management-consumer) and in hostility to the villain (union). Bell (1983) shows how these character roles of hero-helper-victim-villain form the underlying structuring principle of drugs stories in the news media (see chapter 15).

This sort of model can also reveal simply the ideology at work in fictional stories. In the *Hart to Hart* episode analyzed in chapters 1 and 6 the disruptive event is the jewel theft, the restorative event is the catching of the thieves. Disruption and restoration occur at the level of individual or unique events, and thus the social system underlying the state of equilibrium is

shown as coping with disruption and therefore as adequate. Another version of the story, however, could present the disruptive event as an attempt by a member of a disadvantaged minority to provide for his wife and his retirement. In this case the restorative event could be the negotiation of a minimum wage and national pension rights! But that would be a very different story and a very different ideology.

Todorov's model does not imply that narrative in itself is either radical or reactionary. But in popular culture the narrative structure is likely to be used in favor of the status quo. In realist narrative the equilibrium is a reproduction of the values of the current social order that is rarely represented directly, but only indirectly in terms of its disruption. It is, therefore, mythologized into the taken-for-granted, the common-sense view of how things really are, which is necessarily supportive of the status quo. To present a critical view of the social order, it would be necessary to take it out of the realm of the taken-for-granted, to "nominate" it, to represent it directly and critically, and thus to demythologize it. Most television narrative does not do this.

If the narrative's original state of equilibrium is assumed to be fair and good, then the forces of disruption (which include forces for social change) necessarily take the role of the villain and the restorative event is necessarily performed by the sociocentral hero who restores the status quo, or preferably an enhanced version of it. The "rewriting" of the *Hart to Hart* episode (above) posits an unjust state of equilibrium at the start in which stability is maintained only by the exercise of class and economic power. The representation of such an equilibrium in a bourgeois society could not be commonsensical: rather it would need to be explicitly represented in opposition to conventional representations and their furtherance of the dominant ideology. If an unacceptable state of equilibrium exists at the beginning of the narrative, then clearly the forces of disruption can play the hero role, and the restorative event produces a completely new equilibrium.

The conservative drive of the narrative structure may be undeniable, but its effectivity is far more open to doubt. It works to center the meanings within the dominant ideology and to close off alternative ones. But, as chapter 5 has shown, alternative and resistant readings are possible within and against any dominant textual structure. A textual structure is a hegemonic line of force that may, at any time, meet an equivalent line of resistance.

The structuralist accounts of narrative that we have looked at so far tend, through their emphasis on structure, to imply a unity within each narrative as well as between narratives. Barthes's early work "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" (1976) shares this concern with structure as a producer of meaning, but his later work *S/Z* ([1970] 1975) brings a completely different perspective to bear.

In *The Structural Analysis of Narrative* Barthes uses the close analogy between language and narrative to argue that narrative is open to the same sort of descriptive analysis as language, which can be achieved at different "levels of description" (Barthes 1977a: 85). Language can be described first at the level of phonemes and morphemes, then the description can move "up" a level to that of words, then to that of phrases, then to the sentence, the paragraph, and so on. Propp's functions are, according to his theory, the equivalent of morphemes — the smallest signifying units. Barthes takes this analysis a stage further by classifying the functions into different types, not by relating them syntagmatically.

His first level of classification is that between functions and indices. Functions are events that are strung together to form the sequence of the narrative. Indices are the constants that are involved in this sequence, but do not advance it — characters, settings, atmosphere, and so on. Functions are distributional and syntagmatic, whereas indices are integrational and paradigmatic. All narratives contain both, but in some the functions predominate and in others the indices. Thus folk tales are predominantly functional, psychological novels predominantly indicial. Popular television series, especially cop and adventure shows aimed at men and children, tend towards the functional, whereas serials, such as soap operas, often aimed at women, tend to put more stress on the indicial.

Functions are then subdivided into two types — nuclei (or cardinal functions) which are essential to the progress of the narrative, and catalyzers which "fill in" between the nuclei and could, logically, be dispensed with. This does not mean that they are redundant, but that they are not crucial to advancing the narrative. Instead they accelerate it or slow it down, they can summarize, anticipate, recall, or even mislead. Nuclei have antecedents and consequences, catalyzers do not. Thus in the *Hart to Hart* scene the heroine's putting on the ostentatious jewelry is a nucleus, it has the consequence of attracting the thieves. The hero's discussion of the robbery is a catalyzer, it summarizes and slows the narrative.

Indices are divided into indices proper, which are the narrative agents, atmosphere, mood, and informants, which identify or locate in time and space. We have looked already at the indices which indicate which two characters are playing the role of the hero, and which two the role of the villain. Informants are those functions that indicate the setting on a ship, the contemporary time period, the location in America. Informants are also called by Barthes "realism operators" and work to make the world of the narrative appear to relate closely to the "real" world of our experience. They perform the important ideological function of verisimilitude.

These functions are then, according to Barthes, structured into "sequences," as words are structured into phrases. A sequence is a "logical succession of

they differ in that they are determined not by the needs of the narrative structure, but by the needs of the culture of which that narrative is a part. They are a Lévi-Straussian rather than a Proppian concept.

This "culture" works most directly, and paradoxically, through what Barthes calls the *referential code*. This is the code through which a text refers out beyond itself, but this reference is not, as in so many other theories (e.g. those of Jakobson and Peirce, see Fiske 1982), to "reality" in an objective, empirical sense, but rather to cultural knowledges. "The real" is the common stock of a culture as it is expressed in the "already written" knowledges of morality, politics, art, history, psychology, and so on. These knowledges, as they pervade the texts of our culture, constitute our sense of "life," of "reality." They are the commonplaces of a culture to which a writer refers or which s/he quotes, in order to produce a sense of reality. "Reality" is "the product of discourse" (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1983), and in so far as its knowledges are already written, "reality" is intertextual (see chapter 7).

The *code of actions* (the proairetic code) is similarly intertextual and is the one which relates most directly to Barthes's earlier structuralist endeavors. It suggests that we understand any action in a narrative by our experience of similar actions in other narratives, and that our narrative experience is an aggregation of details arranged in generic categories of actions – murder, rendezvous, theft, perilous mission, falling in love, etc.

Barthes's final code is the *hermeneutic*. This code sets and resolves the enigmas of the narrative and is motivated by the desire for closure and "truth." It controls the pace and style of the narrative by controlling the flow of information that is desired by the reader to solve the enigma or make good a lack. It first proposes the enigma or mystery, finally resolves it, but in between works by delaying our access to the desired information. It is thus the motor of the narrative. Barthes suggests that it works through ten motifs which may occur simply, in any combination or in any order. Silverman (1983) summarizes them as "thematization, proposal of the enigma, formulation of the enigma, request for an answer, snare, equivocation, jammung, suspended answer, partial answer and disclosure" (p. 257).

Barthes's achievement in *S/Z* was to destabilize the notions of text and reader so that neither is seen as an entity or essence, but rather as interdependent processes by which meanings are constructed and circulated, and by which, paradoxically, "reality" is created. The text works in two dimensions, the intra-textual and the intertextual. As Johnston (1985) explains:

The various ... devices identified in *S/Z* as forming the intra-textual system illustrate the highly crafted and selective nature of the procedures through which the realist world is built up. On the other hand, the work depends upon a set of external relationships, its position within a grid of

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nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity" which can be "named," usually by a verbal noun that describes action – Fraud, Betrayal, Seduction, Contract, Greeting, etc. The *Hart to Hart* scene is part of the sequence "Setting the Snare." These sequences or phrases can be combined into larger sequences or sentences and so on.

□ Narrative codes

This attempt to provide a structural linguistics of narrative is useful in so far as it provides a vocabulary for the close analysis of narrative sequences: it is a micro-grammar. Barthes's later work *S/Z* (1975a) concentrates on the discourse of narrative, that is, its structure above the level of the sentence, and this has produced a more widely used model.

S/Z is a very detailed analysis of Balzac's short novel *Sarrasine* from which Barthes derives major conclusions about narrative in general. Unlike his earlier work, and that of Propp, Barthes's aim here is to reveal not a structure, but a "structuring," the process by which meaning is structured into narrative by the writer-reader, for if there is a universal in narrative it lies in this structuration in which the writer and reader engage on equal terms. Barthes's shift in emphasis is away from the formal structure of the text and towards the reading/writing process that creates meaning from that structure and its intertextual relations. For the structure of the text is, finally, an interweaving of voices which are shared by reader and writer and which cross the boundaries of the text itself to link it to other texts and to culture in general.

These voices are, according to Barthes, organized into five codes.

The *symbolic code* organizes the fundamental binary oppositions that are important in a particular culture. These include masculine:feminine, good:evil, nature:culture, and so on; they are the antitheses upon which the narrative is founded. This is the code that Lévi-Strauss would prioritize above all others.

The *semic code*, or the voice of the person, works in a similar way to construct the meaning of character, objects, or settings. Barthes concentrates on its operation in constructing character to explain the way it works. "Semes," or basic units of meaning in the text, are repeatedly attached to a proper name in order to create a character. They bear the meanings of speech, clothing, gesture, action, and are the means by which a "figure" is individualized into a "character." A "figure" is a cultural stereotype common to many narratives – "the distraught mother," "the misunderstood son," "the cruel king/father." These "figures" are similar to Propp's character roles in that they exist before and independent of any notion of the individual, but

other cultural texts; its *intertextuality*. Realism, Barthes argues, "consists not in copying the real, but in copying a depicted copy of the real" (*S/Z* pp. 54-6).

Barthes's description of the writerly narrative as a "limited plurality" echoes Morley's (1980a) description of a text as "structured polysemy" and both are attempting to model how a text can allow for a multiplicity of meanings within boundaries that its structure sets. For Morley, the motor of polysemy is the diversity of social situations of the text's readers which produces the multiplicity of discourses they bring to bear on the text. For Barthes, the "limited plurality" of a text is a result of collapsing the role of the reader into that of the writer in the construction of a text from a work. A code is a bridge between texts, and meaning is encoded via intertextuality. Intertextuality is not a system of allusions between specific texts, or of references between one text and specified others: rather it is located in that space between texts to which all texts and readers/writers refer more or less equally, but which all activate differently.

Early structuralist accounts of narrative tended to see it as a closed system. Barthes in *S/Z* has demonstrated that even the most apparently closed narrative, a realist one with its closing reliance upon "truth to reality" as its final pleasure, is available to open, "writerly" readings and, indeed, requires them.

□ Televisual narrative

Feuer (1986) argues that television has produced and developed distinctive forms of narrative that invite what I have called "producerly" relations with the text. The series and the serial, which she characterizes as television's dominant narrative forms, are, she argues, inherently more open texts that the one-off, completed, closed narratives typical of the novel and film.

The television serial, typified by the soap opera (see chapter 10), departs from traditional narrative structure in a number of ways, the most obvious being the way that its many plots never reach a point of closure, and its absence of any original state of equilibrium from which they departed. But Feuer (1986) does point out that there is an unwritten and unachieved ideal of the stable, happy family against which all the disruptions are plotted.

She also makes the point that traditional narrative theories are better at describing "masculine" narrative, such as the cop/adventure show, than "feminine" narrative, such as the soap opera. Even so, the series, while reaching a resounding conclusion to each episode, never resolves the ongoing situation. The police force is engaged in a constant war against crime, *The A-Team* has a constant supply of "little people" who need its help because of the

limitations of the official agencies of law and order. Similarly Eaton (1981) argues that in television sitcoms, the comedy may be resolved each week, but the situation never is. The syntagmatic chain of events may reach a closure, but the paradigmatic oppositions of character and situation never can. It is a requirement of television's routine repetition that its stories can never be finally resolved and closed off. Similarly, chapter 15 argues that the conventional, repetitious nature of the news means that its stories, however formally they may be closed off, never really end: there will always be more terrorists, more political conferences, more murders, more disasters, more kittens in trees, tomorrow, next week, or next month. The narrative tension between equilibrium and disruption is always there.

Television's sense of time is unique in its feel of the present and its assumption of the future. In soap opera, the narrative time is a metaphorical equivalent of real time, and the audiences are constantly engaged in remembering the past, enjoying the present, and predicting the future. In series, the future may not be part of the diegetic world of the narrative, but it is inscribed into the institution of television itself: the characters may not act as though they will be back with us next week, but we, the viewers, know that they will. The sense of the future, of the existence of as yet unwritten events, is a specifically televisual characteristic, and one that works to resist narrative closure.

It also makes the hermeneutic code work differently. Television's "nowness" makes suspense seem real, not manufactured, and invites the viewer to "live" the experience of solving the enigma, rather than be told the process of its already achieved and recorded resolution. The story appears to be happening *now*, its future to be still unwritten. So in soap opera, in sport, in quiz shows, the hermeneutic code is more imperative, the engagement it requires is more "equal," for both narrative and viewer appear to be equally lacking in knowledge as they live through the enigma's resolution. This is a more engaged and empowering reading relation than that offered by the novel or by film.

Chapter 6 argued that the television text was typically segmented. Ellis (1982) says that an effect of this is succession, rather than consequence. The inevitable sequence of cause and effect that marks the progression of the traditional narrative to its point of resolution is constantly interrupted in television by advertisements, promos, spot announcements, and so on. The self-sufficiency of the single diegetic world of traditional realist narrative can never be maintained in television. On similar lines Feuer (1986) argues that television has three diegetic worlds that constantly intersect and interrupt each other — that of the television program, that of the ads and promos, and that of the viewing family.

These interruptions of the narrative that fracture its diegetic world are

characteristic of the apparatus of television, that is, of its commercial mix of programs and advertisements and of its domestic mode of reception, which means that it may be watched either continuously or interruptedly, according to the way the viewer inserts it into her/his domestic routine. It is arguable that women's domestic routine is the most insistent and interruptive (see chapter 10) so the feminine narrative of the soap opera is least like the traditional closed narrative and most amenable to being viewed with different modes of attention. Its diegetic world is not only fragmented into its multiple plots, but is interrupted by its advertisements in a way that Flitterman (1983) argues is unique. She suggests that the ads aimed at women and inserted in the daytime soaps are mini-narratives that bear an inverse relationship to the narrative structure of the programs. The ads are closed narratives that reach a successful, if temporary, closure. The problem of stained shirts, facial wrinkles, or muddy floors which disrupts the "normal" state of equilibrium (ideologically proposed as a state of perfect hygiene, beauty, and agelessness) is solved by the hero-product which restores an enhanced order. But, like the episodic sitcom, the resolution is temporary and fragile, and in no way touches the basic situation of dirt-bearing children/husbands or the passage of time/youth/beauty which constitutes the ongoing problems of the housewife. The ads, Flitterman argues, complement the program by providing a limited sense of achievement and satisfaction which is constantly deferred in the narrative of the program itself. But they do more than this, they frequently address the viewer directly, acknowledging the bridgeable gap between their diegetic world and that of the viewing housewife. They make explicit the sense of intimacy between the televisual world and that of the viewer in a way that breaks the self-containedness of television's diegesis by presenting it not as a separate world (like that of a film or a book) but as a part of the "real" world of the viewer. The viewer willingly enters into this illusion to increase her pleasure (see chapters 5 and 9) and in so doing interacts with the world of television in order to create a meaningful relationship between it and her world. She uses Barthes's referential and semic codes positively in order to construct bridges between her "life as culture" and the representational world on television. She is a writerly viewer of a writerly text.

Masculine narratives, such as *The A-Team*, also interact with their ads in a similar way, though here the relationship is reversed. The masculine program closes with successful achievement, but the ads often emphasize the means to that achievement rather than the achievement itself. Ads for cars and power tools emphasize the mechanical extensions of the masculine body, and beer ads promise male bonding and the "feel" of masculinity (see chapter 11). But the effect is the same, the ads mediate between the diegetic world of the program and the world of the viewer — they show that the diegetic world

is not complete within itself, but that its boundaries can be broken where it intersects with the "real" world of the viewer.

Recent masculine narratives, such as *Miami Vice* and, occasionally, *Hunter*, do not wait for the ads to fracture their diegetic world, but use pop songs in the sound track to relate out of the world of the narrative and into the cultural life of the viewer's previous experience of the song or, intertextually, to rock video or MTV (see chapter 13). The diegesis is fractured by emphasizing and exploiting the cultural work of Barthes's referential code.

The intertextuality of television which crosses diegetic worlds is typically more explicit than that of the novel or film. Feuer (1986) notes some examples of deliberate exploitation of this, such as when a trauma drama on teenage suicide is followed by a discussion program on the problem. Similarly *Threads*, a fictional telemovie on the effects of a nuclear war and the nuclear winter, was followed by expert comment by scientists and politicians on the "real world" problem. Commercially the interdiegetic references are exploited by inserting ads showing Krystle/Linda Evans extolling her brand of cosmetics in *Dynasty*, in which she is a major character. Ads in which sportsmen or sportswomen endorse a product are frequently inserted into sports broadcasts in which they are performed. A less intentional, but no less significant, Australian example occurred in a commercial break that contained a station identification for Channel Nine and a promo for *The Flying Doctors*, a program to be screened later in the evening. The promo previewed one of the plotlines which concerned the drama of a pregnant woman in a remote rural area needing the services of the Flying Doctors' team. Channel Nine's identification consisted of a rapid series of portraits of typical "real" West Australians, one of which showed a pregnant woman being helped into a "real" Flying Doctors' aircraft. This blurring of the distinctions between the fictional and real replicates the denial of genre differences between fiction, fact, and advertisement, and reduces the power of the text to construct a viewing subject position. The text can only suggest that the various diegetic worlds are related, not self-contained: it cannot specify the links that the viewer makes between them.

Television viewing is more interactive than either cinema spectating or novel reading and consequently its narratives are more open to negotiation. The segmented, fractured nature of television, its producerly texts, and its active audiences, come together to oppose any forces of closure within its narrative structures.

The structuralist theories of narrative I have outlined here have developed largely from studies of folk tales or legends: the more sophisticated narrative forms of some novels and films have given rise to different theories, in particular ones that stress the difference between story and discourse (Chatman 1978) or fabula and *syuzhet* (Bordwell 1985).

Narrative theory which is derived from folk tale, with its emphasis on common structures and conventions that relate directly to its social context, would seem more pertinent to a popular medium like television, with its simple, repeated structures. But folk tales developed in essentially homogeneous tribal societies, or in simple agrarian ones, whereas television narratives have to be popular in heterogeneous societies amongst audiences with different and often conflicting social interests and experiences. So television narrative must be more open and multiple than the singular folk narrative with its comparatively tight closure. Television narratives may embody the repetitious, straightforward structure of the folk tale, but they must be able to build into it contradictions that weaken its closure, and fragmentations that deny its unity.

Chapter 9

Character reading

Television is centrally concerned with the representation of people – its most typical image is a mid-shot or close-up of someone talking or reacting. Two- and three-shots establish identities, spatial relationships and location, and then the camera moves in on the individual. Even the news is personalized and news readers receive similar fan mail to that of soap opera stars.

The producers know the importance of character, too. About 80 per cent of prime-time US network television is fiction, and this is typically presented in terms of its leading characters. Series titles commonly are those of their leading characters (*Starsky and Hutch*, *T. J. Hooker*, *Magnum*, *Simon and Simon*, *Cagney and Lacey*, etc.) and studio publicity heavily promotes the shows in terms of their star personalities. The cover picture of *TV Guide* is almost invariably of the star or stars of one of the week's series. An interesting exception to this naming policy is provided by daytime and nighttime soap operas, whose titles stress place, family, or generalizations about social experience (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Knots Landing*, *Days of Our Lives*, *The Young and the Restless*). Similarly, the police shows that appropriate elements of soap opera form appropriate their titling strategies too (*Hill Street Blues* [USA], *Cop Shop* [Australia], *Z Cars* [UK]).

But even though soap operas appear, by their titles at least, to deviate from television's typical strategy of inviting us to read drama through its characters, their fans and their industry of secondary texts (fanzines, feature articles in magazines, etc.) give character high priority. The difference in titling strategy between soap operas and other television drama is due rather, as we shall see in the next chapters, to the soaps' emphasis on a family or neighborhood of characters rather than an individual hero/ine, or hero/ine pair or team.

Character representation on television differs significantly from the cinema or theater, and this difference arises from two prime televisual characteristics: its series or serial form, and its "nowness" or "liveness." Television relies on regularity of scheduling to establish a routine. The commercial intentions of this are obvious – it gets people into the habit of viewing a particular program at a particular time each day or week, it allows for proper