chapter 7 · JANE FEUER

Narrative form in American network television

Theories of television narrative have attempted to situate the television 'apparatus' both in its continuity with earlier narrative forms and in its difference from them. Much British television theory appears to accept the premise that

> like cinema, television is an apparatus used for the production-reproduction of the novelistic; it serves to address the problem of the definition of forms of individual meaning within the limits of existing social representations and their determining social relations, the provision and maintenance of terms of social intelligibility for the individual.[1]

Certainly, in a broad historical sense, one cannot take exception to this claim. However, to follow out this line of reasoning is to stress television's similarity to the novel and cinema, rather than its differences from other narrative forms. In what follows, I will stress theories of difference over those of continuity, since I believe that television[2] as an apparatus differs in almost every significant respect from cinema. Television is not very well described by models of narrative analysis based on linearity and resolution. Nor is its metapsychology that of the cinema. According to Rick Altman,

> Whereas the level of audience attention to a given Hollywood film scene may be roughly dependent on the importance of that scene for resolving the plot's dilemmas, attention to a given *Dallas* scene depends instead on the topic and characters present. In recognition

of this difference, we might say that classical Hollywood narrative is in large part *goal-driven*, while attention to American television narrative is heavily *menu-driven*.[3]

If the historical subject for the novel and cinema has been the isolated individual 'reader/spectator', then the subject interpellated by television has been always already familial.

Television narrative structure

Most theories of cinematic narrative have stressed a linear, causal model derived from the work of Roland Barthes and others. That this is the dominant model for conceptualising cinematic narrative is illustrated by a definition of 'narrative' given in a popular film introductory text as 'a chain of events in cause/effect relationship occuring in time.'[4] Following Barthes, the narrative structure of the classical Hollywood text is seen as proceeding through a chain of narrative 'enigmas' towards closure. Although much criticism has been levelled at such a totalising theory of cinematic narrative (not the least because it describes masculine genres better than feminine genres) I believe that it is even less applicable to the operation of television. The television apparatus works against logical notions of causality and closure. According to John Ellis, television narrative operates through the segment, i.e. a relatively self-contained scene that is discontinuous with other segments. Ellis goes on to argue that 'movement from one segment to the next is a matter of succession rather than consequence'. Thus, for Ellis, all television narrative is *serial* rather than linear, in the sense that 'the series implies the form of the dilemma rather than that of resolution and closure'.[5] In this sense, neither of the two forms of television narrative that I will discuss – the episodic series and the continuing serial – correspond to the dominant model of popular cinematic narrative. However, their methods of non-correspondence differ.

Metapsychology

The dominant model of the 'cinematic apparatus' based on the work of Metz, Baudry and others does not account very well for television. Television may be seen to possess a dif ferent 'imaginary' from cinema, to articulate a different position for its subject, and to demand ways of looking which do not correspond to mirror-identification and voyeurism as they have been described for the cinema. In another context, I have argued that so-called magazine format non-fiction television sets up an idealised quasi-nuclear family whose unity is seen as an attribute of the medium itself.[6] This representational strategy has its completion in the mode of address of the apparatus – 'from our family to yours'. (These are the actual words used in the Christmas message sent to 'my family' by the local news 'team' in my market.) That is to say that the 'implied spectator' for television is not the isolated, immobilised pre-Oedipal individual described by Metz and Baudry in their metapsychology of the cinema, but rather a post-Oedipal, fully socialised family member. Thus we need to revise a model of specularity derived from the cinema by providing for television a new destination to Metz's quest in *The Imaginary Signifier* for an analogue to the Lacanian mirror.[7] For television, we would have to dispute or at least reformulate Metz's claim that the spectator's own body is never reflected in the mirror. To be perversely literal-minded (in keeping with the spirit of much metapsychological speculation of this ilk), the television screen *does* reflect the body of the family, if we turn the images off. This is perhaps a metaphorical way of arguing that the representational content of television proposes a reflection, however distorted, of the body of the familialised viewing subject. We are not dealing with the same degree of signification-by-absence that can be deduced from an examination of the 'basic cinematographic apparatus' if only because, as I have argued at length elsewhere, television disseminates an ideology of presence that has its basis in the presumed 'live'

status of the apparatus.[8]

By extension, the unevenly developed dialectic of voyeurism and exhibitionism that Metz theorises for the cinema does not operate with the same force for television. Far from wanting to disguise its discourse as story, television seems to want to foreground its discursive status. As Robert Stam has written regarding television news, 'if illusionistic fictions disguise their discourse as history, television news, in certain respects, wraps up its history as discourse'.[9] This calls into question a model of spectatorship based upon voyeurism. Television's foremost illusion is that it is an ***interactive medium***, not that we are peering into a self-enclosed diegetic space. This generalised stance of the apparatus as a whole, due in part to the property of 'flow', tends to carry over to the more cinematic narrative modes of the episodic series and the continuing serial, if only because these 'diegetic' fictions are continually interrupted (especially on American television) by more discursive structures in the form of voice-over announcements, commercials, and promotional 'spots'. The 'diegesis' in television can never be sustained in the imaginary of the cinema either at a narrative level or at the level of modes of reception. As Raymond Williams has explained, the historically determined mode of reception for television in the West depends upon a social use of technology 'which served an at once mobile and home-centred way of living: a form of ***mobile privatisation***'.[10] This is in sharp contrast to the psychoanalytical view of the historical conditions of reception for theatrical cinema which might be described as 'immobilised public consumption'. In this regard, it is important to take into account studies which demonstrate the viewer's 'talking back' to television – a process now literalised on certain cable systems by interactive cable capability, but also an implied feature of network television. The very concept 'diegesis' is unthinkable on television. One rather astonishing example of television's tendency to 'break' the cinematic diegesis (that I have observed recently) is a pattern of interrupting the ten o'clock drama with

'promos' for the eleven o'clock local news in which the news anchors, in direct address, attempt to draw parallels between the presumed diegetic fiction and a 'real' happening that will be 'covered' in the forthcoming news broadcast. For example, a 'news report' on college students' ritualistic viewing of *Dynasty* was announced during the commercial break preceding the last segment of *Dynasty* and then broadcast during the news report directly following *Dynasty*. Similarly, following a 'trauma drama' on teen suicide, the eleven o'clock news announced and subsequently presented 'expert' psychological advice on how to recognise suicidal tendencies in 'your' children. The example appears all the more bizarre if considered in terms of screen theory, when one recognises that the identical 'expert advice' had already been given within the diegesis of the made-for-TV film in the form of a public address to a self-help group given by the mother of one of the dead children. Yet it does not appear bizarre to the viewing subject thus addressed precisely because such disregard for the diegetic is a ***conventional*** television practice, not an exceptional one. Television as an ideological apparatus strives to break down any barriers between the fictional diegesis, the advertising diegesis, and the diegesis of the viewing family, finding it advantageous to assume all three are one and the same.

Familialised Technology

In order to deal with differences within American network television's representational mode, a good place to begin would be in the different strategies for dealing with 'the family', both at the level of narration and that of mode of reception. Although both the episodic series and the continuing serial are serial forms constituted by the media's economically derived need for perpetual self-reduplication, they differ in their narrative strategies. The self-replication of the episodic series depends upon a continual re-integration of the family; that of the continuing serial depends upon a continual disintegration of the family.

In almost Lévi-Straussian terms, the dominant binary opposition informing television's representational practices is that of inside the family/outside the family. Both the episodic series and the continuing serial have as their 'irresolvable' cultural contradiction the need to explain factors which in reality are 'outside' in terms of the 'inside'. For television, both the economic and the socio-political cannot be thought except in terms of 'inside the family' – an impossible dilemma, if indeed such dilemmas cannot be resolved inside the family. The social may not be equivalent to the familiar, but for ideological reasons, television's narrative representations would have it so. Here we must part company with Lévi-Strauss, in order to note that the inability to resolve the inside/outside contradiction is not a universal attribute of the human mind but rather an ideological construct derived from the social formation as a whole and buttressed by the specific role of the television apparatus as a mechanism for reproducing ideology. Thus the television 'apparatus' is historically determined.

Recent revisionist broadcast historians have emphasised the extent to which a *social* conception of broadcast technology influenced the development of that technology in the direction of Williams's 'mobile privatisation'. According to these historians, the technology by no means determined its innovation as an apparatus for private consumption within the family. In its experimental period, television's initial location was in the public theatre, and it was primarily its association with radio that led to television's innovation as a home-based advertising media in America.[11] Radio itself had been instrumental in the growth of consumerism, the process of changing the American home into a unit for consumption rather than production. In this changing ideology of the home, the radio receiver played a significant role in conferring status.[12] Whereas the radio industry had initially sought in the family a market for its receiving equipment (as had the BBC in its formative years), the American radio manufacturers from their first attempts to innovate television in the 1930s already had in mind a model for selling families to advertisers. This socio-economic relationship between the apparatus and the familial viewing subject has its counterpart in television's textual strategies.

The episodic series

As an example of the mode of representation of the episodic series, I will discuss its simplest and least cinematic genre – the situation comedy. In the early 1970s two conceptions of the sitcom family competed for dominance on American network TV. The Norman Lear sitcoms (*All in the Family, Maude, The Jeffersons*) dealt with nuclear families beset from the outside by a variety of socially-derived problems. This ideological conflict which each week would spring from a new source or 'enigma' would split the family apart, usually dividing neatly along progressive v. reactionary lines. Typically, *All in the Family* would provide two axes along which 'secondary identifications' could be made – the reactionary father v. the liberal children – thus making the Lear sitcom epitomise a 'liberal' narrative strategy, based on balance and a 'choice' of objects for identification. By the end of each episode, the specific 'enigma of the week' would be resolved, with the underlying social problem (usually involving racial or feminist issues) retained as an 'absent cause' for the ensuing series episode. The Lear family, however much they were divided along political lines, would each week be reintegrated in order that a new enigma could be introduced. The Lear sitcom thus politicised the basic sitcom structure of a return to equilibrium and a new dilemma which would proceed in an endless circle until the series was cancelled.

The alternate 1970s paradigm, the family of co-workers, was a product of MTM Enterprises' sitcom factory. Here the dilemmas tended to be interpersonal or 'lifestyle' issues which made a better transition than the Lear programmes into the apolitical late *1970s* (e.g. *Taxi, Cheers*). If the Lear sitcom

implied that solutions within the family were but a means of temporary weekly closure, the MTM sitcom stressed the unity of the family above all other values. The substitution of the work family for the nuclear family actually aided in this task, since its all-encompassing nature provided no avenues of escape. It also provided a 'mirror' family that was at once more realistic and more Utopian – realistic in that the nuclear family was no longer the dominant form outside the texts; Utopian in that love and work merged in an essentially harmonious universe that represented a throwback to a less corporate age – a residual ideology. A typical situation on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would involve a threat to the unity of the family that would be resolved when the recalcitrant family member realised that family unity represents a higher goal than personal ambition. For example, for each of the main characters, an episode featured the dilemma of taking a new job that would mean withdrawal from the work-family; in each case the character is unable at the last moment to 'leave home' and the episode ends in a group celebration of the reintegration of the family. When a major character actually did depart, she would be replaced by a new family member, thus keeping the work/family balance stable.

The dominant view of the episodic series sitcom as essentially static and conservative is argued in David Grote's *The End of Comedy*.[13] Following Northrop Frye's conception of the comic mode, Grote's argument is based on a distinction between the comic mode of the television sitcom and Grote's idiosyncratic view of the 2,000 years of dramatic comedy preceeding it. According to Grote, the enduring form of 'new comedy' was anarchic in that it continually retold the story of a regeneration of the social order through the rebellion of a young couple against the authority of the father. The sitcom, by contrast, resists not only the change of the traditional comic plot but *all* change of any kind. According to Grote, the sitcom carries its repetition compulsion to such an extreme that it has all but rejected the concept of plot as

a process of change from an old equilibrium to a new. His description of the process by which narrative development is avoided supports the view that television series narrative is essentially circular. The sitcom, he says, never reaches a new equilibrium but only returns to that point of stasis from which the episode began. From this static narrative economy, Grote deduces that the moral lesson of the sitcom is that all problems can be solved within the family. Changes of mind and solutions to problems all happen to outsiders who must be expelled by the end of each episode. Thus the reintegration of the sitcom family is bought at the cost of narrative and ideological stasis.

Grote's view of the sitcom's handling of the inside/outside the family contradiction might be that one side of the binary opposition (the outside) is, through the narrative mechanism of the sitcom plot, erased. We are left with a pure interiority and a monolithically conservative view of social relations. We can then contrast this to the developmental mode of the continuing serial in which both situations and characters change and grow organically, thus setting up another neat binary opposition between a reactionary form (the sitcom) and a progressive form (the continuing serial). That this is an attractive interpretation is proven by the popularity of this view in both journalistic and academic circles.

However, much is omitted in this easy explanation, most significantly any theory of how the sitcom is *read* by its audience. Grote is unable to explain how an audience that for 2,000 years was able to accept a progressive form of comedy could – in about twenty years – get 'hooked' on such a static, anti-progressive form and then, in the space of about five years, become subjects for an entirely new developmental form of narrative art – the continuing serial drama. Such a rapid public acceptance of an overarching diachronic transformation of the narrative apparatus of American network television is the historical 'fact' that an undialectical view such as Grote's is unable to explain. Instead of viewing

changes in narrative forms as breaks in essentially synchronic structures, I believe we must view the transformation from the episodic series to the continuing serial both dialectically and historically.

In order to do this, we have to question a monolithically static view of the episodic series at the same time that we qualify the developmental interpretation of serial form. For if the episodic series sitcom was static at the level of situation, it was not so at the level of character (throughout the 1970s). Narrative analysis, however, has taught us to look for change in a rather Proppian fashion as the syntagmatic changes in narrative functions. This kind of change will not be found in the 'pure' episodic series. For example, after seven years, Mary Richards was still encountering the same situations she had in the first season. But Mary had changed in terms of the traits attached to her character, that is, paradigmatically. If we examine the credit sequences for the first, second, and ensuing seasons, this change is apparent in that the initial enigma shifts from the future conditional to the future indicative tense (you might just make it after all/ you're gonna make it after all). After this, the question 'how will you make it on your own?' is dropped altogether; presumably it is no longer in question.

Another factor that the concentration on plot functions overlooks is that the static nature of the family-integration plot is not without its progressive aspects. The fact that Mary's situation could not develop very much should not be seen in an entirely negative light. For it meant that Mary could never leave the Utopian work/family in order to settle down into bourgeois domesticity. After the pilot episode, there was never any question of Mary attaching herself to a particular man. In many respects, the family of co-workers represented a progressive alternative – in its integration of the public and domestic spheres, in its emphasis on reciprocity within independence, and its valuing of the collective experience of the ensemble. For the spectator, especially the

'new woman' audience for which this programme had a special meaning, the family in the mirror was a Utopian one that deserved to remain together. Here we must question Grote's tendency to read Frye in the most strongly developmental way possible. Although Frye says that 'the theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it', he does not say that movement toward a *more* Utopian society is inevitable in comedy.[14] And there is a sense in which the reintegration of the family each week *does* represent 'development'.

The continuing serial

Given the sitcom's potential for diachronic development in the direction of character growth and change, we should view the greater diachronic development of the American sitcom in the 1980s as part of the general movement on American television towards the continuing serial form, not as an abrupt break with the static series format. A number of developments within television programming during the mid-1970s provided the transition to the continuing serial. First, as I have already mentioned, sitcoms began to move toward a more developmental model, so that by the early 1980s it was possible for a sitcom such as *Cheers* to modify even the basic situation (i.e. Diane's and Sam's enmity). Secondly, in two crucial programmes – *Mary Hartman* and *Soap*, comedy and melodrama were combined in a continuing serial format. Thirdly, continuing daytime serials became very popular; and peak-time melodramas emerged with *Dallas*. At the same time, certain peak-time melodramatic series types (the 'cop show' and the medical drama) began to take on the continuing serial format. Thus we have to explain and correlate a double transformation – from the comic to the melodramatic and form the series to the serial.

Mary Hartman and *Soap* both illustrate that when the sitcom moved in the direction of the continuing serial, it also

took on a more melodramatic flavour. One possible explanation for this is that comedy tends to stress integration and closure, whereas melodrama has always stressed disintegration and an 'unsatisfying' or ambiguous sense of closure. But the self-replication of the continuing serial cannot depend upon integration. In order to keep the various plot lines going, disintegration must be the method of self-replication. In the continuing serial, as exemplified by the daytime soap opera, the inside/outside the family contradiction has always been expressed in terms of the disintegration of the family. This is not to imply that circumstances outside the familial have any greater force. As Tania Modleski has stated, the main fantasy of the soap opera remains that of a fully self-sufficient family.[15] The difference is that whereas in the MTM sitcom that family is constantly regenerated in a Utopian fashion, in the continuing melodramatic serial the integrated family is a goal whose achievement would mean the end of the hermeneutic chain. We cannot say that the movement toward the continuing serial *caused* a change towards melodrama, or vice versa. Rather, it seems logical that the two should have been articulated together.[16] Since I have discussed the dynamics of the continuing serial elsewhere,[17] I would like to proceed directly to the implications of the transition to the continuing serial as form-in-dominance. For different reasons a number of analysts have wanted to describe this change as 'progressive'. However, all (including myself) have tended to confuse a *narrative* sense of 'progress' with a political sense of the term. For the industry and the popular press that perpetuates its views, serials are progressive in that they affirm bourgeois notions of character development and growth. We can reject this explanation at two levels – first, it is arguable that a static conception of character is a more damning description of bourgeois social relations. Secondly, it is not correct to say that characters *change* in continuing serials. Quite the contrary – they perpetuate the narrative by continuing to make the same

mistakes. Rather, due to the multiple plot structure, characters' *positions* shift in relation to other characters. To quote Rick Altman, '*Dallas* is organised not according to a novelistic hermeneutic, but around an intricate menu of topics which for some viewers are experienced by character and for others by theme'.[18] The diachronic development of continuing serials depends more upon the shifting status of the various couples and families. At any given synchronic moment, families that were once integrated are now disintegrated, and vice-versa. Integration into a happy family remains the ultimate goal, but it cannot endure for any given couple. The various sets of couples achieve in fulcrum fashion a balance between harmony and disharmony, but no one couple can remain in a state of integration (or of disintegration).

My discussion of the sitcom makes clear that 'misreadings' are eminently possible; indeed the 'liberal' structure of the Lear sitcom ensured differential readings of Archie's racism. However, I would still maintain that the emphasis upon reintegration of the family does not allow much space for a critique of the nuclear family structure itself. (However, one might read the substitution of the Utopian work family as constituting a form of critique.)

For the continuing serial, the very need to 'rupture' the family in order for the plot to continue can be viewed as a 'dangerous' strategy in the sense that it allows for a reading of the disintegration as a critique of the family itself. Specifically, it threatens to explode the strategy of containment common to both the series and serial by which all conflicts are expressed in terms of the family. In the sitcom, the threatening forces are re-expelled each week. The continuing serial, by contrast, maintains its 'outside' within the family structure. The outside forces which threaten the sitcom family become the inside forces which threaten the internal disintegration of the continuing serial family. In allowing the family to be perennially torn apart, there is always the danger that 'the outside' will explode upon the inside. We cannot,