

MEDIA DISCOURSES:
Analysing Media Texts

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THE STORIES THEY TELL US: STUDYING TELEVISION AS NARRATIVE

[T]he narrative form is maximumly meaningful. It provides a far greater context of understanding than is possible in life itself . . . By locating an experience in a narrative sequence with other experiences, experiences are given meaning.

(Wright 1995: 451)

Introduction

Narratology begins from the idea that all stories share the same fundamental structure. They all ‘cohere’ according to some basic rules. As a consequence, according to these theories, narratives all order experience and construct the identity of narrative actors in basically similar ways. This chapter explores such claims from a discourse analytic perspective, asking how far a theory of the basic structures of narrative takes us in understanding the ways that narrative is deployed in the media. A case study of the British police drama, *The Bill*, will be used to explore the political implications of the kinds of stories we are told.

The basic structure of the story is often identified by looking at simple stories, such as anecdotes. The US sociolinguist William Labov gathered a large number of these, including the following from a sailor in Columbus, Ohio, in 1970, from which he abstracted a set of basic functions that, he argued, the tellers and the audiences of stories would recognize. The claim of narrative theory, then, is that the following personal narrative differs little from the narratives in the news or televisual fiction or talk radio:

a Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin'
 b And – this Norwegian sailor come over
 c an' kep' givin' me a bunch o' junk about I was sittin' with his woman.
 d An' everybody sittin' at the table with me were my shipmates.
 e So I jus' turn aroun'
 f an' shoved 'im,
 g an' told 'im, I said, "Go away,
 h I don't even wanna fool with ya."
 I An' nex' thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me,
 j an' a guy told me, says, "Don't move your head.
 k Your throat's cut."

(Labov 1997)

As discussed later, the way this story develops, from a scene-setting clause (a) to sequences of action (such as (b), (c)) to evaluative comments that interrupt the action (such as (d)), can be seen as a universal characteristic of stories in all media.

Why is this? The key observation is that the sequential organization of events is a universal across cultures. This organization involves what Barthes (1977b: 94) called the 'fallacy of sequentiality'. Listeners to the anecdote above are simply given the words the narrator said to the Norwegian sailor followed by 'an' nex' thing I know I'm layin' on the floor, blood all over me.' But all listeners know to hear the clauses as a causative chain (his tough talk *leads* to him splayed out on the floor and bleeding). For this reason, Wright (1995) terms narrative a fundamental ordering of experience. This is partly a matter of the content of the stories that narratives provide as templates for thought. People can read their own lives according to templates of hero and villain, and so on. But, for Wright, narrative's fundamental ordering of experience is much more a matter of the ways it links elements together into episodes focused around characters and the ways it constructs cause and effect relationships. The details of the story become 'maximumly meaningful'. Readers know that, in the story world, each detail will make sense in terms of those links and causal relations. The act of telling a story thus transforms experience into something that can make sense (Labov 1999). Gergen and Gergen (1983: 255) argue that a sense of identity itself is constructed through narrative: 'The fact that people believe they possess identities fundamentally depends on their capacity to relate fragmentary occurrences across temporal boundaries' (cited in Young 1999: 430).

Narrative theory is not the only way to account for the ordering of experience in culture. As discussed in earlier chapters, the relationships between words and the intertextual relations between texts are also powerful ways of analysing discourse and are not reducible to narrative. But seeing texts as narratives is

particularly powerful in exploring the ways elements link together into larger units of text. The discourse analytic perspective adopted in this book leads us also to see narrative not as something immanent, something that always already exists, but something that is achieved through texts and something that is therefore a rhetorical achievement of people in certain contexts. It is not a library of basic story types but a way of talking. This chapter therefore emphasizes narrative as what Wright calls ‘models of social action’, that is, the active dimension of the ordering, transforming and relating that take place through the stories we get in the media. The chapter focuses particularly on television fiction.

Coherence

Discourse analysis has shown that language users have a number of ways of making a text hang together as a meaningful whole, of which narrative is one way, if a powerful one. This has two implications for analysis. First, we will often find narrative embedded within other ways of ordering experience, with important effects. Second, we can also analyse narrative in the light of the other forms not chosen. Both these points suggest that we can analyse the extent to which texts draw on narrative as rhetorical acts. If making a text cohere involves aligning it with powerful ideas about the way the world coheres (or should cohere), these rhetorical acts are also potentially political acts. Consider the opening sentences from a BBC television news item on a hurricane: ‘Winds of 130 miles an hour and driving rain are already battering the eastern coast of Cuba. Hurricane Michelle is approaching’ (BBC News Online, 3 November 2001).¹ This piece of text, accompanied by shots of a wind-battered Caribbean coastline, describes part of a meteorological phenomenon. The two sentences therefore cohere as scientific observation: the second one gives scientific explanation for the observation in the first. But it can also be understood as a fragment of a story. The *deictic* ‘already’ signals to us that we are at a particular moment on a longer timeline and also cues us to expect the battering of the wind to get worse, while the second sentence similarly looks forward to the next event, the arrival of the hurricane. As part of a story, the two sentences ask us to look forward as viewers literate in the plots of storm narratives. This is signalled at the same time as we observe the unfolding phenomenon.

Why does this matter? The descriptive dimension asks us to think in terms of the phenomenon and its causes. The narrative dimension points us towards actors and a plot. Bad weather is not just approaching, but takes on anthropomorphic attributes. It has a name, ‘Hurricane Michelle’, but more importantly the story’s action, ‘battering the eastern coast’, is done by this entity, requiring us to infer some intention, just as besiegers ‘batter’ the gates of city. This is of

course meant metaphorically, and the BBC story is doing nothing new, as storms are often talked of in terms that echo the visitations of spirits or gods. But political sense-making work is nonetheless being done. Narratologists often argue that plots are about the disruption of an equilibrium. Here the equilibrium is left unclear, and we would have to infer some image of normal life before the storm. As a result, there is an almost mythic sense to the disruption, the entry of the anthropomorphized storm and the normal world which precedes the event, a vagueness that militates against asking questions such as whether the experiences of Cubans match this so briefly sketched story, whether preparations for such regular storms are sufficient, or whether human impacts on climate might be implicated. Thus, at the same time as these two clauses position the implied reader scientifically as aware of the cause of the disruption, they position the reader also narratively within a certain mode of understanding.

One way to pin down the sense-making work of narrative and other ways in which the parts of a text hang together is in terms of coherence. Coherence describes the qualities that distinguish a text from an incoherent or arbitrary jumble (van Dijk 1997: 9). Thus it accounts for what is happening between two or more clauses that add up to something larger. Narrative is a major and basic form of coherence, because it links elements together in a series of cause and effect. There are, though, other forms. **Syntax** is a local form of coherence: the nouns, verbs, qualifiers and other constituents belong together and add up to a larger sense-making unit, the clause. Groups of clauses also hang together by linguistic means, often through connectives such as ‘and’, ‘although’ or ‘who’ which string clauses together and through deixis – the use of words such as ‘she’, ‘then’ or ‘here’ which require a reader or hearer to refer back to previous moments to work out who the ‘she’ is or where ‘here’ is. A series of clauses may cohere sequentially – as a narrative, where one thing follows another in time, or as an argument, where one thing follows another in ways that make it more convincing – or it may cohere as matching pairs – such as questions and answers, contrasting pairs, an idea and example, and so on (see Hoey 2001: 30). We can test this by comparing a minimally coherent text, such as a shopping list (which hangs together only in the sense that all the linguistic elements describe things to be bought and which rarely displays any sense of one thing being ordered above another for a communicative reason) with a more coherent text such as an academic essay (which has an introduction and a conclusion, asides, amplifications, a developing argument and much else) (Stubbs 1983: 15). Reorder the elements of the shopping list and you should still be able to do your shopping, but reorder the elements of academic argument and you have a pretty garbled text.

Coherence is often thought of as a quality of a text, but can be thought of as

happening as much in readers' or listeners' minds. Much of what we are analysing here is constructed between clauses, literally between the lines, and must therefore be interpreted. For this reason, Ochs (1997: 186) suggests that, while we might from a cultural perspective identify the most basic narratives in culture as myths, we might from a discourse analytic perspective start instead with conversational narratives, because these are interactive achievements, completed as much through the nods, shared evaluations and additions of those who start the story as listeners. Narratives such as Labov's sailor story therefore shape the expectations of narrative coherence we take to other texts.

As discussed below, we should also be aware that texts cohere to different degrees, and we should not approach all texts expecting to find every element strongly linked to every other. This is particularly the case with television, where a number of critics argue that the context of viewing does not favour highly structured texts, but instead favours what Raymond Williams (1974: 93) called flow. This kind of discourse analysis therefore tries to make a more complex point than the common argument that most forms of media text, whether entertainment or journalistic, are structured around narratives. Casey et al., for example, argue: 'It is narratives that draw us in, engage us and encourage us to keep reading, viewing or listening. The unfolding of narratives is one of the principal sources of pleasure in media' (Casey et al. 2002: 138). Bell (1991) makes a similar point about news as narrative. But when we look closely at texts, we can see that the media draw on other forms of structure as well, and meaning arises often in the productive tensions and overlaps between forms of coherence.

Story as structure

The analysis of narrative as a form of coherence draws on but differs in some fundamental assumptions from the structural narratology made famous in film theory. In particular, it sees narrative as a choice and as a rhetorical achievement more than as a deep structure underpinning culture. Following Propp, Todorov, Lévi-Strauss and others, film theorists have been able to argue that film narratives reiterate already given narratives, giving pleasure by allowing us to recognize fundamental character types and plots, or by mixing or slightly changing these prototypes. The weather story above therefore gives us a fragment of a story recognizable as much from myths or fairy tales as from previous weather stories. This thinking begins from the observation that any specific telling of a story – what is in variants of structural narratology called the plot, *syuzhet* or *discours* – only makes sense in terms of an underlying story – the real story, the *fabula* or *histoire*. It is possible to juggle the clauses or images in a story into

almost any order and, with a few changes of tense and pronouns, still make a readable story (for some extended examples, see Hoey 2001). The ‘real story’ has its own unalterable order: as Propp (1968: 21) puts it, ‘Theft cannot take place before the door is forced’. So it might be argued that meaning is coded at a deeper level of the story, which is independent of the text. Rather than identify coherence between elements, then, these theorists identify a whole structure that shapes how a story can emerge. So the *histoire* must follow a temporal structure, while the *discours* can leap around, often starting in the middle and working first backwards and then forwards. Similarly, Propp used over 100 examples of traditional Russian ‘heroic wondertales’ to identify eight character roles which not only recurred in each story but structured all the characters possible. These are:

the villain, the hero, the donor (who provides something which allows the hero to take the plot forward), the helper, the princess (the person the villain and hero fight over, or the person who is the hero’s reward), the princess’s father, the dispatcher (who sends the hero off) and the false hero.
(cited in Branston and Stafford 2003: 34)

These roles may be filled by the same character at different points, as different storylines emerge. In ‘The Cartridge Family’ episode of *The Simpsons* (episode 183), the main plotline concerns how buying a gun changes the father, Homer (witness his comment at one point: ‘I felt this incredible surge of power, like God must feel when he’s holding a gun’). Part-way through, however, the mother, Marge, becomes the plot’s protagonist. Now her fears, her determination to rid the house of the gun and her final appropriation of the gun drive the story.

Analysts can draw upon structural narratology without accepting that a small number of basic characters and plots structure the plot. It is useful to see that the hero role is shared, but probably not useful to attempt to define which of *The Simpsons* characters is the ‘real’ hero. Homer and Marge instead share aspects we could describe as heroic. As in many episodes (in a repeated parody of patriarchy), Homer loses power through the course of the plot to Marge, as she becomes the driver of the narrative, that is, the person who develops as a result of the action. This parody of patriarchal storylines can be seen as a kind of generic heterogeneity (Chapter 2).

Narratology: Principles of storytelling

Contemporary narratology tends towards describing narrative principles and conventions, rather than the rules of narratives – a notion that requires that all narrative texts must follow a set of rules in order to work.² As a result,

proto-narratives (such as: hero faces danger and then triumphs) are less important than techniques of storytelling. The underlying story is emphasized less than the act of telling.

The basic logic of telling a story involves an arc from the initial complication of a situation to its final resolution (Fabb 1997: 165). So a story is worth telling to the extent that something out of the ordinary has happened. This disruption is what makes the story 'reportable' (Gülich and Quasthoff 1985: 171). The narrative driver of the text is to resolve the crisis and attempt to restore the equilibrium. Each episode within the story replicates the model on a smaller scale. This basic logic, which may be signalled in the text but depends on readers' or viewers' ordering of the text in their minds, is what provides a large dimension of the coherence of the text, placing each element on the arc from the first crisis to the final resolution. This becomes clear in the analysis of an event such as the US bombing of Baghdad which started the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Official US and British publicity before the invasion placed the upcoming event within a narrative of 'shock and awe', that is, a very short arc where heavy bombing would lead to the Iraqi Government's quick capitulation (while critics of the war plans and the Iraqi Government put forward quite different narratives, from a long drawn-out war to a rapid defeat for the USA). The event, then, was surrounded by competing narrative arcs which sought to make sense of it. Then, on 20 March, as the world waited for the bombing to begin, a surprisingly small attack took place, requiring a fresh set of propaganda narratives, as the news agency, Reuters, reported:

UPDATE 1 – AIR WAR SCRIPT PRE-EMPTED BY
DECAPITATION BID

DOHA, March 20 (Reuters) – President George W. Bush threw away the script and timetable for war on Iraq on Thursday when U.S. intelligence came up with one of its most long-sought after and elusive prizes: the location of President Saddam Hussein.

It began a day, or maybe even two, ahead of schedule with narrow-focus cruise missile strikes at dawn Baghdad time, surprising analysts who expected a 'shock and awe' blitz using more than 3,000 precision-guided bombs and missiles.

Despite the abrupt change of plan, one can only imagine Iraq's shock and awe if Saddam had died. In Washington, it would have been greeted as victory.

The missiles fired by U.S. submarines and warships were meant to kill

Saddam and his aides. But the Iraqi leader was quickly shown on television reading a speech of defiance.

(Reuters news wire, 21 March 2003, 04:24 GMT)

The new narrative justifying the attack began with precision bombing, with the hope of a still quicker resolution in Saddam Hussein's death and US victory. When this story did not finish as planned, the 'shock and awe' narrative was returned to, and when Iraqi Government capitulation did not ensue, the elements were again organized for our reading by another official narrative, that of the capture of Baghdad. Indeed, the US political manoeuvring in Iraq since, up to the time of writing, can be interpreted as attempts to provide endings to the US occupation which cast the occupation in a positive light.

This is the power of narrative. As Wright suggests, once viewers recognize a narrative arc as relevant to making sense of some text, they can be expected to regard every detail as significant, as organized for maximum meaningfulness, in terms of that narrative. It becomes difficult to read the bombing as angering Iraqi citizens into rallying around their government or acts that destroyed lives and the social fabric or that further polarized Middle Eastern politics, as these very tidy narratives worked to resolve political problems through the spectacular cause and effect sequences of bombing.

We can see here both a problem and a strength of narrative analysis. The weakness is that so much takes place between the lines and with reference to unstated principles of storytelling. Readings have to be relevant (as discussed in Chapter 2), and it is sometimes difficult to pin down analyses. The strength is that we can then see how ideas are propagated without being stated. The problem is lessened if we are able to point to signals in the text which prefer certain readings. The Reuters text does this through key words, such as 'prizes' or 'victory', which direct us to a sense of ending, and 'after' or 'it would have been greeted,' which signal progression through the narrative. Fabb (1997) notes that perhaps still more important in signalling a story's arc is the assumption that listeners make, unless told otherwise, that a sequence of elements implies a relationship of cause and effect. As discussed above, listeners know to hear the clauses in the sailor's story told to Labov as a causative chain, where what happens later happens because of what happened earlier. Listening to a story is partly about listening for the teller's sense about why something happened that is woven in through the way moments are chained together.

Part of the politics of journalism is that it often resists the narratives of its sources, reorganizing the elements according to newsworthiness and therefore placing the source narrative as only one among a range of possible ones. The text above contains little of the sequential fallacy, making the US Government's changes to its planned narrative itself the reportable event and the existing war

plan the equilibrium that is disrupted ('Bush threw away the script and timetable'). The headline and the first three sentences tell an interrupted narrative sequence. Each paragraph has two clauses, where one clause relates back to the original plan and one to the bombing. Although a story emerges in those latter half sentences – US intelligence finds Saddam Hussein, strikes are launched at dawn, the shocked and triumphant responses that would have resulted if Saddam had died – these are not allowed to flow one from the other and are framed within the journalist's focus on the change of plan. The news text does not put forward other possible narrative arcs for the events (some critics of the war plan, for example, started the story in the 1980s, when Western governments fed arms and aid to Iraq to weaken neighbouring Iran) and it takes our focus away from the military event and onto the political event of Bush's thinking. This brief narrative analysis suggests the text is political in the sense that it resists the propagandist narrative, raising questions about military planning. Yet, on another level, it is apolitical, in the sense that it allows readers to forget that bombs are also about fear, death and a violent display of western might.

Fabb describes narratives as divided into episodes, each of which is characterized by internal continuity in location, time and participants, and separated by discontinuity in one or more of these factors. So the text marks the division of the story into moments – for example, in television, the camera cutting away to a new scene – but the story itself happens as much between these moments, in the gaps that are left for us. When watchers of satellite news channels saw bombers leaving the British RAF Brize Norton airfield and then six hours later saw flashes in the sky over Baghdad, they had to connect the two, imagining the continuity in between of the bomber aircraft crews crossing Europe and the Middle East. Each scene also sets up an entire narrative world around itself through its establishment of time, place and participants, a world dependent on listeners' knowledge but also coherent with what is going on. This is as true of non-fiction as it is of fictional narrative. The sailor story invokes a rough pub filled with sailors; the Reuters text above requires readers to think of Iraq as a government rather than as a landscape full of fragile human beings. If the text was read in the next day's newspaper, readers would have had to recognize it as happening in yesterday's world. Readers must suspend their own experiential worlds and enter the narrative's time and space coordinates and the experiences of the inhabitants of that text.

The social life of narrative

Literary studies, and the cultural studies which grew out of it, often involve an assumption that the critic's context of reading is universal. Discourse analysis,

by contrast, requires analysts not just to look for a particular set of narrative meanings but for the ways that readers or viewers will draw on those meanings. As a result, discourse analysts emphasize the relationship between the viewing world and the narrative world. Gülich and Quasthoff (1985) discuss the findings of sociolinguists who have recorded oral stories in various settings, and argue that narratives have many functions in different contexts which listeners process unconsciously, from unburdening the narrator and self-aggrandisement to entertaining others, evaluating an event and presenting evidence in a convincing form (Gülich and Quasthoff 1985: 175–6). The sailor story is an extreme and sensational personal narrative, probably told to impress and shock listeners and perform the identity of a sailor who has sailed the world and seen it all. Some parts of the text become particularly important when we look for a story's functions in its social context. Narrative openings and closures perform important roles in cuing interpretative frames, through stock phrases such as, 'Once upon a time' or 'You'll never believe what just happened to me', or through the opening graphics and music of a television programme. The way the narrative text invites us into its world is key to the way meaning is made there. Most narratives also provide an orienting sentence or two (or sometimes deliberately leave them out, forcing listeners to do extra work in orienting themselves to the material). It is significant, then, as discussed below, that television viewing often involves viewers channel-hopping, and arriving at narratives midway through. The way meaning is made, according to narrative theory, must be quite different to those who watched the text from the beginning.

Labov laid the groundwork for this kind of work, arguing that the oral personal narratives he studied almost always had a number of other functional elements as well as the action and resolution (Labov and Waletzky 1967). The narrative is framed by an *abstract*, which takes us into the narrative world and sketches what is to come, and a *coda*, which takes us out of the narrative back to our time and place. Within the telling, we are next given an *orientation* to the narrative setting (in Labov's sailor story, 'Oh I w's settin' at a table drinkin'), and then scattered at climactic moments in the action, moments of *evaluation*, which justify or give the point of the story. These categories give us a checklist to compare narratives by. So the Reuters text is full of evaluation (i.e., Bush threw away the script, analysts were surprised), while the sailor story has almost none, suggesting perhaps that the journalist must do much more work to make his story interesting and keep our attention.

Stories on television

The social context of television is quite different again. Television, as Williams and Ellis have pointed out, has an intimate position in people's homes. It does not intrude, as a caller at the door does, and therefore viewers do not need to perform in formal ways towards it, but can relax: it is 'profoundly domestic' (Ellis 1992: 113). Television is continually on offer, as a kind of wallpaper, but only occasionally taken up by viewers, and only half attended to as they talk, eat or do other household activities. Ellis argues that this social context has pointed television writers and directors to distinctive narrative forms, characterized by a sense of flow rather than narrative arc: 'According to Williams's model of flow, then, everything becomes rather like everything else, units are not organized into coherent single texts like cinema films, but form a kind of montage without overall meaning' (Ellis 1992: 117). As a result, we find narratives which concatenate small segments without any final ending. Soap operas operate in this way, weaving together multiple plotlines across time often without any obvious ending – even for their writers, who may have long-term narratives they are working through but who are often writing just weeks ahead of viewers. This open-ended structure, that may last literally for decades, would be deeply unsatisfying in a theatre play, but in the domestic setting of the home, critics such as Allen argue, it provides a rich experience:

The long-term, loyal viewer of the soap opera is rewarded by the text in that her knowledge of the large and complex community of characters and their histories enables her to produce subtle and nuanced readings, whereas a single episode of any given soap opera, viewed out of context by a textually-naïve critic, appears to be so much pointless talk among undistinguishable characters about events of maddeningly indeterminable significance.

(Allen 2004: 246)

He argues that the soap opera takes place at a similar pace to viewers' lives, often celebrating Christmas or Thanksgiving at the same time, so that viewers share a collective history with its characters. The most important sites of meaning in a soap are in the intimate spaces between each episode, and in the contrasts between plot strands, which viewers fill with speculation, imaginings and talk (Allen 2004: 251).

This point holds across much television. Although much television is organized into self-contained episodes, whether it is a serial or a game show, Ellis and Allen suggest we should not think of the single episode of most shows as the coherent text, but see that text within the context of the season, the series as a whole, its repeats, its spin-offs and the domestic context of consumption. Ellis

finds the structure of television instead at a much more local level: in short segments which explore a dilemma and then move on, so that shows resemble the 30-second ads which they share the televisual flow with. Linear, causal structures within episodes are present, but are weak. This has ideological implications, breaking down any barriers between the fictional world, advertising, and the viewing family (Feuer 1995: 495).

'The Cartridge Family' episode of *The Simpsons* already discussed makes sense in these terms. Marge refers explicitly at one point to the previous 'Who Shot Mr Burns?' episode: 'Homer! I don't want guns in my house. Don't you remember when Maggie shot Mr Burns?', constructing a sense of continuity across episodes, as a soap opera would (and indeed the storyline of the baby shooting the villainous nuclear power station owner is clear parody of the 1970s soap, *Dallas*). Yet, as a number of observers point out on a fansite, guns have featured in previous episodes, including one where Marge became a police officer to combat domestic boredom and showed no concerns about gun ownership.³ The characters do not always cohere across episodes, a phenomenon common in the serial genre, where crises in one show are often completely forgotten in the next.

Olson (2004: 124) argues that the further a film or television narrative strays from proto-narratives such as the fairy tales described by Propp, 'the less familiar, less accessible, and less coherent these narratives become'. These mythic structures provide a powerful ground of truth for individual narratives and their abstract type-characters and settings are highly inclusive. Powerful narrative coherence of this sort may be drawn on, as in the hurricane story above, but it is questionable that television, with its casual, domestic gaze, always projects us into such mythic time. In fact, looking for unity of action and actor may be doomed to failure in satirical fiction such as *The Simpsons*, which parodies US politics and culture and thus makes much of its sense intertextually. *The Simpsons* episodes are probably more thematically organized. In this episode, for example, National Rifle Associations arguments that gun-owning is a defining and positive feature of (male) life in the United States are ridiculed.

Police problems: Case study of *The Bill*

This final section will explore the arguments discussed above in relation to one episode of the British police drama *The Bill*. This episode (broadcast in the UK on ITV1, 8 January 2003) comes from the nineteenth season of the serial, which began in 1984. It contains a number of storylines: the two major storylines concern, first, how the police deal with threats against a convicted paedophile priest by a vigilante mob and then deal with newly surfaced allegations against

him and, second, how one uniformed officer, PC Gary Best, uses his power as a policeman to intervene in his sister's domestic situation. Surrounding these are fragments of a number of other stories of different duration which are flicked into for a few seconds or minutes at a time, including the cocaine addiction of PC Nick Klein (one of the repercussions for him and his colleagues of the death of another officer and his lover Cass Rickman), the former alcoholism of PC Jim Carver (who discovers Klein's habit), the suppressed affection of DC Danny Glaze for a nun who appears in a number of episodes, the corruption of one detective, Phil Hunter, who convinces his wife to sleep with a local crime boss, the emotional turmoil of gay Sergeant Craig Gilmore over a (straight) constable and wider storylines of police corruption, tensions between the police and the local community and tensions over government policing targets.

The overlapping and intertwined narratives of the characters, some of which continue for a whole season (Gilmore's crush) and some of which are years old (Carver's alcoholism) place us firmly within the soap genre, even before we consider the sensational and personal themes of these stories. The narrative world invoked is, as Allen puts it, one that viewers can share as part of their own lives, as the police station's personal lives unfold before them twice a week, year after year. These soap narratives were introduced into the formerly highly realistic programme (complete with hand-held cameras, topical social themes and rich references to its London setting) in 1995 to boost flagging ratings (Kibble-White 2002). The multiple, sensational storylines, each of which is treated in segments of a few minutes at a time, increase the pace and are seen by producers as better able to draw audiences into a viewing habit than self-contained stories.

But at the same time as the recourse to sensational soap opera narratives, *The Bill* episode also sticks to a 20-year-old formula of documenting a crime investigation through police officers' eyes, with the typical plot uncertainties of a British crime drama (is the old priest only pretending to be unwell, does the woman only now pursuing a complaint dating back to childhood have ulterior motives?). Here there is considerable narrative unity in Labov's terms. There is an initial orientation to a narrative world in the episode's opening scene, as Father Frank Keegan hides in a church from a vigilante mob. Key characters are introduced here, as are topical themes of mob hysteria over paedophiles and debate over the police's double role in protecting released paedophiles and protecting the public.

This is a fictional version of contemporary Britain, coming two years after riots on housing estates over sex offenders living there and only six months after a tabloid newspaper campaign for a 'Sarah's Law', making public the whereabouts of released paedophiles, had petered out. Keegan is rescued by the police, but the plot is then complicated by the introduction of Bridget

Thomas, who wishes to press charges for a sexual assault by Keegan when she was 10 but whose emotional turmoil may hamper a conviction, placing DC Glaze in a dilemma about how to meet his ideal of improving people's lives (the nun provides a dramatic counterpoint here). Investigative plots (such as in whodunnits, police dramas and personal quest dramas) provide classic cases of what Barthes (1974: 17) called the enigma code, new plot complications and puzzles that pleasurably delay the plot's resolution. Glaze seeks to resolve the case by making the old man face up to his past, whereupon Thomas' brother tries to kill the man, only to be restrained. Glaze is cast straightforwardly as the plot's hero ('Alright, but tread carefully, Danny,' warns his boss Jack Meadows) whose skills as a humane detective are put to the test. The occasional characters then disappear from view, and the narrative is quickly, if clumsily, wrapped up with Glaze being told by his boss that Keegan does not wish to lay charges against the brother. The **realist** drama conventions of *The Bill* resist a tidy ending for Thomas, but the police officers are returned to their initial equilibrium, if a little wiser ('It's never enough, though, is it,' Glaze reflects). The narrative thread concerning Gary Best and his sister follows a similar thematic and progression through crisis to resolution for the police officer.

This generic hybridity is typical of televisual fiction since the 1990s, including crime dramas (such as *Merseybeat* (2001–4) and *City Central* (1998–2000)). This is perhaps partly attributable to a loss of faith by producers in serial formats and what the scriptwriter Jimmy McGovern has called 'dramatic inflation', where writers and producers look less to actor-led plots and instead to increasingly dramatic storylines which must top the last one to carry narrative energy (cited in Kibble-White 2002). But it may also be attributed to the blurring of programme and genre boundaries in people's casual, domestic and channel-hopping viewing experience. If viewers are looking for even a moderate degree of coherence in *The Bill* episode, the two kinds of plot surely conflict, with an involved police investigation plot jostling for space in a half-hour episode with so many other strands, unable to pleasurably delay or satisfactorily reach resolution, and with a realist social setting of a police station clashing with hyperbolic plots in which at least two officers are killed each season. Feuer (1992: 158) argues that the advent of the remote control may lead to 'the end of genre' entirely (cited in Rose 2003) as a rapid flow across genres characterizes viewing. However, making meanings across genres requires that people recognize the genre boundaries to start with, so the end of genre is not quite so simple to theorize. Close analysis of a segment of *The Bill* episode suggests instead the coherence of its televisual segments is complex and multi-layered, but still a key component in how viewers make sense. The following 30-second segment occurs a minute and a half into the episode. PCs Gary Best and Tony

Stamp have been told to patrol the Underground as part of the station's bid to meet crime prevention targets.

(Establishing shot of London Underground sign pans down to mid-shot of two men walking along pavement)

1 GB: This is stupid (.) we're coppers not flipping bouncers

2 TS: Rather be here than nurse-maiding some perverts

(camera closes in to two men's faces, shop frontages in background)

3 GB: Yeah (0.5) must bring back some bad memories eh Tone?

(camera swings round to back of GB's head and very close-up of TS)

4 TS: I was [innocent

5 GB: [(I) didn't mean it like that

6 TS: It's scum like Keegan that bring suspicion down on [all of us

(camera swings again so both men's faces in view, pedestrians in background)

7 radio:

[All units

Sierra Oscar

48 Grattan Street reports of domestic informant is neighbour

9 GB: That's your gaff⁴

10 TS: T' I don't believe it (.) I'm doing your sister a big favour letting her stay there

11 GB: I know mate

12 TS: I've had enough trouble off the neighbours trying to lynch me

13 GB: Come on it might be something or nothing let's go and check it out

(GB leaves to right, camera lingers on TS looking exasperated)

See Appendix for transcription conventions.

The segment is a mini-narrative, analysable in Labov's terms as:

- *orientation*: the Underground sign and the two policemen grumbling on the beat, commenting on the paedophile priest plot begun in the preceding scene.
- *complicating action*: GB refers to a plot in the previous season where TS was accused of child abuse.
- *complicating action*: TS reminds GB of the resolution of that plot ('I was innocent') and so accuses his partner of being disloyal and doubting his integrity.

- *evaluation*: for TS, paedophiles create distrust of upright citizens like himself.
- *complicating action*: radio alerts them to a fight at TS's house, currently let to GB's sister, leading to one of the episode's major plots.
- *evaluation*: GB tells TS it's TS's house (thereby explaining this to the viewer).
- *complicating action*: TS complains that GB and his sister are letting him down.
- *evaluation*: TS explains his anger in terms of a previous plot where his house was used in a CID operation that went wrong.
- *resolution*: GB decides they will answer the call.

The narrative focuses on the personal relations of the two officers (hence the very close-up shots), exploring a dilemma and then moving on, much as Ellis predicts. Stamp's affront is not resolved, but is interrupted by the radio, opening a slightly different source of tension between the men. This is not resolved either, instead Best, who should be apologizing, exits stage right in a minimal kind of resolution. The segment shows, then, a minimal coherence: nothing much happens, just a lot of poorly resolved talk. As Ellis puts it, dilemmas are worked through, worried over for a while, then dropped.

There is narrative impetus of a sort, as other plot strands are woven through the scene. Already in the first two orienting lines, the segment is for a moment a telling instance of the political pressure police are put under to walk the streets, in the knowledge that few crimes are detected that way (line 1), and then in the next moment an instance of the pressure police feel in shielding paedophiles (line 2). Then the old child abuse allegation against Stamp is woven into the present (lines 3–6) before the radio interrupts with an incident that pulls in past plots concerning both officers. The scene thereby acts as an orientation of the story to come on PC Best and his sister, setting the scene and reminding us of the characters, in terms of previous *Bill* stories. At the same time, the viewer is asked to regard the action as a moment in a slowly moving tangle of narratives, building to the 'subtle and nuanced readings' of character which Allen describes in soap operas. Ellis (1999: 67) talks of the 'contingent and co-present quality' of such television narratives – 'they offer themselves as narratives that are evolving'.

However, the segment is much more coherent as a casual conversation, and this opens up fresh forms of interpretation. As will be described in more detail in Chapter 6, conversations are characterized by the participants taking turns to talk, making up pairs of statement and response, which often introduce a wide range of topics. As Ochs points out, narrative is often intertwined with other genres. If we regard viewers as watching a story unfold, we can interpret *The Bill* conversation above as produced for viewing as part of that narrative – as

maximumly meaningful for the many plot strands it interacts with and which it is designed to draw viewers into – but if we regard viewers as looking upon a fictive world, in a much more detached mode of consumption, the conversation is simply part of that continuing world. As in the observation of characters that takes place in reality television (see Chapter 5), the interest is in much more **ontological** than **teleological** problems, questions such as: are these people sincere, true to their character, or performing to get some social benefit from the talk; rather than how will this end. The programme asks viewers to bring their expertise in human relationships in viewing slices of people's lives more than their expertise in televisual genres. The 'real person' isn't self-evident, but has to be discovered, and part of the pleasure seems to be in doing what we do whenever we meet others, the complex business of appraising them. As Ellis puts it (1999: 56–7), images of the world are given stability through framing and narrative, but they are also surrounded by forms of talk – justifications, explanations, appeals, speculation, complaints, and so on. The 'real' London scenes, complete with London slang, faithful details such as the uniforms, urban backdrop and the officers' tensions, is made enjoyable and understandable through both conversational and narrative coherence, but not too safe, so as to give a pleasurable sense of the disorder of real life.

Structural analysis of narrative often finds a politics in the oppositions constructed by the action and resolved by the plots (Bignell 2004: 91). There is thus a politics to the narrative's enacting of a police equilibrium that is disturbed by New Labour policing targets. A number of scholars argue that 1980s British drama often pursued highly politicized themes because of pressures from the Thatcher Government restricting news and documentary makers, and *The Bill* still pursues such social realist thematics. However, it also engages in a much more intimate politics through its depiction of the relationships and reflections of the working life of police in London. At work here is a moral claim to show us how it 'really is', a reality claim which *The Bill* has made since its beginning as a gritty police drama. Realist police dramas have been greatly criticized for legitimating and making comfortable the repressive nature of policing (Casey et al. 2002: 44–6). *The Bill* no longer enacts a unified story of solving crime – its heroes are busy solving their own rather than society's problems – and so perhaps is less open to such critique. Yet it instead inserts the programme more intimately into viewers' everyday lives, making police still more 'like us'. The political coherence – the ideology – of the fiction is perhaps not disturbed by its generic hybridity. But there is a cultural politics at work in the show's 'theatre of intimacy' (Dovey 2000), in its recourse to characters' subjective experiences of policing instead of a narrative coherence. The real is aestheticized as fragmented rather than as narratively unified.

The idea of coherence, of the way in which a text hangs together as a whole,

has been at the heart of this chapter. Television, among other media, spends much of its time telling stories, and these stories are immensely powerful ways of ordering experience and providing meaning. But television language use also hangs together as argument, as description, as conversation, and as any of the other ways that language users link words together. Moreover, as scholars since Williams have explored, sometimes television is not maximumly meaningful, in Wright's (1995) phrase. This characteristic leads us on to reality television, in the next chapter, where showing the world 'as it is', in its incoherence as much as its coherence, takes prominence.

Further reading

Ochs (1997) gives an overview of discourse analytic approaches to narrative and Hoey (2001) puts narrative in the context of other forms of coherence. Fabb (1997) is a textbook with a clear and systematic account by a linguist of narratology, while Rimmon-Kenan (1983) will introduce readers to the wider narratological literature. Labov's narrative analysis is applied to news discourse in Bell (1991). The section on the 'Moving Image' in Boyd-Barrett and Newbold (1995) has excerpts of many key readings from film studies of narrative.